

The Fine Path to Liberation:
An Explanation of the Stages of the Preliminary Practices
For Manuals Such as *Buddhahood Without Meditation*¹

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¹ Sera Khandro, *The Fine Path to Liberation: An Explanation of the Stages of the Preliminary Practices for Manuals Such as Refining Appearances*. *sNang sbyang sogs khrid yig rnams kyi sngon 'gro bshad bya'i yan lang bshad pa rnam drol lam bzang* in *The Collected Treasure-Texts of bDud-'joms gling-pa*, Vol. 21. *Sprul pa'i gter chen bdud 'joms gling pa'i zab gter gsang ba'i cho sde* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Lama Kuenzang Wangdue, 2004), 1–17.

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[Introduction] [2]

First, regarding the explanation of the stages to be discussed, the compassionate *jinās*, who are expert in skillful means, have taught an inconceivable number of Dharmas, entrances to the path, and resultant accomplishments in accordance with the temperaments, capacities, and inclinations of disciples. However many teachings they have given, if you synthesize their meaning, they consist of two [*yānas*]: the causal, [Sūtrayāna] with characteristics, and the resultant, Secret Mantra, Vajrayāna. If you classify them internally, in the causal vehicle there are the Śrāvākayāna, the Pratyekabuddhayāna, and the Bodhisattvayāna. In the resultant vehicle [3] there are three classes of outer tantras: *kriyā tantra*, *upa tantra*, and *yoga tantra*. The three classes of inner tantras are the father tantras of the [stage of] generation known as *mahāyoga*, the mother tantras of the transmission of *anuyoga*, and the nondual tantras of the Great Perfection, known as *atiyoga*. As a tantra states:

In the past, between the causal and resultant [*yānas*], among the causal [*yānas*] there are three [divisions], and among the resultant [*yānas*] there are two. In the second there are six categories in accordance with the levels of one's faculties.

As for the topic to be discussed here, among the canonical and treasure teachings, this is exceptional due to four qualities: its short lineage, its unerring practical instructions, its great blessings, and its revelation of the descent of the lineage. [4] The meaning of the vast and profound revealed treasures of the Great Perfection, *atiyoga*, is impeccable, and it includes the three divisions of the mind, expanse, and practical instructions. This is a commentary on the principal, very secret, unsurpassed teaching from a direct vision of Samantabhadra called *Buddhahood Without Meditation*, and it begins with the way to listen to the Dharma, followed by the actual explanation of the meaning of that treatise.²

² This second section refers to the commentary to *Buddhahood Without Meditation* called *A Garland for the Delight of the Fortunate*, which immediately follows this short, preliminary text on the way to listen to the Dharma.

The Way to Listen to the Dharma

First, regarding the way to listen to the Dharma, there are (1) a general explanation and (2) a specific explanation.

1 A General Explanation

It is extremely important that you eliminate the miserable attitude of thinking only about yourself, by considering, “Among all sentient beings dwelling since beginningless time in saṃsāra, there is not even one who has not been my parent. So in order for them to be freed from the miserable ocean of saṃsāra and to achieve the truly perfected state of buddhahood, I shall authentically practice the profound, sublime Dharma.” In this way, bring forth the valiant, indefatigable Mahāyāna motivation of *bodhicitta* to achieve the well-being of others. As Maitreyanātha declared:

The generation of bodhicitta aspires to

Truly perfected buddhahood for the sake of others.³ [5]

Especially concerning the practice of the profound path of the Secret Mantra Vajrayāna, the goal aspired for and the resolution of bodhicitta are crucial. As *The Lamp for the Three Methods* states:

Because of its lack of confusion regarding even a single point,

Its many methods, which are not difficult,

And its mastery by those with sharp faculties,

The Mantrayāna is exceptional.⁴

This Secret Mantra Vajrayāna has many methods that can be practiced without needing to undergo great hardships. The root of its many profound methods for realizing the fruition [of enlightenment] depends on the transformation of one’s aspirations. As it is written:

The contributing condition for all Dharmas

Dwells on the summit of one’s aspirations.

You must listen to the sublime Dharma with a pure body, speech, and mind—not reifying the teaching, the teacher, and so on in an ordinary way—but rather imagining them to be imbued with five perfections. The perfect environment is the pristine buddhafield of the absolute space of phenomena, Akaniṣṭha. The perfect teacher is the primordial Lord, the Dharmakāya Samantabhadra. The perfect disciples are [6] the Enlightened Awareness Lineage of the jinas and the Symbolic Lineage of the *vidyādhara*s, visualized as male and female bodhisattvas, gods, and goddesses. The perfect Dharma is the Mahāyāna Dharma of the unsurpassed fruition—the Great Perfection. The perfect time is imagined as the fourth time, one of perfect symmetry, an eternal, continuous cycle, free of movement and change. By such means your body, speech, and mind must be purified, enabling blessings to flow into your mindstream.

On all occasions—whether you are teaching or listening to the Dharma or practicing meditation—you must carefully examine your own mindstream and listen in a way that is free of the following three faults: Like an upside-down container, however the words of Dharma are expressed, you do not hear them or retain the slightest bit of their meaning. Like a leaky container, even though you hear the mere sounds of the Dharma, your conceptual mind is unstable regarding their meaning from start to finish. Like a contaminated container, even though you understand the words of the Dharma, they do not act as remedies for your mental afflictions, because your mindstream is not sustained by the pure spirit of emergence and bodhicitta. These faults must be avoided, as is said in the sūtras, “O monks, listen well and attentively and bear in mind what you hear, and I shall teach you.” By listening well to the Dharma

³ Skt. *Maitreyanātha*, Tib. *mgon po byams pa*

⁴ *Tshul tshul gsum sgron me*

[7], the fault of contamination is dispelled. By listening attentively, the fault of an upside-down container is dispelled. And by bearing [the teachings] in mind, the fault of a leaky container is dispelled.

When you listen to the Dharma, you should avoid everything that is incompatible with the Dharma, such as the egoistic pride of thinking you are highly knowledgeable, lack of faith in your Dharma friends and the guru, lack of interest in the Dharma, and allowing your eyes and other senses to be distracted elsewhere. Instead, when you listen to the Dharma, you should take delight in receiving the sublime Dharma, and with abiding reverence and faith, purify the faults of the six contaminants⁵ and focus solely on the welfare of sentient beings, as is written in the *Condensed Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*:

By abiding in delight, reverence, and supreme faith,

Obscurations and afflictions are dispelled and taints are left behind.

By applying yourself to the welfare of sentient beings, heroic wisdom is perfected.

O valiant disciples, follow such conduct.⁶

Here is how to practice the six perfections. Setting out the Dharma seat and offerings is generosity. Listening to the Dharma while restraining your body, speech, and mind is ethical discipline. Enduring harm by others at that time is patience. Requesting the guru to teach the Dharma is enthusiasm. [8] Listening without distraction to the meaning of the Dharma is meditation. Inquiring by means of investigation and analysis into the points of uncertainty is wisdom. These are the six aspects of a listener.

2 A Specific Explanation

Regarding the specific explanation, there are five topics: (1) the cultivation of reverence and devotion for the guru, (2) the cultivation of love and affection for your spiritual siblings and companions, (3) the cultivation of compassion for sentient beings, (4) the cultivation of renunciation for saṃsāra, and (5) meditation on the impermanence of composite phenomena.

2.1 The Cultivation of Reverence and Devotion for the Guru

In general there are said to be six kinds of teachers from whom one receives counsel,⁷ but the one who grants empowerments, explains the tantras, and provides practical instructions is the root guru who bestows the three kindnesses. Nowhere in the sūtras or tantras is there evidence of anyone achieving enlightenment without devotion to a guru. It is perfectly clear that all the *siddhas* of the past without exception [9] developed the qualities of the grounds and paths and achieved *siddhis* by first devoting themselves to their gurus who are physically present and those who are not. Therefore, even though the guru is truly a buddha, free of all faults and replete with all virtues, the minds of ordinary individuals like us are easily swayed by the influences of our social environments, historical eras, companions, and so on. For this reason, it is important that you first thoroughly examine the guru, both closely and from a distance. Then, eliminate the faults of your own speculations and negative thoughts and devote

⁵ The six contaminants are: (1) pride, (2) lack of faith, (3) lack of dedication to practice, (4) distraction, (5) dullness, and (6) depression.

⁶ Skt. *Prajñāpāramitāsamcayagāthāsūtra*, Tib. 'Phags phags pa *sdud pa*

⁷ The six kinds of teachers are: (1) teachers who grant samayas and vows, (2) teachers who grant oral transmissions, (3) teachers who explain the tantras, (4) teachers who provide practical instructions, (5) teachers who bestow empowerments, and (6) teachers who perform work.

yourself to the guru. Finally, offer your services by pleasing the guru in three ways,⁸ and without letting your *samayas* deteriorate or be broken, emulate the thoughts and behavior of your guru, as if you were his *sātsa* replica. Because of the degenerate nature of the current era, it is difficult to find a guru who has all the attributes described in the collections of tantras. Nevertheless, the guru to whom you devote yourself must have all these qualities:

- purity of the three kinds of vows,
- great erudition,
- compassion for sentient beings,
- knowledge of the vessels of the three outer divisions of the teachings and of the meaning of the inner Secret Mantra Vajrayāna Dharma,
- for the guru's own sake, experience of realization and the perfect achievement of positive qualities and the abandonment of negative ones,
- for the sake of others [10], the ability to provide training in the sublime Dharma by way of body, speech, and mind in inconceivable ways, in accordance with the temperaments and capabilities of individual students, and
- ability to assemble fortunate students by the four means of gathering others.⁹

It is important to devote yourself to such a spiritual friend, and specifically to a guru who reveals the profound points of practical instructions in the Secret Mantra Vajrayāna. Due to the unbroken lineage of ripening empowerments and liberating teachings, his mindstream is ripened and liberated. The guru's [conduct] does not conflict with the root of commitments taken at the time of an empowerment, namely the *samayas* and vows of enlightened body, speech, and mind, and so on. He has few mental afflictions and obsessive thoughts, his mindstream is calm and subdued, and he has internalized the meaning of the tantras and all the practical instructions pertaining to the ground, path, and fruition. Having seen the signs of the stages of generation and completion, he has correctly realized the nature of existence. Having renounced [the concerns of] this life, he constantly dwells in solitary retreat. Imbued with great altruism, he brings living beings onto the path of Dharma by every suitable means. By practicing in accordance with such a guru's instructions, one receives swift blessings of the lineage and excellent qualities arise.

A guru who has all these qualities is the regent of all buddhas of the past [11], the source of all buddhas of the future, and an emanation of all buddhas of the present. His body is the saṅgha, his speech is the sublime Dharma, and his mind is the buddha. The enlightened body is the guru, the enlightened speech is the personal deity, and the enlightened mind is the *ḍākinī*. The enlightened body is the *nirmāṇakāya*, the enlightened speech is the *saṃbhogakāya*, and the enlightened mind is the *dharmakāya*. The synthesized essential nature of the objects of refuge is the compassionate root guru. Regarding him as an actual buddha, reverently offer prostrations with your body, reverently offer prayers with your speech, and with your mind reverently visualize the guru in the center of your crown, your throat, and your heart. While merging your mind and so on with that of the guru, by sincerely pleasing him in the three ways with your body, speech, and mind, it is of vital importance that you

⁸ The three ways to please the guru are by means of offering material goods, offering service, and devoting oneself to practice.

⁹ The four means of gathering others are: (1) pleasing others by giving them material things or whatever they need, (2) teaching Dharma to lead others to liberation, (3) helping others in their Dharma practice by giving them encouragement, and (4) showing others a good example by always practicing what one teaches.

maintain continuous, unwavering faith, pure vision, reverence, and devotion. Even if you know the three collections of teachings as if by heart, if you lack reverence and devotion for your guru, there will not be even the slightest benefit for your mindstream. As it is written:

The guru is the buddha, the guru is the dharma,
And the guru is the saṅgha.
The master of everything is the guru.
The guru is the glorious Vajradhara.

Drikung Kyobpa Rinpoche (1143–1217) declared:

If the sun of reverence and devotion does not shine
On the snow mountain of the four kāyas of the guru,
The streams of blessings do not descend. [12]
So earnestly apply your minds to this reverence and devotion!¹⁰

Accordingly, if you single-pointedly pray to the guru, without a vacillating mind or uncertainty, his realizations will be transferred to you, and you will achieve all the supreme and common siddhis.

2.2 The Cultivation of Love and Affection for Your Spiritual Siblings and Companions

The guru, your spiritual friend, and your vajra siblings and companions are like guides on the path to the land of omniscience and liberation, so you should devote yourself to them with love and affection. Although there are four kinds of vajra siblings,¹¹ here the coupling of siblings and companions is like that of twins, so on all occasions and in all ways restrain your conduct by way of the body, speech, and mind with affection and loving-kindness, without any duplicity regarding the samayas. Viewing everything they say as credible, as if they were your guru, cultivate pure perception with the reverence and devotion of seeing their conduct as symbolic of the Dharma, whatever they do. You should never be separated from them, as if they were your own heart, and you should hold them dear with love and affection. *The Tantra of Awesome Lightning* states:

With affection for your vajra siblings,
For all your siblings, those with whom you are and are not close,
For those who have entered the authentic path, [13]
Always avoid even the mere thought of contempt.
Bring forth the power of love and affection,
And look after each other as you would your own eyes.¹²

Until you realize liberation and the omniscient state of enlightenment, you must accompany your vajra siblings and companions. So it is important that you love them and do not let your samayas degenerate. If they degenerate, you and everyone else will wander about in miserable states of existence, so you must properly guard your samayas and ardently love your vajra siblings.

2.3 The Cultivation of Compassion for Sentient Beings

Among all sentient beings throughout space, there is not one who has not been your father or mother, but under the influence of the delusive appearances of their own karma, those sentient beings, who

¹⁰ *'Bri bri gung skyob pa rin po che*

¹¹ The four kinds of vajra siblings are: (1) *general* brothers and sisters are all the sentient beings who possess Buddha nature, (2) *far* brothers and sisters are all the practitioners who belong to the retinue of the Buddha, (3) *close* brothers and sisters are Vajrayāna practitioners, and (4) *inseparable* brothers and sisters belong to the retinue of the same lama. Those who receive empowerment together from the same mandala are like siblings with the same father.

¹² *rNgam rngam glog*

have been your parents, experience only suffering, without ever even a moment of happiness. Resolve, “In order to purify and cleanse the appearances of their karma, habitual propensities, and suffering, and to achieve the precious state of authentic, omniscient enlightenment, I shall generate bodhicitta to achieve perfect enlightenment and shall dredge the depths of the ocean of the three realms of saṃsāra.” [14] With this heartfelt motivation, you should reject self-centered thoughts and cultivate compassion for the sake of sentient beings, like King Courage.¹³ *The Dohas* of the glorious Saraha state:

One whose view of emptiness is devoid of compassion

Does not reach the supreme path.

Moreover, if you cultivate compassion alone,

You will remain here in saṃsāra, but where is liberation?

One who has both

Remains neither in mundane existence nor in nirvāṇa.¹⁴

Accordingly, loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta are indispensable for Dharma practitioners. Whatever path you follow, they are always like your pillar of life, so you should practice them correctly.

2.4 The Cultivation of Renunciation for Saṃsāra

Wherever we are born in saṃsāra, whether in its heights, its depths, or in between, it never transcends the nature of suffering—an ever-shifting display of misery and a vicious cycle of pain. Reflecting on the ways in which the activities of saṃsāra are devoid of essence, resolve, “I shall renounce all activities of this life, such as subduing my enemies and protecting my friends, and devote myself solely to the practice of the sublime Dharma.” With this firm intention [15], you should go unaccompanied to an unpopulated, solitary place and let your practice pervade your whole life. Otherwise, if you have attachment to those who are close to you and aversion to those who are distant, while craving and clinging to such things as food, clothing, and enjoyments as if this were a city of *gandharvas*, your practice must lead to higher and lower rebirths, without a moment of happiness—only misery. The great Orgyen declared:

Here in saṃsāra there is never

As much happiness as would fit on the tip of a needle.

Even slight happiness is the suffering of change.

Accordingly, it is important that you come to a decisive certainty that the activities of saṃsāra are devoid of essence and that you strive solely for the essence, the sublime Dharma.

2.5 Meditation on the Impermanence of Composite Phenomena

All outer phenomena of the firm and solid inanimate environment, the many inner sentient beings who move about and inhabit the environment, and all the intervening, beautiful appearances of the five sensory fields are ultimately impermanent and subject to destruction. Apart from that, however composite phenomena may appear, they are not self-sustaining, like clouds in the sky, and all activities are like last night’s dream or like rainbows in the sky [16], never remaining. So continually meditate on death and impermanence, and with the thought, “Death is coming,” until you cast off that sense of

¹³ *snying stobs can*. This is a reference to Prince Great Courage (*rgyal bu snying stobs chen po*), one of three sons of the king at Namo Buddha in Nepal, the other two being Great God (*lha chenpo*) and Great Mighty One (*mtu thob chen po*). When Prince Great Courage saw a tigress in the forest that was dying of starvation, he offered his body to her so that she could save her starving cubs. This was a previous incarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni when he was a bodhisattva.

¹⁴ *dpal sa ra ha pa'i do ha*

dread, without laziness or procrastination, bring your life and spiritual practice to culmination. The noble Mogchokpa¹⁵ commented:

Experiences of those in whom [the awareness of]
Death has not arisen are like autumnal mist.
The nobility of those in whom [the awareness of]
Death has not arisen is like that of a king's consort.
The courage of those in whom [the awareness of]
Death has not arisen is like ice in the summertime.

Accordingly, impermanence is a motivating force for Dharma, so you should by all means bring forth this certainty in your mindstream at all times and on all occasions. Leave your homeland behind, go to another region, disregard hardships, let your body and life force be an object [of abuse], live happily in a cave as your home, let wild animals be your companions, entrust your heart to the guru and the Dharma, and bring your life and spiritual practice to culmination. This is the most cherished, sublime point.

Whatever kind of practice you adopt, with meditative objects belonging to the stages of generation and completion, the above five topics are indispensable. They are the most important things to practice, like a heart-treasure for all Dharma practitioners [17], so each of you should definitely take them to heart. This concludes the explanation of the stages to be discussed. This synthesis from the root teachings on the stages of Dharma was presented for the sake of Déwé Dorjé.¹⁶

May there be virtue!

Sarva maṅgalam!

¹⁵ *rje rmog cog pa*

¹⁶ *bde ba'i rdo rje*