

Summary of the Stages of Meditation

An Extract from the Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

- Lama Tsongkhapa

Now I will give a brief summation of the general meaning of the path. At the outset, the root of the path derives from your reliance upon a teacher, so consider this seriously. Then, once you have developed an uncontrived desire to take advantage of your leisure, this desire will spur you to practise continually. Therefore, in order to develop this, meditate on the topics connected with leisure and opportunity. Unless you then stop the various sentiments which seek the aims of this life, you will not diligently seek the aims of future lives. So, work at meditating on how the body you have is impermanent in the sense that it will not last for long, and on how, after death, you will wander in the miserable realms. At that time, by creating a genuine awareness which is mindful of the horrors of the miserable realms, build certainty from the depths of your heart about the qualities of the three refuges. Be constant in the common vow of going for refuge and train in its precepts. Then, from a range of perspectives develop faith, in the sense of conviction, in karma and its effects - this being the great foundation of all positive qualities. Make this faith firm. Strive to cultivate the ten virtues and to turn away from the ten non-virtues and always stay within the path of the four powers.

When you have thus trained well in the teachings associated with a person of small capacity and have made this practice firm, you should contemplate often the general and specific faults of cyclic existence, and in general, turn your mind away from cyclic existence as much as you can. Then, having identified the nature of karma and the afflictions-the causes from which cyclic existence arises – create an authentic desire to eliminate them. Develop broad certainty about the path that liberates you from cyclic existence, i.e., the three trainings, and particularly make effort at whichever of the vows of individual liberation you have taken.

When you have thus trained well in the teachings associated with a person of medium capacity and have made this practice firm, consider the fact that just as you yourself have fallen into the ocean of cyclic existence, so have all beings, your mothers. Train in the spirit of enlightenment which is rooted in love and compassion, and strive to develop this as much as you can. Without it, the practices of the six perfections and the two stages are like stories built on a house with no foundation. When you develop a little experience of this spirit of enlightenment, confirm it with the rite. By making effort in this training, make the aspiration as solid as you can. Then study the great waves of the Bodhisattva deeds, learning the boundaries of what to discard and what to adopt, and make a strong wish to train in those Bodhisattva deeds. After you have developed these attitudes, take the vow of the engaged spirit of enlightenment through its rite. Train in the six perfections that mature your own mind and the four ways of gathering disciples which mature the minds of others.

In particular, risk your life in making a great effort to avoid the root infractions. Strive not to be tainted by the small and intermediate contaminants and faults, and even if you are tainted, work to repair it. Then, because you must train specifically in the final two perfections, become knowledgeable in the way to sustain meditative stabilization and then achieve concentration. As much as you can, develop the view of the two selflessnesses, purity free from permanence and annihilation. After you have found the view and stabilized your mind upon it, understand the proper way to sustain the view in meditation, and then do so. Such stabilization and wisdom are called serenity and insight, but they are not something separate from the last two perfections. Therefore, after you have taken the Bodhisattva vows, they come about in the context of the training in its precepts.

You have reached a critical point when, while meditating on the lower levels, you increasingly wish to attain the higher levels, and when studying the higher levels, your wish to practise the lower levels becomes stronger and stronger. Some say to expend your energy only to stabilize your mind and to understand the view, ignoring all earlier topics, but this makes it very difficult to get the vital points. Therefore, you must develop certainty about the whole course of the path. When you meditate on these topics, train your understanding and then go back to balance your mind. So, if it seems that your faith in the teacher who instructs you on the path is decreasing, since this will cut the root of everything good that has come together, work on the methods for relying on the teacher. Similarly, if your joy in your practice loses strength, make meditation on the topics connected with leisure and opportunity your primary focus; if your attachment to this life increases, make meditation on impermanence and the faults of the miserable realms your primary focus. If you seem to be lazy about the proscriptions you have accepted, consider that

your certainty about karmic cause and effect is meager and make meditation on karma and its effects your primary focus. If your sense of disenchantment with all of cyclic existence decreases, your desire to seek liberation will become just words. Therefore, contemplate the faults of cyclic existence. If your intention to benefit living beings in whatever you do is not strong, then you will sever the root of the Mahayana. Therefore, frequently cultivate the aspirational spirit of enlightenment together with its causes. Once you have taken the vows of a conqueror's child and are training in the practices, if the bondage of the reifying conception of signs seems strong, use reasoning consciousness to destroy all objects which are apprehended by the mind which conceives of signs, and train your mind in the space-like and illusion-like emptiness. If your mind is enslaved to distraction and does not remain on a virtuous object, you should primarily sustain one-pointed stability, as former teachers have said. From these illustrations, you should understand the cases I have not explained. In brief, without being partial, you have to be able to use the whole spectrum of virtues.

Among the stages of the path of a person of great capacity, I have explained how one who trains in the Bodhisattva path practises insight, which is wisdom.

After you have trained in this way in the paths common to both Sutra and Mantra, you must undoubtedly enter the Mantra path because it is very much more precious than any other practice and it quickly brings the two collections to completion. If you are to enter it, then as Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment says, you must first please the Guru-even to a greater extent than explained earlier-with deeds such as respect and service and with practice that is in accordance with the Guru's words. And you must do this for a Guru who meets at least the minimum qualifications of a teacher explained there.

Then, at the outset, your mind should be matured through the ripening initiation as explained in a source Tantra. You should then listen to the pledges and vows to be taken, understand them, and maintain them. If you are stricken by root infractions, you may make these commitments again. However, this greatly delays the development of the good qualities of the path in your mind. Make a fierce effort not to be tainted by those root infractions. Strive not to be tainted by the gross infractions, but in the event that you are tainted, use the methods for restoring your vows. Since these are the basis of the practice of the path, without them you will become like a dilapidated house whose foundation has collapsed. *Manjushri-Mula-Tantra* (The Root Tantra of Manjushri) says, “The Master of the Sages does not say that faulty ethical discipline achieves the Tantric path,” meaning that those with faulty ethical discipline have none of the great, intermediate, or low attainments. And it says in the Highest Yoga Tantra texts that those who do not maintain their vows, those who have inferior initiation, and those who do not understand reality do not achieve anything despite their practice. Therefore, someone who talks about practising the path without maintaining the pledges and vows has completely strayed from the Tantric path. In order to cultivate the Mantra path, someone who keeps the pledges and vows should, at the outset, meditate on the stage of generation, the complete divine wheel as explained from a source Tantra. The unique object to be eliminated on the Tantric path is the conception of ordinariness which regards the aggregates, constituents and sensory sources as common. It is the stage of

generation itself that eliminates this and transforms the abodes, bodies and resources so that they appear as special. The Conquerors and their children continually bless the person who clears away the conception of ordinariness in this way. Such a person easily brings to completion the limitless collections of merit, thereby becoming a suitable vessel for the stage of completion.

This person should then meditate on what appears in the source Tantras on the stage of completion. Neither the Tantras nor the scholars who explain their intended meaning hold that you should discard the first stage and merely classify it within the latter stage, training only in individual portions of the path. Therefore, you must bear in mind the vital points of the two stages of the complete corpus of the path of Highest Yoga Tantra.

Considering only the terms, I have described a mere fraction of what is involved in entering the Mantra path. Therefore, understand this in detail by using works on the stages of the Mantra path. If you train in this way, you will train in the entirely complete corpus of the path, which includes all the vital points of Sutra and Mantra. As a result, your attainment of leisure in this lifetime will have been worthwhile, and you will be able to extend the Conqueror's precious teaching within both your own and others' minds.

Colophon: