

# *The Three Vehicles of Buddhist Practice*

by

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# Chapter 3

## *The Vajrayana*

**T**he word *vajra* means “immutability” or “indestructibility.” On the conventional level there are all the samsaric phenomena which are impermanent and change from one thing into another. On the ultimate level the essence is always there and never changes and is not affected by one’s relative viewpoint. The main concern of the tantric teachings then is working on this changeless, immutable essence. That is why it is called the Vajrayana or “the vehicle of the changeless.”

There are two vehicles: the *sutrayana* and the Vajrayana. The *sutrayana* or the “sutra vehicle” is more related to cause, than result. It is called “the cause which is the vehicle with characteristics” because by developing this sutra level, one learns all that is necessary to create the conditions to achieve the effect or result. The actual result is the Vajrayana. To attain the result, one needs to train in the *sutrayana*. The *sutras* show the nature of phenomena. They show what is virtuous and what is not; they show the value of practicing certain things and giving up other things; they show the nature of cause and effect (karma); and what one is trying to develop and what one is trying to eliminate in meditation. We need to train in the *sutras* first to understand how the relative level works. So that is why it is called “the causal condition with characteristics.” Some-times it is also called “the vast aspect” of practice because it touches upon so many different things.

The *sutras* are mainly concerned with the development of the various causal conditions for realization. In the tantric approach, one goes directly to the very elements that bring results in one’s practice. This result aspect is called the “Vajrayana” or “the quintessential mantra.”

The problem with the word “tantra” is that it is not only used by Buddhists but also by Hindus. Apart from having the same name, there is little correspondence between the Buddhist and Hindu *tantras* except that both have their origins in India and used Sanskrit as their main language. In many Western books there is a tendency to suggest that the Buddhist *tantra* is related to Hindu *tantra*. There are, however, no similarities in philosophy, in practice, in point of view, in origin, or in teachers. So Buddhism and Hinduism are different. The Hindu *tantra*, for instance, is

based on the idea of an *atma* or a “soul” or a “higher self.” One practices various yogic meditations using subtle channels, energies, and drops<sup>16</sup> (Skt. *nadi*, *bindu*, and *prana*) with the idea of relating them to the *atma*. The Buddhist philosophy, whether on the sutra or tantra level, involves trying to understand the absence of self or higher self. So from the beginning these two approaches are very different.

When the dharma teachings went to Tibet, there was the simultaneous development of the sutra and the tantra approach. The sutras were studied mainly as a way to understand basic dharma. The tantras were applied principally as a way of meditating. So first one would study the sutras to find out the way that things were and gain a conviction in the meaning of Buddha’s teachings establishing a sound theoretical basis in them. When it came to actually meditating, there was a great emphasis on the tantra or Vajrayana techniques in Tibet. So in Tibet there was the sutrayana level of meditation called *je gom* which is usually translated as “analytical meditation” in which one gradually works through the analysis of various phenomena understanding the various objects of meditation, and develops wisdom, which emerges through analysis. The meditation related to the Vajrayana is called *jo gom* which is usually translated as “placement meditation.” In this meditation one concentrates not on the analysis of external objects, but goes directly to resting deeply in the mind, and by doing this, one quickly experiences the deeper aspects of meditation.

The reason the Vajrayana was favored in Tibet was that it causes a much more rapid and direct way of reaching the goal of enlightenment. The analytical sutrayana approach tends to take much more time although both approaches lead to the same result. Analytical meditation is mainly based on the development of wisdom. Vajrayana meditation is mainly based on faith and confidence. To develop sutrayana meditation one needs wisdom; to gain the results of Vajrayana meditation one needs faith. Generally, the sutrayana was studied at the same time that one was meditating on the Vajrayana level so these two methods could reinforce each other. If a person follows only the sutra approach, the Mahayana path can take a long time. For example, to develop the paramita of generosity one must develop one’s generosity to such a point that one would give up even one’s arms, legs, or even the whole body. The cultivation of all these paramitas is a very large task. Compared to this, the Vajrayana is a more simple and easy task. When properly practiced, it enables one to achieve the goal of Buddhahood through *skillful means* in a single lifetime.

The Vajrayana has several names. Sometimes it is called in Tibetan *dorje tekpa* or “the Vajrayana” where *dorje* is “vajra” and *tegpa* is “yana.” Another word used for the Vajrayana is the Tibetan word *sang gnak* which

is often inappropriately translated as the “secret mantrayana.” The actual meaning of the Tibetan syllable *gnak* or “mantra” here is being able to achieve the goal very quickly or quickly getting the results one wants. The syllable *sang* in the word is sometimes translated as “secret,” but it really means “very vital” or something which is “quintessential” or “necessary and vital.” For example, a machine has many vital parts which allow it to work. These parts are called the *sang* in Tibetan meaning the very core, or the very essence of the machine. So *dorje tegpa* actually means a very “indestructible vehicle” which contains the vital thing which enables one to reach the goal very quickly. When this word is translated as “secret” it gives the incorrect impression of something which needs to be covered up. This is incorrect because the word *sang gnak* doesn’t mean “a secret,” but it means “the vital essence.”

### ***The Importance of the Guru***

In the Vajrayana the skillful means to achieve the goal is divided into the *creation stage* (Tib. *che rim*) and the *completion stage* (Tib. *dzo rim*) of meditation. In the creation stage we are learning how to transform our perception into pure appearances. To achieve this purity, we meditate basically on the three roots. These are the *gurus* who are the root of the blessings and the transmission of abilities, the *vidams* who are the root of the *spiritual powers (siddhis)*, and the protectors who are the *dakas* and *dakinis* who are the source of all activities to be accomplished. By meditating on these, we are able to touch the level of the pure dimension in our meditation. In the Vajrayana path our wishes are very immediate. When we try to attain the blessing or the power of realization, we find the source of that blessing is the Buddha. But the Buddha lived 2,500 years ago so it’s hard to have much confidence that the blessing will cover such a distance in time between us and the Buddha. Nevertheless, this is not important because our own *root guru* and the gurus of the lineage have this very same *blessing*, this power of dharma, in exactly the same amount as the Buddha. The Buddha transmitted this power of realization or blessing to his students. They perfected it and it has been handed down absolutely perfectly and unspoiled to the present day so there is absolutely no difference between receiving it from them and having received it 2,500 years ago from the Buddha. This is the gift of the gurus of the lineage. We receive this by opening ourselves to the blessings and transmissions through *guru yoga* practice to the gurus of the lineage.

To be open enough to receive the blessings and trans-missions, we need to do guru yoga practice and to think of our guru as being exactly the

same as the Buddha. Even more than that, if we think he or she is even better than the Buddha, we will be able to receive the fullness of the dharma and the blessing it contains. It might not be apparent that our guru is identical to the Buddha. But the guru has all the transmissions and by receiving the essence of the teachings from the guru, we will be able to develop the practices just as if we had studied with the Buddha himself. So there is no difference between studying under our own guru or studying with the Buddha. The guru is even better than the Buddha. We are not able to make a connection with the historical Buddha by meeting him but we are able to establish this connection with our own guru. In the Vajrayana we really need to believe that our guru is exactly the same as the Buddha and if we believe that, we can open ourselves enough to receive all of the guru's teachings. If we don't have that confidence, then we are going to doubt the guru's abilities and once we doubt these teachings, we can't put them into practice. If we can't put them into practice, we can't get the full results from them.

The root guru and the gurus of the lineage are the source of the blessing or the transmission of realization. The most important thing in receiving these blessings is our faith, devotion, and confidence in the gurus and their teachings. For example, imagine that there is a very large sparkling diamond. Just seeing it immediately starts us thinking about how we can get it. We really want it and appreciate it and will work very hard and do lots of things to obtain it. If it were, however, just brass or copper, we are not going to strive to get it in the same way. If it were just trash, rather than striving for it, we will try to get rid of it. So how we relate to something, how much we want to have it, depends on our attitude towards it. So the vital teachings and transmissions the guru holds are valuable only if we have great faith, confidence, and devotion in them. With these qualities we will work hard to develop our abilities.

### ***Meditation on Yidams***

When we do guru yoga we meditate on those gurus in an outer<sup>17</sup> way to gain this blessing. Actually the word for "blessing" in Tibetan is *jinlap*. It has the meaning of "the power of dharma," which gives insight, the idea of the very pith or potency of dharma. So this word for "blessing" has the meaning of a "transmission" of dharma. The source of that transmission or power comes from the guru and we meditate on the guru through guru yoga. In particular, Kagyus meditate on Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa and the Karmapas.<sup>18</sup> They meditate on them externally to gain this closeness and receive this blessing or transmission from them.

We also meditate on the yidams who are the source of our accomplishment. The word “accomplishment” is *siddhi* in Sanskrit and *ngödrub* in Tibetan. The Tibetan *ngödrub* means to “actually complete something.” What we accomplish is the fruition of our dharma practice. In the Vajrayana there are two kinds of accomplishment: the general and the supreme accomplishment. The supreme accomplishment is the achievement of Buddhahood by meditating on the yidam.

On the path we progress from stage to stage and develop the miraculous powers and the very deep transcendent insights which come from the yidam. This general accomplishment comes from the development of dharma. In the beginning we study the dharma. In the intermediate phase we reflect very deeply and develop a much deeper understanding of what we have studied. Eventually, through meditation, we enter into the real heart of the meaning of dharma. It is through this process of the development of dharma that Buddhahood emerges. In this way, all the general and extraordinary accomplishments emerge.

The Buddha taught 84,000 aspects of the vast dharma. It would be difficult to master all of these. Fortunately, we don’t need to master all 84,000 aspects to attain Buddhahood. In fact, just fully mastering one aspect of what Buddha taught will lead to Buddhahood. We can practice meditation on a yidam and gain Buddhahood. Yidam practice is a very powerful practice that combines the essence of the dharma. So if we properly do the creation stage and the completion stage of meditation on a particular yidam, we can traverse the whole path of dharma and gain all its benefits.

The Tibetan word *yidam* means “to commit oneself” or “to set one’s mind on something.” The syllable *yi* means “mind” and the syllable *dam* means “to commit.” So in yidam practice one becomes determined to meditate on one of these yidams and to follow this practice all the way through until the attainment of enlightenment. So one vows, “through this yidam practice I will attain the very highest state, the supreme accomplishment of Buddhahood.” One sets one’s mind very determinedly on the decision to gain all the beneficial powers by the practice of yidam meditation. These yidams are the transcendental aspects of one’s mind’s commitment so this is what yidam deities lead us to see.<sup>19</sup>

There are many different forms of yidams. There are yidams associated in particular with the development of skillful means—the male aspect—and yidams in particular associated with the development of wisdom—the female aspect. There are yidams which are peaceful in their appearance that help develop peace and great calmness. Then there are yidams which are wrathful which help develop the dynamism of activity

in order to accomplish all the good activities one wishes to do. There are yidams of different colors related to the kind of activity that one wants to develop. For instance, for peaceful activity, there is the white yidam *Chenrezig* which is a male form of the yidam who represents skillful means. *Tara* on the other hand, is a female form or wisdom aspect of peaceful activity. *Vajrasattva* is another example of the peaceful form, while *Vajrayogini* is an example of the female wrathful form. So there are many, many different forms and appearances of the yidam. There are so many different forms because the practitioner's aspirations and abilities are so very different from one another that one yidam doesn't suit everyone. So these yidams correspond to the various needs of the different students at various stages of practice.

Most people have an impure perception. We therefore meditate on yidams to help eliminate the various impure mental habits and conditioning that we have built up over many lifetimes. We meditate on the yidams in the creation stage to carry out this purification. So in yidam practice there is the stage of disassociating ourselves mentally from impure images by letting our awareness dissolve into emptiness. From that emptiness we begin to associate with the yidam who is the manifestation of the pure qualities. So through meditation on the yidam, we condition ourselves to purity and help free ourselves from our impure conditioning.

The concepts of birth and death (that is, arising, generation, and dissolution) are purified by meditation on the yidam. In the initial stage of meditation we let everything dissolve into emptiness to purify our concepts of death. For birth, we meditate, for example, on the emergence from emptiness of the seed syllable of TAM and then meditate on the gradual emergence of the various details of visualization. This purifies the various ideas and concepts of birth. We also have ideas about our own inferiority and this tendency holds us back. To purify this hesitancy, we meditate on the yidam in space so the wisdom aspect charged with the real presence, materializes in space before us. We identify with that wisdom aspect to overcome this identification with the weak or inferior side of our nature.

There are many different styles of meditating on the yidams. Sometimes we visualize them above our head. Sometimes we visualize that we have become completely transformed into their form. And sometimes we visualize them in space in front of us. Generally speaking, there are many different styles of visualization because there are different needs, aspirations, and stages of development of meditators. Even though there are many different ways of meditating on the yidams, the dominant way of visualizing the yidam is to visualize oneself as being transformed

into the yidam. This eliminates previous impure conditioning and helps us to learn how to relate to the purity that the yidams represent. For example, we visualize a peaceful yidam as being extremely beautiful and inspiring and adorned with beautiful clothes and precious ornaments and so on. In the same way, we visualize wrathful yidams as really terrifying. If we only pretend to visualize, it becomes fabricated and we don't get the full benefit of the practice. Whereas, if we meditate with great conviction, relating to and identifying with these various forms; this will actually bring about a change in our meditation developing it and making it much more stable.

There are many reasons why we meditate on yidams. We identify with these pure forms to free ourselves from the conditioning and impurity which has been built up in the past. We visualize the real presence of the deity to develop confidence in the existence of this purity. If we practice *Shamatha* meditation by itself, we find it quite difficult to attain peace and insight without a lot of effort. However, visualizing and identifying with the yidams is a very useful way of developing our Shamatha meditation. If we just try to rest our mind, it is very hard to calm it down. Whereas if we try to visualize the appearance, the face, the hands, the clothing of the yidams, we find it is easier to do. Through accustoming oneself to yidam meditation, the power of Shamatha meditation will develop quite quickly.

With all meditation if one is too tense and tries too hard, one won't achieve very much. On the other extreme, if one is too relaxed, one won't receive much benefit either. This is also true with yidam meditation. If one is too tense, one won't be able to visualize very clearly in the creation stage. If one is too relaxed, the yidam won't appear either. However, with the development of one's power to visualize a deity, one's Shamatha meditation will increase. They help each other: Shamatha meditation helps the visualization and the visualization helps the Shamatha. Also in the different stages of yidam meditation there is usually a period of time when one just rests in the peace of Shamatha meditation.

When doing yidam practice, one usually recites a mantra. Sometimes one recites the mantra at the same time as visualizing the yidam and sometimes one just recites the mantra, and at other times one just rests in meditation. There are various ways of doing yidam practice but the overall idea is to employ the body, speech, and mind at the same time. For the body aspect, one sits properly; for speech one recites the mantra, and with mind one visualizes the deity or rests in placement meditation. The mantra recitation is also beneficial because even the sound of the actual mantra supports the development of meditation because it has its own power. Great benefit also comes to the mind and the development of one's power of absorption by meditating in the creation stage of yidam practice. The



actual methods for doing these practices are explained in the instructions for practicing the *sadhanas* such as the Medicine Buddha sadhana, the Tara sadhana, or the Chenrezig sadhana. The main idea is that the yidams are the root of the accomplishment of dharma.

### ***The Sangha and Dharma Protectors***

Generally speaking, our friends and helpers on the path of dharma are the *sangha*. The sangha are our dharma friends because they tell us of the good qualities we can develop and show us what obstacles might arise and how to avoid them. They can even help us foresee the obstacles which may arise and help us steer clear of them. They also give us support and guidance in the areas of increasing beneficial activities and eliminating harmful activities. In the past there have been many Buddhas and bodhisattvas who have been very great friends of beings. Meditating on the protectors in the creation stage of meditation is a way of connecting with their power which helps us remove the various difficulties within and without us. So we pray to them for their help and that help materializes through the wisdom aspect. These Buddhas and bodhisattvas appear in the form of the various dharma protectors. They are called *dharma protectors* and we should never make the mistake of thinking that they are our personal protectors. We should not relate to them to increase our personal interests or to harm other people. The dharma protectors serve entirely to increase all favorable conditions for our dharma practice and to help us remove the various obstacles which can arise in our dharma practice. It is very important that we really believe that they are really there and that we have confidence in their power to help. If we do not have this complete confidence, we will receive little benefit from them. The protectors can remove the obstacles; they can really help us achieve our dharma goals. In Vajrayana practices we can make offerings of *torma* to the protectors and this helps increase our confidence in the protector's help. If we do these things properly and have great faith and confidence in their helping power, the help will really materialize and we will benefit from it. In this way the protectors are the root of activity in the dharma.

### ***The Completion Stage of Meditation***

Meditation in the Vajrayana is divided mainly into the creation stage and the completion stage. Previously, the creation stage or the visualizing stage of practice was discussed. Now the completion stage of Vajrayana meditation will be discussed.

The main focus in Vajrayana meditation is working with our mind. It is said that what manifests, what appears to us, is the mind. If we can understand this, we can understand how even the things in the external world—trees, mountains, rocks, flowers, etc.—are creations and experiences of the mind. If we can analyze this carefully enough, we can understand this. Whether these external things are or are not the projections or creations of the mind is not too important because happiness, suffering, and our relationships with the world are very definitely related to our mind. Whether we are attached to things or whether we are repelled by things depends on our mind. Whether we are enjoying what is taking place or not depends on our mind. That's obvious. If two people see the same movie, for example, one may think it is the greatest movie ever made and the other the worst. The movie obviously is the same, but how we feel depends upon our mind. All of our relationships are determined by our mind and our attitude. Also all the disturbing emotions and all the products of these disturbing emotions are rooted in our mind. Also, all the good qualities of the path emerge from what we do with our mind. For this reason we work principally on the mind in the Vajrayana.

### ***The Four Foundation Practices***

Besides *tranquillity meditation* (Skt. *Shamatha*) and *insight meditation* (Skt. *Vipashyana*) meditation there are the four ordinary foundations or preliminaries. It is said that the foundations are even more profound than the actual practice itself and the amount of benefit and development that emerges in the main practices is related entirely to how well one has prepared oneself through the foundations. There are two kinds of foundations: the *four ordinary foundations*<sup>20</sup> or four thoughts that turn the mind and the four special foundations or the *four preliminary practices*. These foundations are designed to orient the mind totally towards practice and to ensure that we will later practice with the greatest diligence and enthusiasm. For this reason the foundations, which are the steering force of the practice, are said to be even more important than the actual practice itself.

### ***Meditating Directly on Mind***

There are two traditions of tranquillity meditation: the sutra approach which contains the vast dharma teachings and the profound tantric approach. At the level of the sutra teachings we learn to understand all the

projections and creations of our mind. These vast teachings teach us how to understand and develop the view that the external world of phenomena and internal world of mind are empty. We begin to understand the emptiness of phenomena through these teachings.

The profound approach of the Vajrayana is not so much concerned with establishing the relationship between outer world and inner mind. Instead the main focus in the Vajrayana is working directly on the mind.<sup>21</sup> Whether outer phenomena are projections or not or whether the outer world is empty or not empty is not so important at this stage. When we work with mind, we are trying to discover the very essence, the very nature of mind. When we are progressing towards enlightenment, we are not creating new qualities in the mind or taking the mind from one stage to another. Rather we are discovering its true nature which has been invisible to us because it's clouded by delusions created by mistaken perceptions. So the whole point is to cast aside mistaken perceptions and discover the actual nature of what is already there.

The reason the Vajrayana teachings are called “that which explains directly” or “that which points to meditation” or “that which points to mind itself” is that these teachings are concerned with showing how to meditate and uncover the inner mind. The example that is often employed to demonstrate this process is the example of the rope that is mistaken for a snake. When we see a rope in a dark room and mistake it for a snake, we have a sudden fear and panic because of this delusion or a mistaken perception. The most useful thing to do in this case is not to create anything new or jump at some new remedy to eliminate the “snake,” but simply to realize that the “snake” is actually a rope. Once we see that it is just a rope, all the fear and delusions automatically disappear. There is no need to do anything about the delusions once the actual nature of what is there is realized.

Similarly, when we do Vajrayana meditation on the actual nature of phenomena, we are not so much concerned with fabricating something or being concerned with various outer delusions. We try instead to find the very nature of what is there. The mind is turned inward to consider how it is operating. It is the mind which looks at the mind itself. Through this process we begin to understand the very nature of the mind and we taste the very essence of how the mind becomes deluded and lost in various phenomena.

It is important to know how to actually meditate on the essence of mind. The actual essence, the deepest nature of the mind, is the empty aspect of mind called the dharmadhatu. Besides the dharmadhatu aspect

there is the aspect of luminous clarity, the essence of Buddhahood and wisdom. This is the true nature of the mind that is eventually discovered.

In the beginning of our meditating we cannot see mind's nature directly and its nature is not at all evident. When first examining the mind for its nature, we come to the conclusion that the mind is constantly in the throes of wanting and not wanting, of being happy and unhappy. The relationship between this first look at the mind and the true nature of the mind is the relationship between something which is very changeable or fleeting and something which is deeper and more lasting. When the mind is in the throes of happiness and sadness, wanting and rejecting, it is like water full of mud that has been stirred up. When we examine it, we only see the agitation, the cloudiness, and the dirtiness of the water. However, if we let the water settle without agitating it, the very nature of water which is clear and calm emerges. If left alone, it settles to become clear and calm. Similarly, when the mind is stirred up by these fleeting and changing thoughts of desire and emotion, it is not very clear. It is very cloudy. But if we can clear away this agitation by letting the mind rest in meditation, the actual nature of the mind which is very lucid and transparent and calm and peaceful emerges.

### ***The Body in Meditation***

We meditate so that we can actually perceive the essence of mind. The essence is constantly there, whether we are walking, sitting, sleeping, and whether we are deluded or not deluded. We could theoretically meditate on the mind on all occasions, but for beginners that is not at all easy. To help beginners eventually become more fully aware of this essence, it is extremely important to set our body in a good posture while meditating and to learn to control our mind. Through this we will eventually be able to perceive the essence of mind.

Traditional teachings present five or seven points of posture for the body and five main points of mental stability for the mind to observe. Overall, we should be neither too tense nor too relaxed so we will eventually be able to follow a path which leads to the perception of that essence. When we meditate, we sit very erect and properly. When our body is straight, the different subtle channels in our body will also be straight. When the channels are straight, then the energies which move through these channels also move in unobstructed lines. When these energies move correctly, the mind becomes much more stable.

There are five main points of meditation in relation to posture. Firstly we keep the spine straight. This actually is a way to relax and bring well-

being into our meditation. If the back is bent by leaning backwards or slanting to the right, left, or forward, we have to make an effort to maintain it and it's not so easy to be relaxed. If the spine is straight (by this we mean erect because the spine is slightly curved), then we don't have to expend effort and meditation becomes naturally comfortable accompanied by a state of well-being.

Secondly, we have the legs crossed when we meditate. Were we to meditate standing up, it would be quite uncomfortable. Were we to meditate lying down, we would become too sluggish. Sitting cross-legged, however, keeps the mind and meditation very stable making a very comfortable and lasting position. That's why we sit cross-legged.

Third, the hands are placed on top of each other in the lap. If the arms were outstretched in all sorts of funny positions, this would give rise to many kinds of feelings and not be very comfortable. Just letting the hands rest in the meditation posture with the palms on top of each other is very relaxed and this doesn't give rise to various feelings.

The fourth point concerns the breath. The breath should not be artificial. Artificial breathing requires effort and making this effort never allows the mind to rest in stability. For that reason we relax, letting the breath be natural, letting it come and go without any effort.

The fifth point concerns where we look with our eyes. Our mind and thoughts tend to change a lot. This is related to the eyes so that what we do with our eyes is quite important. There are different ways of meditating. The *tirthikas* (the non-Buddhists or Hindus) believe that Indra, Brahma, and the gods are in the heavens and they will often look upwards in meditation. In the Buddhist system, the Theravada practitioners will most often meditate with the eyes looking downward because if one looks around one, the objects in view give rise to feelings which are usually associated with the disturbing emotions. So they look downward in order not to be aware of these things.

In the Vajrayana we look neither up nor down or away from things, but look straight ahead. If the eyes are tightly closed, we get a sense of darkness but this doesn't allow much clarity of mind. If, on the other hand, the eyes are too widely open and staring, it is very uncomfortable and takes a lot of effort to maintain. So the eyes are naturally opened; not too closed, not too wide open and looking straight forward. No matter what appears within the field of vision, we meditate with a relaxed mind and don't follow after the various impressions which go through our consciousness. No matter what visual impressions manifest, we don't bother with them because the mind is very relaxed and not conditioned by visual impressions.

## *The Mind in Meditation*

Once we have learned to sit correctly and place the body correctly, we go on to stabilize the mind. Since the main qualities of meditation are dependent upon the connection we have with our guru, the first thing we do is to consider the guru as the very essence of all the Buddhas, the essence of all the gurus of the lineage, and has the transmission of the lineage. The guru is the very essence of all these beings condensed into just one person. To do this we visualize our own guru in the form of Buddha Vajradhara (Tib. *Dorje Chang*) and visualize him or her above our head or in space before us. It makes no difference whether Vajradhara is visualized in space before us or on top of our head. We meditate on the fact that the guru's presence is the essence of all the gurus and that he or she is in the form of the Buddha Vajradhara. We meditate and pray to the guru one-pointedly and at the end we visualize the guru melting into light and this light is absorbed into ourselves. Through the fusion of the guru and ourself, a connection is made in which we obtain both the blessing or the transmission of the essence of the dharma and the seed of accomplishment.

When we have done that, we rest our mind in a completely unfabricated state. First of all, we don't bother remembering things from the past. This means we don't think that yesterday, last month, or last year when we did such and such and we don't bother to recall what it was like when we were young. We don't think, "Oh, this person said that" or "I've had this sort of feeling" or "This happened to me." We simply don't bother about our memories and all the data from the past. So when we sit down to meditate we think, "Now I am going to meditate," and we decide not to be carried away with thoughts and memories.

We also don't think about the future. Many people worry a bit and feel quite uncomfortable when they receive this instruction and ask, "If I don't think about the future, it is going to be really difficult to make any plans and work out what I am going to do." They have not quite understood that there are two stages in our practice. There is meditation and post-meditation. These instructions of not remembering and not planning are concerned with what we do only when we are actually practicing meditation. In between these periods it is quite all right to plan and work out what to do in daily living. So, if we are thinking, "I'm going to build a house" or "I'm going to write a letter" or something like that, then the postmeditation phase is the time to sort all this out. If we are full of such thoughts while meditating, the presence of these thoughts and the agitation

it creates will prevent us from getting a taste for meditation and developing our meditation further.

So far the obvious level of remembering the past and planning for the future has been explained. But there is also a more subtle level of the present in which we do not remember or are not mindful. “Not remembering” means not holding or chewing over the thoughts which have just occurred or thinking of things which have just happened in previous instances of meditation. We don’t think, “Oh, I just thought this” or “This idea just came up” and then begin to contemplate these thoughts. We just leave the mind very relaxed. No matter what thoughts, concepts, or emotions come up we don’t bother to consider or analyze them. On the more subtle level of planning the future we don’t hope for an experience in meditation and think, “Now I am meditating. This sort of experience will come.” Once again we just leave the mind very relaxed without planning, hoping, or contriving the meditation. Even in the present time we don’t think, “Now I am meditating and now I am having a thought,” and so on.

The reason we don’t become involved with thoughts is that if we do pay attention to them, we become involved in a never-ending process of tracing thoughts with “Oh, now I am thinking this. Now I am thinking that thought. Now this thought is occurring. Oh, yes, this thought is nice.” This constant recording of what is taking place will go on and on and we will be caught up in the flow of constant observation of what is happening in the mind. That is why we should leave the thoughts completely alone and not pay any attention to them.

It is not good to think of the future on a subtle level. Trying too hard to contrive meditation by thinking, “Oh, now I am thinking this and it ought to be like that,” or “Oh, now I am meditating well and must keep it up,” or “This isn’t so good. I must adjust it so its more like that.” is not a useful thing. The Buddha said that if one tries too hard and tries to fabricate the meditation too much, this actually becomes a distraction which troubles the mind. With distraction we never develop stability of mind. For example, if we keep stirring muddy water, it never becomes clear. The water becomes clear by just leaving it. We can’t make the clarity by stirring or doing something to it. We need to leave it alone to be calm. There’s a quotation which says,

*If one doesn’t trouble the water, it is clear.  
If one doesn’t fabricate the mind, then it is content.*

Our mind's experience is a succession of instants. One instant follows another like a rosary; mental activity is a succession of different experiences one after another. In these instants thoughts can arise or not arise. In meditation when one relaxes in the actual instant without confusing it with the instant that has passed or a future one, there is only the freshness of the moment. We do this without the idea of "this is such and such a thought." We may think that this will create a state of annihilation in the mind. But it doesn't and if we can rest in that freshness, it leads to great luminous clarity. So in the first instant we rest in the freshness and then, without any analysis, we rest in the second instant; whatever is there is also completely fresh and so on. If we can manage to stay within the present instant relaxed and fresh, then great peace and tranquillity of mind will automatically emerge. If we are tense or thinking, "Oh, now I have this thought. I must change it," or "I am meditating" then we are not in relaxed meditation. The thing to do is to be relaxed in the freshness of the moment. While being relaxed, we are very attentive with mindfulness and awareness. This means we are aware and mindful of what is happening in a very bright and alert way, like a very good spy. A good spy knows what he is doing, that he is writing a letter now and then is going to go there and so on. So we have this relaxed, but incredibly alert, mindfulness while being in the freshness of the present moment.

When we meditate, we actually practice both aspects of relaxation in meditation: mindfulness and awareness. When meditation is very comfortable and we aren't troubled by many thoughts, we can just relax in the freshness of the moment. If many thoughts and distractions arise, that is the time to be very mindful and aware of what is taking place. Because of an incredible awareness and sharpness of mind, the thoughts will eventually subside and clarity of mind will increase. So, when a large number of thoughts subside through our alertness and awareness and we become very comfortable, then we can turn down the sharpness and awareness and be more relaxed. Relaxed, however, doesn't mean being carried away by our thoughts because that would be the same as not meditating. Relaxed means to be comfortable in this freshness of this instant of the present time.

At first we do short periods of meditation to be very relaxed in the freshness of the present and try to be very alert about what is taking place. That very alertness doesn't mean we see the thoughts and think, "Oh, these thoughts are a bad thing." It is said that this clarity of mind is unbroken; it is there continuously. By meditating in this way, we will come closer and closer to the inherent clarity of the essence of mind.



Shamatha meditation, the meditation which brings this calmness and peace of mind, is done either “with a support” or “without a support.” “With a support” means meditating on something like a Buddha statue, on the breath, or a visualization. This is an easier way to meditate, but we gradually need to develop concentration that has no support. Shamatha “without a support” means settling the mind without settling on something. Usually, we meditate without support doing Shamatha meditation which is mainly focused on the freshness of whatever is happening in the present moment.

### ***Analytical and Placement Meditation***

Generally speaking there are two main approaches to meditation. First there is the “analytical meditation” of the great scholars, the great *panditas*. With this meditation one is very aware and investigates everything that is there. One examines the various objects to find out their substance, to find out if they exist, if they don’t exist, to look at the nature of the external world, to look at the mind, and so on. One examines everything very minutely and carefully using meditation as a means of seeing things more and more sharply and precisely. Through this meditation a great deal of mental clarity and sharpness emerges, but not the calm abiding of the mind. So the first main approach is called the “analytical meditation of the great panditas.”

The other main approach is called “placement meditation” of the yogi. The word in Sanskrit is *kusulu* and this means “those who don’t contrive or fabricate anything” or “those who are very simple and natural.” We would call them “yogis” these days. In this meditation we don’t analyze everything that is taking place. We learn instead how to put the mind to rest, how to rest within the mind’s very essence, and then how to develop the actual power of meditation through direct experience. We do not get caught up with thoughts of the past or future and learn to remain in the freshness of the very instant. We then learn to actually lengthen this meditation so that we can rest moment after moment in the freshness. Through the actual experience of this we learn instinctively what is to be done in meditation and what is to be avoided.

To develop meditation we need to actually meditate. To gain a genuine experience of meditation we first go to a place which is favorable for meditation; a nice, calm, and isolated place. We then do many short sessions by meditating very concentrated for a short while. We don’t think of the past or future, but try to experience that freshness of the present doing this again and again and again with many short clear sessions.

Gradually we extend the time of each session so that we can have that freshness and sharpness of meditation for longer and longer periods.

The great meditators of the past have employed several different terms for this fresh state of meditation. They have used different terms which seem to be meaningful to them. One term is to meditate in that “freshness.” This gives the idea of not being caught up in the past or future but being in the instant, fresh in the next instant, fresh in the instant after. Another term which means the same thing is the “natural awareness” of meditation. The word “natural” means unfabricated. This means that whatever is happening in that instant, we need not think about it or play with it. All mental analyses are “unnatural” in that they are fabrications which occur when we think a lot about what is going on and try to change it. This word “natural” is the opposite of “fabrication.” Freshness and natural awareness apply more to the relaxation of meditation. If we have a sheaf of wheat and bind it with a rope, then it is bound very tightly. If we cut the rope, then the wheat falls down loosely and naturally. So there is another term “loose” in meditation, but this word “loose” means more in Tibetan than in English. The idea of “loose” is the idea of taking away the tension and letting something be relaxed in the natural way rather than holding it together artificially. The Tibetan word for “freshness” is *sang pa*. The Tibetan word for “natural awareness” is *nyu ma* or *nyu me she pa*. The Tibetan word for “looseness” is *loe pa*. Then there is a fourth term which is *rig ki* which in Tibetan means something like “sharp.” “Sharpness” is used in relation to meditation because there is this very attentive sharpness that we apply to mindfulness and awareness. In summary, these four terms are very meaningful and have been applied by the great masters to meditation. As we meditate, we will encounter these four things and the significance of the meaning of these words then strikes home.

### ***Insight (Vipashyana) Meditation***

Previously, we mentioned that Buddhism and Hinduism have similar names for different things. The Buddhists talk of Vipashyana or insight meditation. The Hindus also use this term because both religions had their roots in India and taught in the Sanskrit language. Even though the terms are the same for Buddhists and Hindus, Vipashyana meditation in the Buddhist tradition is different from the Vipashyana meditation of the Hindu tradition. In fact, there are also some different ways of defining Vipashyana meditation within the different schools of Buddhism.

In the Theravada tradition of Buddhism there are two main stages of meditation: Shamatha and Vipashyana. But this is not quite the same thing as Shamatha and Vipashyana in the Vajrayana. Shamatha in the Theravada tradition is also different from Shamatha in the Vajrayana tradition. To define these terms more accurately, when Shamatha was translated into Tibetan it became *shenay*. The first syllable *she* means “calm” and syllable *nay* means “stability.” So the first syllable is “calmness” and this means that one establishes a state of mind which is not troubled by many thoughts. By getting rid of all the problems associated with thoughts, a natural peace and calmness comes to the mind. Then, when that peace or absence of thoughts is there, the mind becomes very stable. So to translate *shinay* meditation literally would be “calm stability meditation.” Vipashyana when it was translated into Tibetan became *lhag tong*. *Tong* means “to see” and means to have insight. From the sutra point of view this means that one gains insight into the dharmata or the universal essence. In the Vajrayana context it is translated in terms of “seeing the very essence of mind,” or seeing the very nature of mind. So there is the insight, but this insight gains something which is *tong*. The *lhag* means “superior” because when one has insight, there is no more confusion of “Is it like this? Is it like that? Is its nature such and such?” One sees directly beyond any shadow of doubt so it literally means “superlative seeing.”

We are trying to gain Vipashyana insight into the very essence of phenomena in both the sutra and the Vajrayana approach. In the sutra approach we are trying to gain insight into external phenomena. In the Vajrayana approach we are trying to gain insight into the very essence of the mind. They are the same in nature because in both cases we are trying to penetrate to the very heart of phenomena, the very essence of what is there. If we discover the nature of phenomena, then we discover the nature of the mind as well. So Shamatha and Vipashyana are the same in their nature and purpose.

Where Shamatha and Vipashyana differ is in the means they employ to reach the goal. In the sutrayana one tackles all the various phenomena and tries to understand their essence by analysis. In the Vajrayana one knows it would be a difficult and lengthy task to work through the essence of all external phenomena and all the internal phenomena of the mind. Instead if we discover the universal essence in one thing completely, then we will realize the essence of everything else. It is therefore more convenient to meditate on our own mind and discover the very essence of this mind. Discovering the essence of mind will automatically reveal the very essence of everything else in the external world. So this method is more rapid and focused. In this regard Gampopa says:

*The view is the view of the mind itself.  
If one looks and asks, "Where is the mind?"  
One is never going to discover it.*

Gampopa compared this to a traditional story of a man called Jig. This man was very strong physically but not too intelligent. He was unusual because he had a jewel in his forehead and rather floppy skin on his head. One day, when he was tired, the loose skin on his forehead flopped forward and covered up this jewel. In his tiredness and not being too bright, he thought, "Oh, it is gone!" He became very worried and started looking for the jewel everywhere and just couldn't find it. He was very distressed and, of course, all the time it was in his forehead. It is like that: If we want to find the essence, then we turn to our own mind. That's where it is. If we look anywhere else and try to approach the essence through anything other than our mind, it will be very hard to discover.

## *Seeing Mind Directly*

Usually a way of analyzing what one does is based on the view that one has, the meditation one does, and the practice that goes with this view. As far as the view is concerned, the sutra approach and the Vajrayana approach are a bit different. The sutra approach is called “the analytical approach” or “the approach of analyzing the mind.” Through analysis and inspection one comes to the conclusion that mind’s essence is empty, its quality is clarity, and that Buddha-essence exists in all beings. But this is derived mainly through the process of deduction.

The Vajrayana view is based on the mind itself. Rather than being deductive it is called “the direct experience.” So we have the immediate experience of the mind. We discover the mind as it is. Because of that immediate and real experience, the view of how the mind is will naturally arise. We begin by doing Shamatha meditation. This calm stability of Shamatha helps one gain the very direct experience of the mind. We look at the arising, the abiding, and the departing of the things which take place in the mind.

First we examine arising. When something happens, a thought for instance, we try to discover where it comes from. It is different from the analytic approach because in the analytic approach if we have a happy thought, we then deduce that some pleasant object or action produced this happy thought. We would see a causal relationship of thought and object. In the Vajrayana, however, we are looking at the thought itself, looking for where has that thought actually come from? We try to see very clearly what source it emerged from. Second, we examine the actual thought the instant it is there; we try to find out where it actually is; where it is dwelling. And third, as the thought fades, we try to see very clearly where that thought has gone? Where has it departed to? By being aware of the arising, the abiding, and the departure of thoughts, we begin to see that there is no place, no thought bank that thoughts emerge from. There is also no actual place where they are located nor where we can find them. Finally, we discover there is no place that they go to afterwards. So all we find is emptiness in these three moments of thought.

By the repeated examination of thoughts, we gain stability of mind and begin to understand the essence of this mind itself. Once we become familiar with the nature of mind, we see that it is the same whether we are thinking or not thinking. We discover that the essence of the mind itself is very stable. Through this direct approach, we don’t need other techniques to bring stability to the mind because, by discovering the nature of the mind, there will quite naturally be a stability, a calm, and peace. We

discover that even the very essence of thoughts is peace. We don't need to eliminate or suppress thoughts. Instead we gain the actual experience without philosophizing about emptiness. We don't need to know that everything is emptiness, because emptiness is the nature of mind. The very nature of what is happening in our experience is emptiness without any need to think, "Is it?" or "Isn't it?" or having to put any labels onto it. It is obviously empty because we actually experience it. The same is true with the luminous clarity; we don't need to analyze clarity or think, "Is this the clarity and the wisdom aspect?" because we arrive at a state where everything is apparent. We no longer need to add any terms or ideas or philosophy since the actual experience is there.

For instance, before we began our meditation practice, our anger was very powerful and overtook us and seemed very strong and important. Then we learned to look at our mind and to look at how we become angry and where the anger came from. Then we looked at the anger which seemed so real to find its essence. We saw there was nothing there to be found when looking at it straight on.

When we meditate, we sometimes develop a very stable and calm state and think, "Oh yes, my meditation is really working." Sometimes we have many thoughts and think, "Now there are too many thoughts." But when we look at the stable mind and the busy, thinking mind, we do not find a difference between these states from the essence of mind. This contrasts with our normal conception of mind. Sometimes we think, "Now I'm in meditation" and another time we think, "Now I'm thinking" and still another time "Now I'm happy" or "Now I'm sad" or "Now I'm getting angry and upset." It seems there is a tremendous amount of change in the mind, but when we learn to be aware of the nature of the mind, we find this nature is identical in all these reflections.

To improve our meditation and make it a continuous living experience, we need faith and devotion. It is said in the Kagyu lineage prayer that: "Devotion is the head of meditation." We pray to open ourselves to have confidence in our guru, in the gurus of the transmission, and all the Buddhas, the bodhisattvas, and yidams. It is by making this connection with them, with full devotion towards them, and having that confidence in them, that produces this deep meditation. Once our meditation is more and more stable, things become clearer and clearer and all the various good qualities emerge. That is why we do the various sadhanas and devotional practices.

When meditation progresses and becomes part of us, we can find peace. Then when thoughts of aggression and aversion begin to arise, we find peace by meditating on their essence. When thoughts of desire or

attraction emerge, then by being aware of the essence of these thoughts we find peace. When feelings of suffering start to emerge, we are able to go to their essence and experience calm and peace. When thoughts of happiness that stimulate pride and artificial joy emerge, by going to the essence, we again find peace. Through this very deep awareness of the essence of phenomena a peacefulness permeates our mind.

## *The Main Obstacles to Meditation*

The two main obstacles to meditation are sluggishness and excitement. Sluggishness is when our meditation becomes very heavy, very unclear, very thick, and full of torpor. This drowsiness feels heavy and there is a lack of clarity. That's the first obstacle to meditation. The second obstacle is excitement when our mind is overstimulated. We have many thoughts of the past or the present current of thoughts are so strong that our mind just can't settle down.

In more detail, there are six difficulties or obstacles to meditation. First is too much wanting, too much desire. This occurs when we are thinking, "Oh, I want to be happy, I must be happy. I want to go and amuse myself and go and see this or that particular event." Or we feel we ought to be a certain way or we feel a great pull towards something. By itself this is not always an obstacle to meditation. But when it becomes so strong that our mind keeps going back to that thing over and over, it is detrimental for meditation. For example, we may think "I want a nice house" and then think of what the house is going to look like, how it is going to be built, and so on.

The second obstacle is having an aggressive mind. This occurs when we think about hurting other people, how we want to fight back with someone who has harmed us. We want to say something that will really put them in their place. These thoughts aren't necessarily an obstacle but when they become so dominant and the mind is so drawn into them, we can't achieving stability in meditation, then this becomes a fault.

Obviously, these obstacles are things we need to eliminate in ourselves. This is why we do the Kagyu Lineage prayer at the beginning of each meditation session. The prayer says "weariness of samsara is the foot of meditation." The actual word in Tibetan for "weariness" is *shenlok* which means "to turn one's back on craving" or "to turn away from wanting and craving." We need a strong foundation for our meditation, this we need to turn away from the powerful pull of desire which dominates our mind.

Some people when they encounter the expression *shenlok* (it usually has the feeling of disgust with samsara) think that to be a Buddhist one has to wear torn clothes, eat the simplest food, live in a rundown house, and choose an impoverished country to live in. To be a Buddhist doesn't mean that one wears rags, eats terrible food, and so on. It means that one doesn't have powerful desires that leads to "I really must have that thing. I can't live without it. I deserve this and living without it isn't right." It means one doesn't think, "This is too important to me. I can't give it away



because it means too much to me.” When desire is that strong, it presents an obstacle to one’s practice. *Shenlok* or “disgust with samsara” literally means “turning away from desire.” It means detaching oneself from those desires and involvements which represent obstacles because one can’t let go. Buddha himself said:

*If one doesn’t have desire, then it is perfectly all right  
to own a house of a thousand stories.*

*If one has desire, then one needs to give up attachment  
to even a miserable mud hut.*

*If one doesn’t have desire, then it is all right to possess a  
thousand measures of gold.*

*If one has desire, then one needs to give up one’s  
attachment to even a single copper penny.*

So, the main point is not attachment to the objects themselves, but one’s attitude towards these objects.

The third obstacle to meditation is mental obscurity which occurs when our mind is not clear, when it is heavy and thick. The fourth obstacle to meditation occurs when that obscurity becomes sleep. We are so sluggish that we fall asleep. The fifth obstacle is excitement or overstimulation which occurs when we are too excited by the power of thoughts. The sixth obstacle is regret which occurs when we feel sorry about something that has happened and keep going back to it during meditation.

From time to time one of these obstacles comes up in our practice. When they pop up, we must first of all recognize them for what they are and then decide not to be swayed from doing meditation by them because meditation will allow us to go beyond them. For instance, if we have this sadness or regret for something in the past, then we recognize it in our meditation and think, “Oh yes, today I’m being overwhelmed by regret. I must go beyond regret through meditation.” We use meditation to help get rid of this unnecessary regret. If we are aggressive, we must think, “Yes, today I have a lot of aggression. I must meditate in order to get over that aggression by using meditation to help eliminate aggression.” If we feel the great attraction of desire and involvement with a project, then we think, “Today I will meditate to remove that particular obstacle.” Approaching it this way will allow us to work with it and diminish its power over our meditation.

These are the six main obstacles of meditation. The most important ones are sluggishness and excitement. In order to cope with these two

main obstacles, we can employ visualization. When we are very sluggish, dull, thick and heavy, we can recall the qualities of the Buddha, the three jewels, the dharma, and the qualities of samadhi and meditation. This should perk us up a bit. We can also visualize a white drop of light in our heart moving up to the crown of the head and staying there for a while. This will help with sluggishness. When the problem is excitement, we need to tone down the mind a little. We remember all of the drawbacks of samsara, all the suffering it involves, and all of the problems caused by the disturbing emotions. We can also visualize a black drop in our heart that slowly sinks down into the seat on which we are sitting. It is said that those two techniques will help with the problems of sluggishness and excitement.

### ***What Helps in Meditation***

When we start meditation, it is important to do many short sessions rather than a few long sessions of meditation. So we try to meditate very sharply for a short while and then stop. Then we have a break and do another meditation session. Each time is short, sharp, and clear and it feels like a pleasant experience. If one tries to meditate too long, it becomes exhausting and the association of tiredness with meditation is not going to help. That's one of the reasons for doing short sessions at first. Also, thinking of meditation as a pleasant experience makes us very keen to do it again. If we see the benefits of sitting just for a little while and having this moment of clarity and precision, then we appreciate it and want to do it again and again to perfect it. Once we are used to it, we should start increasing the length of the sessions slowly so that we increase the amount of clarity. When we have the taste of meditation and begin to understand what meditation is, we need to increase and develop that meditation. We need to develop it constantly going from one degree of stability to an even greater degree of stability. Three things which help us do this are called "integrating disturbing emotions into the path," "integrating happiness and sadness into the path," and "integrating sickness into the path."

"Integrating the disturbing emotions onto the path" is turning desires, aggression, stupidity, pride, jealousy and so on into good qualities. Of these aggression or anger is by far the most powerful defilement. We think anger is so unbearable that we feel we have to explode, hit someone, or shout at somebody. If we are under the influence of anger, in our meditation we try to look at it directly and find out where it is at the time the actual anger arises. "Where is the anger coming from? Where is it welling up from? Where is this actual instant?" and "Where does it go?" If

we face it directly, it cannot actually be grasped. We feel angry, but when we look for it, we cannot find out where it resides. If we try to stay within this realm of nonexistence, this realm of not meeting the anger itself, the anger should be reduced a little bit. By learning to stay within this nonexistence of the arising, abiding, and departing of the anger, then gradually over a period of time we will really eliminate the influence of anger from our life.

This same approach works not only with aggression, but also with desire, pride, jealousy—all of the disturbing emotions. Each time we look for the defilement, we find only emptiness and experience this emptiness through direct experience discovering its essence. In the sutra approach, we develop an understanding of emptiness mainly through a process of deduction and investigation based on logic, clues, and logical reasoning. We eventually come to the conclusion of the emptiness of emotions based on the investigation of such facts as what we did when we examined the long and short sticks. Through these kinds of exercises the nature of emptiness is slowly understood in the sutra approach.

The tantric approach is much more vivid, immediate, and real. When anger arises, for instance, the anger is truly there. It is very strong and potent at the time. Rather than analyzing and thinking about it, we look at it straight in the face and try to find out, “Where are you? Where are you coming from?” We look directly rather than using deductive reasoning. The result is the emptiness of the anger is experienced. This way of tackling the emotions and disturbing emotions is often described in the *spiritual songs* (Skt. *dohas*) of the siddhas. They tell how powerful and vivid anger can be and how, at the same time, we can use anger to discover the emptiness of phenomena because we naturally meet emptiness when we look directly at this powerful and vivid emotion.

These two approaches of direct experience of the Vajrayana and the inferential approach of the sutra path is described by the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, in *An Aspirational Prayer of Mahamudra* :<sup>22</sup>

*The way things really are cannot be phrased in terms of existence.*

So he says the disturbing emotions or even the mind itself do not exist. When one seeks them, one can never encounter their existence. And then it says:

*Not even the Buddhas can see  
the true existence of any of these things.*

So it is not a question of existence or of nonexistence because even the Buddhas cannot see its existence. On the other hand, one can't talk about total annihilation or nonexistence either because out of this is reflected samsara (the impure side) and nirvana (which is liberation). Whether one is in samsara or whether one is in nirvana depends on one's mind and so the next line of this prayer says:

*It is not nonexistence because therein lies  
the foundation of samsara and nirvana.*

One might think that if things are not existent and not nonexistent, there is some kind of contradiction here. No, there isn't, because things manifest in the middle way, which is the union of samsara and nirvana. It is neither one extreme of existence, nor the other extreme of total annihilation. So it continues:

*It is not contradictory.  
It is this fusion, which is the Middle-way.*

And the last line of the prayer is:

*May that which is free from any extremes  
The universal essence of everything—be realized.*

Freedom from extremes means to be free from the *four extremes* and the *eight intellectual complications*. It's a little strange when we start talking in terms of nonexistence and not nonexistence because this is not easy to grasp intellectually. But, as far as the actual practice is concerned, when we meditate, these words develop full meaning because we discover the essence of phenomena and the truth and meaning of those words becomes lucid. To develop peace and insight then is really just seeing phenomena as they really are. Sometimes when we meditate, it goes really well and we think, "Oh, now I've really got it. At last I'm a really good meditator, a great practitioner." Sometimes it goes really poorly and we think, "Oh, there's no hope. I've lost the knack of meditating completely." Both are just attitudes of the mind. Whether we feel we have great or terrible meditation, it doesn't make a difference to the actual essence, which always remains the same. We just continue to meditate without being carried away by the "goodness" or the "badness" of the experience. We just continue meditating no matter how we may relate to the experience.