

Herein resides
A Concise Explanation of Jigten Sumgon's
Essence of the Mahayana Teachings

Homage and prostrations to the lama and supreme deity!

I will here unpack the meaning of what can be described as the single path that all the true and perfectly awakened buddhas have treaded; the path which the children of the buddhas—the bodhisattvas—are currently traversing; the entranceway for the fortunate disciples yearning for liberation and omniscient buddhahood; the enlightened wisdom of all the sublime root and lineage lamas; the quintessence of all the Buddha's teachings and the holy commentaries, the sutras, tantras, and transmitted oral teachings, all rolled into one. There are three sections here, traditionally referred to as "virtue in the beginning"—the introductory section; "virtue in the middle"—the main body of the text; and "virtue at the end," the concluding sections.

Part One: The Introductory Section

This text begins with an explanation of the meaning of the title, followed by words of veneration and homage. First, let me unpack the meaning of the title. In Sanskrit, it is *Mahāyānaśāsanānīteḥṛīdayanāma*. In Tibetan, the title is *theg chen bstan pa'i snying po*. This translates into English as *Essence of the Mahayana Teachings*, which tells you what the text is going to be about.

Next is an explanation of the formal words of homage. The root text by Jigten Sumgon reads:

sangs rgyas dang byang chub sems dpa' thams cad la phyag 'tshal lo
Homage to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas!

Here, the word Buddha, or *sang gye*¹ in Tibetan, is understood to refer to a victorious one who has awakened from the sleeplike state of ignorance (*sang*) and whose knowledge of the phenomenal world in all its myriad manifestations has fully

expanded (*gye*) to perfect omniscience. Bodhisattvas are heroic beings who have attained the *bhumis*, or stages of realization, and who have given rise to the supreme bodhichitta commitment. Bodhisattvas abide in the ocean of bodhisattva conduct without ever giving up. Homage to all these buddhas and bodhisattvas!

Part Two: The Main Body of the Teaching

The main teaching can be divided into sections. These are: 1) cutting through misconceptions through knowing the four Dharmas; 2) dispelling the faults of being an unfit vessel through four attitudes; 3) accomplishing the nectar-essence of the teachings through four trainings; and 4) assimilating the essence of the teachings through meditating on the fivefold path.

1.0 Let us begin to unpack the first set of four.

1.1 The first Dharma deals with how to find a lama. In the root text, Jigten Sumgon writes:

yang dag lam ston tshad ldan bla ma bstal

Look for a qualified lama who can show you the authentic spiritual path.

Any fortunate disciple who wants to attain the state of perfectly awakened buddhahood must rely on a sublime spiritual guide, the source of all benefit and happiness, without whom it would be impossible to attain enlightenment. The *Condensed Perfection of Wisdom* states:

Qualified² lamas must always be relied upon.

The reason is that all knowledge and accomplishments ensue from them.

As stated above, the lama we should seek is one who, at the level of Vinaya, is imbued with pure ethical discipline and has not transgressed the vows and conduct; this means the lama should abide in accordance with the law of cause and effect. At the level of Mahayana, the lama we seek must have pure compassion and bear the burden and responsibility to accomplish only others' benefit. At the level of Mantrayana, the lama should be imbued with the blessings of the lineage stages. The lama we seek should be imbued with the qualities of intelligence and wisdom, such

that their knowledge and experience enables them to explain any aspect of the sutras and tantras.

1.2 Once we have found such an authentic, qualified master, how should we then rely upon him or her? This is the second point, addressed in the root text by Jigten Sumgon as follows:

skyo med gus pas ston pa'i bka' bzhin bsgrub

With devotion that never grows weary, practice in accordance
with the instructions of the Buddha, the Teacher.

We should follow the lama with deep³ and ongoing devotion of body, speech, and mind, never growing weary or restless. Whatever Dharma teachings the lama gives regarding what to do and what not to do, we should receive them as if we are hearing the words directly from the Buddha. If we do this, the benefit and impact of these instructions on our mind will be greater.

1.3 The way to serve the lama, to please the lama, is the third point, explained by the next line in the root text:

zang zing rdzas dang srid zhu sgrubs pas mchod

Venerate [the lama] with material offerings,
service of body and speech, and practice.

This line points to the three ways of pleasing the lama, classed in terms of lesser, middling, and supreme. The lesser way of pleasing the lama is through making material offerings. To make genuine offerings means to do so without duplicity, offering to the lama any material things that are garnered with integrity in accordance with Dharma, such as food, clothing, bedding and household items, medicines, jewels, and so forth. Material offerings are the lowest form of offering.

Next is the offering of service. This means to offer service of body and speech, with the faith of admiration, longing, and trust in the lama. Serving the lama through body and speech is the middling form of offering.

Finally, listening to the teachings, contemplating the meaning, and meditating and practicing what the lama has taught is known as the offering of practice, and it is the highest form of offering. The way to listen to the teachings, and to study and

contemplate the Dharma through relying on the lama, is described in the root text as follows:

le lor gnas spang don ldan thos bsam bya
Abstain from wallowing in laziness and apply yourself
to listening and contemplating that which is meaningful.

Jigten Sumgon refers here to the importance of being diligent and not succumbing to laziness and distraction. The Dharma that is practiced diligently is meaningful because it is the skillful means for attaining liberation and omniscient Buddhahood. We must listen properly to the teachings in the holy commentaries, or *śāstras*, which take as their witness and basis the actual words of the Buddha. When we are listening to these teachings of the Buddha, or any of the associated commentaries and sublime explanatory texts on the Buddha's teachings, we should be free of the fault of being like an overturned jar, unreceptive to the words being spoken. When we are thinking about these teachings, contemplating their meaning, we should be free of the fault of being like a jar with a leak, unable to remember what we heard. And when we are applying these teachings in our meditation, we should be free of the fault of being like a jar containing poison that contaminates the nutritive essence of the nectar poured into it. This summarizes the three faults of the vessel, which are to be abandoned. We should listen to the teachings and contemplate them so that we do not forget.

1.4 Regarding the way to practice the path, which constitutes the fourth point, Jigten Sumgon explains:

zab don rnyed nas gcig pur dben pa bsten
Having found the teachings of the profound truth, practice in a solitary
hermitage.

In dependence upon the three types of profound teachings—namely, the Buddha's actual words, the holy beings' commentaries on the Buddha's words, and the lama's oral instructions—we internalize the profound truth of emptiness and the extensive conduct of the bodhisattva way. At this point, the place we choose to live and practice is very important. The root text continues:

yon tan phun tshogs gnas der brtson 'grus brtsam
Generate diligence in such a place where all the perfect qualities are present.

Just getting the sublime teachings from the lama is not enough; we have to actually practice. For beginning practitioners, it is unreasonable to expect that we will be able to practice while immersed in distraction. That is why we have the profound pith instruction that emphasizes practicing in a solitary retreat place. We should stay alone in a mountain retreat place or a solitary hermitage. Such a place qualifies as a perfect place if it has been blessed by being touched by the feet of buddhas and bodhisattvas. But simply staying in such a place is not enough. We have to muster up diligence to apply ourselves to practicing there.

The way to hold our body for practice is explained in the root text as follows:

drang por skyil krung dran pa mngon gzhaq nas

Sit straight and cross-legged, and give rise to mindful awareness.

There, in that authentic location, straighten your spine and sit in the seven-point Vairocana posture: spine straight, legs in crossed vajra (full-lotus) posture, hands in the mudra of meditative equipoise, chin slightly tilted, eyes open slightly with gaze resting at the tip of the nose, and tongue pressing gently at the roof of the mouth. Let your posture be relaxed enough that it is not too strained or forced, but not so relaxed that you slouch. While the body is held in this manner, the mind should not be allowed to get caught up in what is going on outside, but should be reined in, focusing mindful awareness on the practice.

2.0 Second, abandoning the faults of the vessel through four attitudes:

The actual focal points of the meditation are fourfold. These are: the meditation on impermanence and death; the difficulty of finding the freedoms and endowments of the precious human life; karma—the law of cause and effect; and the defects of samsara.

2.1 First, for the contemplation on death and impermanence, Jigten Sumgon writes:

tshe 'di'i g.nyen por mi rtag 'chi ba bsam

As an antidote to getting roped into this present life's dramas,
think about impermanence and death.

Up until this point, we have strived only for the heights of greatness in this life and for mere worldly happiness, but this has not taken us to the state of nirvana. Think in this way:

Up to now I have been working only for the sake of my present life, and this has only resulted in my wandering in samsara. If I keep going in this manner, I will only continue to perpetuate my stay in samsara. Therefore, I must abandon my attachment and clinging to this present life.

The way to do this is to contemplate the impermanent nature of all conditioned phenomena. What is impermanent? The outer worlds are impermanent, as are the beings who populate these worlds. Think extensively about every aspect of impermanence; about how, moment by moment, beings' lives are in a state of flux and are continually changing.

2.2 Second is the [contemplation on the] difficulty of obtaining the precious human body with freedom and endowments. The root text reads:

da lta'i lus ni bsod rnam mthu las rnyed

The body I have now was obtained through the power of my [previous] merit.

If we think that death is no big deal, we should think again. Now we have the freedoms, having bypassed the eight states devoid of the freedom to practice, such as rebirth in the hells. We have the endowments—the five personal endowments such as human birth, and the five external endowments such as being born in a time when the Buddha manifested. This precious human rebirth endowed with eighteen qualities has been found through the power of vast merit accumulated from our previous lives. But as the root text continues:

phyi nas dal 'byor 'di 'dra rnyed dka' ste

It is unlikely that I will find these freedoms and endowments in future rebirths.

We should contemplate how singularly unlikely it will be to find another precious human rebirth if we do not apply ourselves diligently to practicing in this life while we have the chance.

2.3 Third is karma, the law of cause and effect. The root text reads:

rang dgar mi 'jug las kyi dbang du 'gro

Things do not happen arbitrarily. Everything follows the force of karma.

If we do not become conversant with the profound truth, we won't have control over our own mind. At the time of death, if we haven't gained control over our own mind, we will not have the power to choose a good womb⁴ to enter, and we will be at the mercy of the negative karma we accrue in this life, and we will have no choice but to be reborn in an undesirable state within the six realms. Karma itself does not expire on its own. As the root text asserts:

dkar nag rgyu 'bras bde sdug so sor smin

Positive and negative actions ripen into happiness and suffering respectively.

This is the law of cause and effect.

Thus, our karma is not random. It is designed by our own positive and negative actions. None of the possessions, family, friends, and loved ones who we have worked so hard to acquire and keep by our side will follow us after death. What will definitely follow us, however, are the positive and negative actions, our karma, that we have accrued. We can be certain about this. All of this karma will stay with us until it ripens into a result. Even after eons of time, karma does not expire by itself.

2.4 Fourth is the contemplation on the defects of samsara. In the root text, Jigten Sumgon mentions the three lower realms of samsara:

dmyal ba yi dwags de bzhin dud 'gro dang

The hells, hungry-ghost realm, and likewise, the animal realm,

Then he continues, speaking of the three higher realms as well:

mi dang lha min lha rnams gar skyes kyang

and the realms of humans, jealous gods, and gods—wherever we are born,

The root text goes on to address the kinds of suffering beings experience:

tsha grang bkres skom blun rmongs skye 'chi sogs

we must experience intense burning or freezing, hunger, thirst, stupidity and inability to communicate, as well as birth, death, and so forth.

As a result of non-virtue, beings are born in the six realms of samsara. To review the suffering that plagues these realms, let's start with a description of the hell realms.

First, the hot hells: The eight hot hells appear as the karmic projection of beings' negative actions. They include the reviving hell, the black-line hell, the burning-hot hell, the extremely burning-hot hell, the hell of gathering and crushing, the hell of crying and wailing, the hell of intense crying and wailing, and the hell of maximum torment. Surrounding these eight main hot hells are the pit of burning embers, the mire of rotting corpses, the mountain of *shalmali* trees with sharp blades, and rivers of burning ash. In all of these realms, the experience is one of sheer and constant suffering. Beings here experience the sensations of being burnt by fire, cut apart with weapons, burnt alive in boiling magma, and so forth.

The eight cold hells are named the hell of blisters, the hell of festering blisters, the hell named for the sound one makes when one is freezing (brrrrr), the hell of cries of "Oh, help me!", the hell of chattering teeth, the hell of cracking like a lotus, the hell of cracking like an utpala flower, and the hell of cracking like a large utpala flower.

The cold hells are thousands of times⁵ colder than the coldest water in the human realm, and the hot hells are thousands of times hotter than the hottest fires in the human realm. Thus Buddha said that the suffering of the hells is extremely excruciating.

In the hungry ghost realm, the hungry ghosts with outer obscurations will see some fruit trees or cascading waterfalls in the distance, but when they approach them, after dragging their emaciated bodies across the ground with their brittle joints cracking, they find that the trees and waterholes have all dried up. Hungry ghosts with inner obscurations have enormous, dried-out bodies. Their skin is very thin and delicate, and their ribs and collarbones protrude. Their stomachs are huge, but their throats are extremely long and thin, and their mouths are too tiny to get enough food to fill their stomachs. Their arms and legs are dry and emaciated, and they suffer intensely from hunger and thirst. The hungry ghosts with obscurations and blockages to food and drink think only of finding those things, but even the sounds of food and drink are not heard in that realm. Even if they do happen to find something to eat or drink, it instantly transforms into a blazing hot iron ball, or a pit of fire. They see piles of pus, blood, snot, and excrement, but are not even able to consume those. The hungry ghosts with common obscurations live as flesh-eating

ghouls in the charnel grounds, with no guaranteed food or drink to be found, suffering the pangs of hunger, thirst, and brutal cold.

The animals that live in oceans and bodies of water suffer from being killed, caught, and injured in all sorts of ways. Their suffering is unfathomable. The beings scattered across land we can actually see with our own eyes. Without even asking permission, human beings pierce their nostrils with rings and drag them around at will, or strike them mercilessly with metal whips, forcing them to pull heavy loads even when their energy and strength is exhausted. They are made to plow and to carry weight far beyond their physical capacity, until they fall over. They are captured and slaughtered by humans for their hide, meat, bezoar stones, fur, bones, and anything else we may covet from their bodies. Wild animals suffer from being vulnerable to harm from fierce predators, and from having to fight in order to survive.

That is a brief explanation of the suffering of the lower realms. What, then, constitutes the suffering of the three higher realms? In the root text, Jigten Sumgon writes:

'thab rtsod 'chi 'pho sdug bsngal dag gis gzir

Beings are stricken by the sufferings of warring and fighting, of death and transmigration.

Human beings suffer from the four root sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death. On top of that, they also suffer from meeting with foes, being separated from loved ones, and so forth. Those who lack what they desire suffer from not finding it. Those who possess what they desire suffer from fearfully trying to protect and preserve it. Humans are plagued by tremendous suffering, particularly the eight main types of suffering.

The beings in the jealous gods' realm suffer from warring and battling due to their jealousy. They see the glory and abundance of the neighboring gods' realm, and the beautiful goddesses there, and they wage great battles, but they lose to the more powerful gods and end up being killed or injured, or they spit up blood, or end up face down on the ground, crying out in defeat. Their suffering is so unbearable that it is said to be indistinguishable from the suffering of the reviving hell.

The beings in the gods' realm suffer when the signs of impending death begin. They lose the radiance of their complexions, and they feel uncomfortable in their seats. Their flower garlands wilt, and their clothes begin to smell. They perspire, when they have never perspired before. They are plagued by the suffering of dying and transmigrating. Therefore we should strive not to be reborn in any of these realms within samsara.

3.0 Following the format of Jigten Sumgon's text, next is the section on accomplishing the nectar essence of the Teachings through the four trainings.

3.1 The first of these is refuge.

'gro skyabs bla med bstan rtsa dkon mchog gsum

Beings' source of refuge, the root of the unsurpassable teachings, is the Triple Gem.

Jigten Sumgon first touches here on the general importance of going for refuge in the Triple Gem, or Three Jewels—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—who protect and rescue beings of the six realms from their long-endured suffering. Refuge in these Three Jewels forms the root of entering into the teachings of the unsurpassable and perfectly awakened Buddha.

Then Jigten Sumgon further elaborates on the meaning and qualities of the Jewels of Refuge:

rtaḡ pa'i skyabs gnas skyob mdzad rin chen gter

The everlasting refuge, precious jewel treasure, granter of protection

The beings who go for refuge with a mind of renunciation of samsara, and with trust and faith in the ultimate, sublime, and everlasting sources of refuge, they will be securely protected and shielded from harm and danger caused by humans and non-humans, as well as from the suffering of the lower realms. The Buddha is already free from the suffering of samsara, and is thus equipped with the wisdom and ability to liberate others. Moreover, the Buddha's vast and all-encompassing compassion is unbiased, equally pervasive toward all beings. It is unconditional and not dependent on being placated by sentient beings. Buddha is said to be the peerless, everlasting refuge because the Awakened One never wavers from that state of awakening. The

Three Jewels are compared to a wish-fulfilling lapis lazuli jewel that fulfills all of beings' desires and needs.

In identifying the different levels, or classifications, of refuge, the root text explains:

theg pa gsum bstan bsgrub bya sdom pa'i mchog

Three *yanas* are revealed within the authentic vows.

Three *yanas*, or vehicles, have been taught by the Buddha: the path to realize the state of a *shravaka* or *pratyekabuddha*, the path to realize the state of a bodhisattva, and the path to perfect buddhahood; and in accord with these three levels of lesser, middling, and supreme, there are temporary sources of refuge. However, the single, final, and ultimate source of refuge is the Buddha as *dharmakaya*, beyond all conceptual mind's projections.⁶

For the actual ceremony itself of taking refuge, the student needs to feel renunciation of samsara, and a longing to attain the unsurpassable state of buddhahood. In the presence of the precious jewel of refuge, the lama, arrange the offering tormas and formally take the vows of refuge. Once we have taken refuge, there are precepts that we must adhere to.

bslab bya'i snying po phan yon gtong thob bstan

The essence of the [refuge] precepts, the benefits, how they get broken, and how to obtain them is shown.

3.1.1 The refuge precepts form the root, or essence, of the three vows. First, regarding the precepts of abstaining:

Once we have taken refuge in the Buddha, we must abstain from taking refuge in and prostrating to worldly gods, such as Shiva and the like. If this is the case with powerful worldly gods, it goes without saying that we must also abstain from bowing before earth spirits or local protector beings.

Once we have taken refuge in the sublime Dharma, we must be free from a mental state of maliciousness and ill will towards others, and we must abstain from harming or hurting other sentient beings. The Dharma is the nature of peace and non-violence, so when we go for refuge in the Dharma, we should try to embody this quality.

Once we have taken refuge in the Jewel of the Sangha, we should abstain from keeping company with those who harbor wrong views of the Dharma and who act in a way that is contradictory to the Dharma. Do not keep close friendships with such individuals, no matter how pleasantly they may present themselves on the outside.

3.1.2 Second, the precepts of adopting, or practicing:

Wherever we see any representation of a buddha's form, we should not judge whether it is good or bad in quality or in its appearance. We should avoid treating any buddha image or representation that we encounter with disrespect and generate faith. We should never criticize the pure Dharma. Also, we should not follow after views that are contrary to the Dharma. Do not show disrespect to any teacher, any spiritual friend who teaches the authentic Buddha Dharma, and never criticize or speak badly of such a teacher. Instead, show respect to the Dharma and Dharma teachers.

There are countless benefits of taking refuge in the Three Jewels, such as forming the root of the three vows, and burning up the negativities of samsara.

Ideally, at the time we receive the refuge vows, we have awakened in our mind streams an understanding of death and impermanence, and we believe in karma—the laws of cause and effect; we see the defects of samsara, and we long for freedom from suffering—for ourselves and all sentient beings. This is how we obtain the vows of refuge when we go to the Three Jewels for refuge.

How do we lose our refuge vows? They are broken when we have a wrong view of the laws of karma and the Three Jewels, or we stop believing in them. We lose our refuge vows when we break our refuge precepts, or when we let a whole day and night pass without seeking refuge in the Three Jewels and without thinking at all about the Three Jewels.

3.2 Once we have taken refuge, we should adopt the ethical discipline of overcoming and ridding ourselves of the poisons of mind. Out of the four (trainings) to practice, we now come to the second one, the foundational vows of individual liberation, or *pratimoksha*.

spong sems gnyen pos sdom pa ris bdun gang

With a mindset of abandoning [the poisons], and using antidotes, there are seven vows [of individual liberation].

We should have a mindset that seeks to abandon non-virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind; and as an antidote to the emotional poisons, we plant the seeds of virtue. This is the perfection of ethical discipline. As the foundation to the three levels of vows, the vows of individual liberation are seven, and in order to receive the higher vows, we need to hold at least some of these seven *pratimoksha* vows. This ethical discipline is the source of all positive qualities, and the foundation of all Dharma. To distinguish according to the basis of the individual: there are the vows of a fully ordained monk; those of a fully ordained nun; of a partially ordained monk; a partially ordained nun; male and female *upasaka*—lay person’s—vows; and an intermediate nun’s vows, making a total of seven. To categorize according to the ritual of vow dissemination, there is the vow ceremony of the fully ordained monk and fully ordained nun; the vow ceremony of the partially ordained monk and nun; the vow ceremony of the intermediate nun; and the vow ceremony of the male and female householders. To categorize according to the precepts of each, the full ordination carries two hundred and fifty-three vows. The partial ordination carries thirteen vows. There are four or five root downfalls for the *upasaka*. Also, for householders, there are temporary *nyungney*-type⁷ vows that are taken for a set period of time. Out of these seven classes of *pratimoksha* vows, at the very least we should have taken and kept without impairment any one of them, even if it is the temporary set of vows of *nyungney*.

3.2.1 In the root text, Jigten Sumgon describes the object of the vows:

rnam dag zhing la nges 'byung bsam pa yis

From a pure refuge field, [receive the vows] with a motivation of renunciation.

When receiving the foundational vows, as expressed in the specific vow-ceremony rituals, take the vows from a learned, qualified master. If we take the vows motivated by renunciation of samsara, they qualify as *pratimoksha* vows. If we take the vows with the vast bodhichitta motivation, our *pratimoksha* vows become incorporated into the Great Vehicle, Mahayana, tradition, according to the view and tradition of Jigten Sumgon.

3.2.2 Continuing in the root text, regarding the [benefits of upholding] precepts, Jigten Sumgon writes:

bslab las mi 'da' yon tan kun gyi rten

If you keep the [refuge] precepts without transgression, you become a vessel for all pure qualities.

The inherently virtuous way of abiding, which the Buddha simply identified and contextualized into a framework of precepts to be upheld, applies universally to all sentient beings. These vows, such as the two hundred fifty-three, and so forth, are not intended for only a select few of us. They apply to all of us, to all sentient beings. All sentient beings are the same in wanting happiness, and all are the same in not wanting to suffer. The precepts teach us to stop all non-virtuous actions, for these bring about suffering, explicitly, subtly, or indirectly. They teach us to continue to practice virtue, for this brings about happiness, openly, subtly, or indirectly. We should look inside ourselves and try to apply these crucial points to our own practice in accordance with our respective levels of realization. A beginner should not behave like an eccentric yogi. A yogi should not engage in the conduct of a realized *mahasiddha*. A realized *mahasiddha* should not engage in the conduct of an omniscient Buddha. In other words, we should incorporate this into our practice. The proscriptions against certain actions are meant to be applied to the individual in accordance with his capacity and level of understanding. If we fail to recognize that these vows are dependent on our state of mind, and instead misapprehend the structure of precepts as an inflexible moral system existing impenetrably outside of ourselves, then we will not be able to free ourselves from confusion regarding the true functionality of the vows and precepts; it will be like trying to separate the strands of the *balpadza* root.⁸

The different levels of practices meet the different levels of practitioners. Like a skilled physician healing the sick with medicine, and like a noble king who establishes laws for the subjects to follow, the Buddha skillfully and authentically taught all aspects of the spiritual path, presenting them in varying ways to accord with the acumen and predilections of the disciples to be tamed.

The benefits of holding the precepts are manifold. Ethical discipline is the source of all positive qualities and the foundation of all Dharma practice. The Vinaya teachings, belonging to the *Tripitaka*, or Three Baskets of Buddha's scriptures, teach the training in ethics, or rather, the moral framework for identifying right from wrong and abstaining from wrongdoing while embracing virtuous action.

All of the Buddha's teachings can be subsumed into two categories: the words of the teachings—the signifiers, embodied in the Three Baskets; and the referents of those words—the meaning, embodied in the three trainings, or three vows. The first of the Three Baskets is the basket of Vinaya, or ethics. The training that is the meaning, or rather, the subject, of the Vinaya teachings, is ethical discipline, which forms the basis of the spiritual path, the basis of higher rebirth, the cause for the qualities of knowledge and realization of the Three Vehicles. It is the training of ethical discipline that in fact makes possible the attainment of the ultimate result of the path, the three *kayas*, for it constitutes their basis.⁹

3.2.3 What happens if our ethical discipline becomes sullied by faults? The root text answers:

nyams na phyir bcos gtong thob dus shes bya

If you impair [your vows], restore them. Know how long the vows remain with you, and the time they are obtained.

Other sources assert that once a person has broken a *pratimoksha* vow, it is like breaking a clay pot that, once broken, can never be restored to its original state. (That is, unless a person first offers back his or her monastic vows. In that case, it is still said in many places that one cannot retake monastic precepts.) Also, some say that it is better never to take the vows in the first place, rather than to take them and later break them. However, in our tradition, making a mistake and impairing the four vows is looked upon as more like incurring a debt, so that repayment will render one in good standing again. The vows, if broken, can absolutely be purified if they are confessed properly.

Serwö Dampa said:

Even if you have committed unbearable negative karma

For thousands of eons,

If you confess purely just once,

It can all be purified.

Although it is said in the Lesser Vehicle¹⁰ path that the vows are lost upon returning them in the vow offering ceremony, having wrong view, or at death, in the view of the Great Drigungpa¹¹ himself, death does not mark the termination of one's vows, as long as one took them with the extraordinary motivation of the Greater Vehicle,

Mahayana. In such a case, the Buddha said, the formless consciousness holds the vows through his or her previous merit or lack thereof.

What constitutes the point of actually receiving the vows? With belief in the law of cause and effect, one sees the suffering of samsara and longs to free oneself and all sentient beings. With such motivation, one repeats the statements of formal commitment from the Vinaya ritual¹² and is said to have received the vows after the third repetition.

3.3 The third element of the four things to practice is the bodhisattva vows. This is summarized in the line from the root text that reads:

mtho ris nyan rang mi 'dod rdzogs sangs rgyas

Not desiring higher rebirth in samsara or the state of *shravaka* or *pratyekabuddha*, instead one desires total awakening as a buddha.

We know that endeavoring to attain the temporary state of peaceful nirvana for oneself alone is not sufficient. What we want is to become a buddha. To do this, we keep the intention to abandon non-virtuous actions. But if we do not have the attitude of bodhichitta that comes from immeasurable compassion, then we will not be able to attain buddhahood. Jigten Sumgon writes:

med na mi 'byung sa bon byang chub sems

For this, one needs the indispensable seed: bodhichitta.

3.3.1 Bodhichitta, like the seed of awakening, is itself indispensable for attaining perfect buddhahood. How do we awaken this bodhichitta mind? The root text reads:

bdag gis sems can bdag tu 'dzin pa las

From cultivating a sense of all beings as being “me”

When we recognize that all beings have been our own kind mothers from time immemorial, we feel a sense of investment in their well-being, for they are part of us. The stages of bodhichitta cultivation are further explained in the text:

byas shes drin mthong byams dang snying rje skyes

Recognizing that all beings have been our mothers, and appreciating their kindness, love and compassion arise.

First we know that all beings have been our own mothers, and this gives rise to a sense of sentient beings as meaning something to us, being a part of ourselves. From that comes an appreciation for the incalculable demonstrations of kindness that they showed us at the time each was our mother. From that arises a desire to repay their kindness. Then, when we look at their present state, and we see they lack happiness, the longing for them to have happiness arises. This is known as “love.” Love has different levels, or classifications, according to the level of bodhichitta development. For those who have just given rise to the bodhichitta intention, the love that is cultivated is known as “the loving kindness that focuses on sentient beings.” For ultimate bodhisattvas (bodhisattvas who have entered the first *bhumi*¹³ or above), the love that is cultivated is known as “the loving kindness that focuses on the true nature.” For those who have already attained the level of patience that can handle the original truth of the unborn nature (corresponding to the attainment of the eighth *bhumi*), the love cultivated is known as “the loving kindness that is beyond focal point.” In this context, we are referring to the first stage of love cultivation, namely, the loving kindness that focuses on sentient beings.

Once one has cultivated a mind of love and affection for sentient beings, one looks at their present state of being plagued by suffering, and one longs for them to be free from all that suffering. This is a great compassion that arises automatically. The stages, or categories, of compassion are as follows: The “compassion that focuses on sentient beings” refers to the recognition that all mother sentient beings are suffering and the longing for them to be relieved of their suffering. The “compassion that focuses on the true nature” refers to the recognition that sentient beings are ignorant and confused about the law of karma, cause and effect, and to the intention to work for their benefit. The “compassion beyond focal point” refers to the level of compassion that comes with realization that there is no inherently existing duality of subject and object. In this context, we are referring to the first stage of the cultivation of compassion, namely, the compassion that focuses on sentient beings.

We need to awaken within ourselves an unbearable compassion, with the recognition that feels,

All beings are just like me, tormented by suffering.

To cultivate love and compassion, specific methods have been laid out. To learn them, you can refer to my text on the stages of meditation.¹⁴

Thus, it is the case that bodhichitta arises out of love and compassion. The root text continues:

de las dri med rin chen byang chub sems

From these [two], arises the stainless, precious bodhichitta-mind.

If uncontrived love and compassion are born in our mindstream, from them arises the desire to become a buddha only for the sake of mother sentient beings. The desire for enlightenment is completely stainless, for it is free from the defilement of self-cherishing nature, free from any selfish motive whatsoever. This is what is called “precious bodhichitta”.

3.3.2 The branches of bodhichitta are described in the root text:

gnas dang bskyed pa'i rgyu las 'byung ba ste

It arises from causes: being innately present, and being further cultivated. (8)

While still on the level of an ordinary sentient being, if someone has an undisturbed and naturally easy-going mind, with uncorrupted integrity and natural great compassion for others, this is known as “the cause being innately present.” However, just having this innate quality is not enough. Bodhichitta must be further cultivated through four causes:

3.3.2.1 The first cause is an extensive gathering of the accumulations. We should exert ourselves in gathering an accumulation of merit. This brings us to the teaching on mandala offering. When we offer the mandala, we should visualize the refuge field in front of us, and we should present the mandala offering. Our physical mandala plate should be free of cracks or fissures, and before we begin heaping the grains and such upon it, we should sprinkle it with some pure saffron water. Then we make the offerings of the thirty-seven heaps, or the seven, or the five heaps. We can offer precious jewels and gemstones, medicinal herbs, grains, and so forth. As we offer the mandala, we recite the verses of mandala offering. We can do the extensive or concise mandala offering verses. Afterwards, we should feel that we wholeheartedly offer all of our bodies, enjoyments, and roots of virtue in order for all sentient beings to attain buddhahood. Feel that you are truly offering everything from your heart, and pray to the sources of refuge. Then feel that the entire refuge field dissolves into you.

3.3.2.2 The second cause is the extraordinary manner of going for refuge. For this, we should visualize the refuge field as before, and with a longing to liberate all sentient beings from the vast ocean of suffering and to attain the state of the Three Jewels, we go for refuge from now until we attain the essence of enlightenment. We should do this at least one hundred times.

3.3.2.3 The third cause is training the mind through cultivating the four immeasurables. Here we should recite the prayer that is translated as:

May all sentient beings, equal to space in number, have happiness and the causes of happiness. May they be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. May they never be separate from the sublime happiness that is devoid of suffering. May they abide forever in great equanimity, free from attachment and aversion, preferentiality and bias.

Keeping in mind the meaning of the prayer, we should recite it at least one hundred times.

3.3.2.4 Now we come to the fourth and most important cause of all: seeing the lama as the actual Buddha in person. (8) Since bodhichitta is the awakened mental state of all buddhas, and since all appearances are your own mind, by seeing your lama as a buddha, you will awaken in your own mind-stream whatever bodhichitta commitments and wisdom your lama possesses.

3.3.3 What is the essence of this mind of bodhichitta? The root text says:

snying rjes kun bslangs gzhan don rdzogs sangs rgyas

With the motivation of compassion, for the sake of others, striving for perfect awakening.

Motivated by compassion, the desire to attain perfectly awakened buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings is the aspiring aspect of bodhichitta. We must give rise to both aspiring bodhichitta and engaging bodhichitta. The method to do this is explained in the root text:

'thob 'dod bsam 'phel 'jug sems dge ba'i rgyu

With the desire to attain awakening, increasing your intention, give rise to

engaging bodhichitta, the cause of virtue.

[We should think:] *Alas, all sentient beings, who pervade the infinite reaches of space, are in fact my own kind mothers and fathers. They only want to be happy, but instead they suffer. Some are immersed in the present experience of manifest suffering, while the rest are immersed in creating the causes for future suffering, amassing heinous negative karma. How tragic for these beings, who are not creating even the slightest virtuous karma. How worthy of compassion they are! But it is no good just sitting here feeling sorry for them. If my mother were drowning, I, the child, should jump in to save her. I must liberate all these sentient beings, my mothers of old, from the realms of suffering and lead them to the attainment of perfect awakening. But I do not possess that kind of power. Beyond me, even the most powerful gods and spirits do not possess such power. Who possesses this power? Only a perfectly awakened buddha possesses this power. Therefore I must become a perfectly awakened buddha.*

Thus give rise to the intention. As the intention increases and expands to a wider scope, we enter into engaging bodhichitta. All virtues are subsumed within it and ensue from it.

3.3.4 To categorize bodhichitta according to levels of grounds and paths, the root text states:

sa sogs yon tan lam dang smon 'jug sdom

Understand the division of the grounds (*bhumis*) and so forth, and the qualities, paths, and vows of aspiring and engaging [bodhichitta].

3.3.4.1 There are twenty-one classic analogies that depict the excellent qualities of bodhichitta. To quote from the *Abhisamayālamkāra*,

*Like the earth, gold, the moon, fire,
Hidden treasure, precious jewels, and the lake in which they are found,
A vajra, a mountain, medicine, a teacher,
A wish-granting gem, the sun, a sacred song,
The royal treasure trove of a king, a great path,
A steed, a fountain spring,
A lute, a river, and rainclouds,
Twenty-one qualities describe it.*

3.3.4.2 Bodhichitta is also divided in terms of the levels of the five paths. Bodhichitta on the path of accumulation and the path of closeness is said to be bodhichitta that is primarily cultivated through imagination and attitude. Bodhichitta at the level of the first seven bodhisattva *bhumis* (also known as the “seven impure *bhumis*”) is called the “bodhichitta of supreme motivation.” At the level of the pure *bhumis* it is known as “ripened bodhichitta.” At the stage of the result, buddhahood, it is known as “the bodhichitta free from all obscurations.” Thus, there are four divisions of bodhichitta according to the paths.

3.3.4.3 To categorize according to the essence, there is the aspiring level of bodhichitta, with a commitment to the result; and there is the engaging aspect of bodhichitta, with a commitment to the cause.

3.3.5 The way we take the bodhisattva vows of aspiring and engaging bodhichitta is described in the root text as follows:

sangs rgyas nas brgyud bla ma mkhas la blang

Take [the vows] from a knowledgeable lama who holds a transmission lineage from the Buddha.

We should take our vows from our root lama, who holds a vow lineage that is an unbroken stream originating from the perfect Buddha, and who is knowledgeable and experienced in the bodhisattva vehicle’s teachings and practices.

We should formally receive our bodhisattva vows at an auspicious time, in front of a holy representation of the Three Jewels. We should arrange elaborate offerings, and seeing the lama as the actual Buddha, we should give rise to the bodhichitta commitment according to the unique method of great bodhichitta in the tradition of the Great Drigungpa.

3.3.6 The benefits of giving rise to bodhichitta in this way are inconceivable and incalculably vast. As Jigten Sumgon writes:

de yi phan yon nam mkha’i mtha’ mnyam zhing

The benefits of this are as vast as infinite space.

In the *Sutra of the Inconceivable Secret*, this is further asserted:

*Merely by giving rise to bodhichitta,
The bounty of merit that you will accrue,
If measured as form,
Would fill the entire infinitude of space,
And, in fact, would even exceed it.*

In summary, Jigten Sumgon states it succinctly:

tshogs rdzogs theg chen rnal 'byor sgrib gsum 'joms
The accumulations will be perfected, we will enter the yoga of the Great Vehicle,
and the three obscurations will be vanquished.

The two sublime accumulations of merit and wisdom will be perfected. The first time we give rise to bodhichitta, this alone takes us out of the realm of the *shravakas'* and *pratyekabuddhas'* vehicle, into the Great Vehicle that surpasses them through three superior qualities. Our body, speech, and mind are thus elevated to the yoga of the Great Vehicle. The three obscurations—those of karma, emotional poisons, and subtle obscurations to omniscience—will be purified without exception. All roots of virtue will multiply exponentially, becoming vast roots of virtue.

Regarding the object of accomplishment:

rgya chen sangs rgyas sras nyid byang sems kyis
Vast [becomes your virtue, and you become a] child of the Buddha because
of bodhichitta. (9)

Once we have given rise to bodhichitta, even a small virtuous act, because it is saturated by bodhichitta intention, becomes sealed by this bodhichitta and expands to become a vast root of virtue. The moment we give rise to bodhichitta we become the son or daughter of the Buddha, and we become worthy of receiving prostrations from gods and humans. The benefits continue at the time of death as well. The root text reads:

mtshams 'byor bde bar 'pho zhing rgyal bar 'gyur
This will carry you onward, where you will move to happier states
and become victorious.

At the time of death, carried onward by bodhichitta, we will continue to traverse to happier and happier states, our minds filled with joy. In the best-case scenario we will become perfectly awakened buddhas. In the middling scenario, we will become realized bodhisattvas on the *bhumis* and paths, and in the worst-case scenario, we will be inseparable from the Three Jewels and reborn in an extraordinary realm. Thus, no matter what, with bodhichitta we will become victorious.¹⁵

3.4 Ultimately, as summarized in the root text:

de phyir tshogs bsag rjes dran spel zhing sbyang

Therefore, gather accumulations, keep remembering [the sources of refuge], and exert yourself to increase [merit and wisdom] and purify [obscurations].

3.4.1 Having thus given rise to bodhichitta, the way to observe the precepts and trainings of aspiring bodhichitta is to offer our bodies, enjoyments, and all roots of virtue to the Three Jewels of refuge, without holding anything back. We should persevere at remembering, increasing, and purifying. For example, we should strive to gather the causal accumulations of merit, and the resultant accumulations of wisdom. As we practice the six perfections, such as generosity—even just giving one bite of food to a hungry animal—all this contributes to our consummation of the six perfections. At all times, seeing the benefits of bodhichitta, keep reminding yourself. In this state, train in the practices and conduct of the bodhisattvas, the children of the buddhas. Rejoice in all roots of virtue and seal them securely with the Great Vehicle, Mahayana, dedication. And never let yourself forsake a single sentient being in your mind.¹⁶ The root text reads:

sems can mi spang chos bzhi spang dang blang

Never forsake any sentient being; abandon the four wrong-doings and adopt the four practices.

Once we have given rise to the mind of bodhichitta, henceforth at all times we should exert ourselves in gathering the referential accumulation of merit and the non-referential accumulation of wisdom. We should remind ourselves of the benefits of bodhichitta. We should practice the seven-branch prayer and other practices that facilitate the growth and development of bodhichitta and the purification of obscurations. We should abandon such negative actions as forsaking sentient beings; misrepresenting the truth, telling lies, and manipulating with a motivation to deceive; slandering other bodhisattvas and refusing to speak the

praises of bodhisattvas despite knowing their qualities; and fourthly, hindering sentient beings from apprehending the unsurpassable, ultimate happiness of enlightenment out of attachment to temporary happiness. The aforementioned four wrong-doings should be abandoned, and we should strive to do their opposites.

3.4.2 The precepts of engaging bodhichitta are threefold. Jigten Sumgon writes:

sdom pa'i tshul khrims sems can don byed dang

Authentically practice the [threefold] ethical discipline: (1) restraining from wrong-doing, (2) working for the benefit of sentient beings,

In the *bodhisattva pitaka*, ethical discipline is said to have three vantage points, also known as the three aspects of bodhisattva activity. The first type of ethical discipline is the ethical discipline of restraining oneself from negative action, or non-virtue. This means to abandon non-virtue and keep the mind in a virtuous state. The second type, the ethical discipline of working for the benefit of sentient beings, encompasses the activities of completely ripening sentient beings by accomplishing their benefit, happiness, and well-being. The third type of ethical discipline is mentioned here in the root text:

dge ba chos sdud tshul khrims yang dag gzung

and (3) gathering virtuous Dharma.

With the ethical discipline of gathering virtuous Dharma, the bodhisattva increases the roots of virtue and brings them to full perfection.

3.4.2.1 If we maintain such a mind of abandoning non-virtue only for our own personal benefit, wishing only for our own achievement of peaceful nirvana, then we are practicing the ethical discipline of the *shravakas*. But if we take our bodhisattva vows and maintain them with the motivation of keeping the vows in order for all sentient beings to attain complete, perfect enlightenment, then we are upholding the ethical discipline of the bodhisattvas. This is the kind of ethical discipline we should hold.

There are four factors that cause these three modes of ethical discipline to be damaged or impaired. The root text explains:

nyon mongs drag po'i dbang gyur rtsa ba ste

At the root, becoming overpowered by a strong negative emotion...

If we incur the downfall of forsaking any sentient being as I will describe below, and the following four factors are intact, we will amass a very heavy vow transgression. The four factors are: (1) being motivated by an intense negative emotion and committing the downfall or wanting to commit it; (2) not feeling self-conscious or ashamed about committing it; (3) feeling happy and enthusiastic about such a negative action; and (4) not seeing such an act as problematic. With these four factors, if we (1) praise and honor ourselves while denigrating someone else out of jealousy or competitiveness; or (2) if someone requests or begs us for the Dharma or material support and we fail to grant it when we have the means to give it; or (3) when someone confesses and apologizes to us for a wrong-doing and we fail to accept their apology; or (4) if someone longs for the Dharma but we withhold Dharma teachings and instead instruct them in non-Dharma: if we do any of these four things [and the previous list of four factors are complete], we will incur a downfall of our bodhisattva precepts, and our bodhisattva vow will become degenerated at the very root.

Branch downfalls are explained as follows:

zag pa 'bring gis yan lag nyes byas 'gyur

Through middling downfalls, one incurs corruption of the branch [precepts].

These include: not going for refuge in the Three Jewels and not venerating and making offerings to the Three Jewels; when attachment surfaces, not immediately taking hold of the mind with mindful awareness; not showing faith, reverence, and respect for the elders and the great masters; not answering Dharma questions; not accepting requests for offerings; not accepting offerings of gold and such if they are presented by faithful disciples; taking money or resources designated for Dharma purposes and deceitfully misusing them for other activities; abandoning those who have impaired their ethical codes of discipline; refusing to teach to those with faith; refusing to help sentient beings when it is within one's capacity to do so; using flattery to acquire resources; dressing in a showy and ostentatious way and spouting irreverent Dharma gossip; failing to abandon such behavior even after one's reputation has been darkened; failing to correct someone who is engaged in a negative action; when someone scolds you, hits you, shows anger toward you, or publicly reveals your hidden faults, reacting by doing any of those four things back to them; abandoning someone when they are angry at you; not listening to

someone's admission of wrong-doing but abandoning them; failing to use the antidote to abandon a mind of anger in response to the negative actions of others; gathering many disciples for the sake of gaining respect and honor; not engaging in practice regularly; letting time pass because of laziness; spending your time caught up in idle talk¹⁷ because of attachment; not looking for the meaning, or nature, of meditation; not abandoning obscurations to meditative stability; clinging to *śamata* meditation as supreme; rejecting the *śravaka's* vehicle altogether and refusing to teach it to those who are certain to benefit from that level of teaching; not being diligent at maintaining your bodhisattva vows, even though it is of great benefit to you; exerting yourself in non-Dharmic endeavors; abandoning Mahayana and adopting the practice of the Hinayana path; laughing at someone who is being made fun of, praising yourself or your own side, and denigrating others or making fun of others, even if not verbally but just with your expressions; not going to receive Dharma because of pride;¹⁹ criticizing other Dharma teachers out of jealousy; refusing to do obstacle-removing rituals for the sick; acting disagreeable and confrontational with your friends; and not praising the good qualities of others. All of these fall into the category of downfalls.

3.4.2.2 The ethical discipline of accomplishing the benefit of beings is mentioned in the root text:

sems can tha mal lam zhugs phyi rol gyi

[Bodhisattvas need to help all beings, regardless of whether they are] ordinary beings, beings who have entered the path, or non-Buddhists

Bodhisattvas who have entered the Mahayana should have no agenda outside of accomplishing the benefit of sentient beings. When an ailing person seeks medicine to recover from his condition, we should strive to find that medicine and give it to him, and do whatever is in our capacity to help him recover. We should be careful and mindful, and help others to do so as well. We should return others' benefit by trying to bring them even greater benefit than they brought us. When we see beings whose hearts are burdened by grief and sadness, we should try to ease their minds and alleviate their sorrow. When people beg for money, we should try to give them something if it is appropriate to do so. We should try to benefit all the beings who rely and depend on us, helping them in whatever way we can. Wherever we go and wherever we are, we should try to act in accordance with Dharma. Cultivate faith and pure view in other bodhisattvas. Speak of the positive qualities of others: praise those who have diligence, good meditation, and knowledge. Students who are going

down the wrong path can be benefited through generosity and brought back to the right way. If that does not work to divert them from the wrong path, use more wrathful means, but never forsake them in your compassion and love. Those who harbor negative feelings for the Buddha's teachings can be gathered through generosity, and ultimately, their mind-streams can be ripened and liberated. We should seek to do this. If that does not work, we should make pure aspirations on their behalf. In each of the aforementioned cases, if we do not respond appropriately and we transgress our bodhisattva vows, each transgression will incur its respective downfall.

Regarding how we know what point in time we have officially "received" the bodhisattva vows, and what constitutes the loss or breakage of these vows: In the root text it states:

don sgrub dus brjod de nyams phyir bcos bya

Accomplish [all beings'] benefit. From the time of the [final] repetition [of the vows, you have received the vows. From then onward, uphold them], if you transgress them, correct your transgressions.

The time when we officially receive and become endowed with the vows is when they are given to us by the lama, we have given rise to bodhichitta, we have awakened the supreme mind of enlightenment, and we have repeated the three recitations of the bodhisattva vow: upon the third recitation. That is how we know we have actually received the bodhisattva vows. From that point onward, until we attain enlightenment, we should guard our vows at the cost of our own life and try never to incur the aforementioned downfalls.

The vows are broken when, from the depths of our heart, we forsake a sentient being, and we let a whole "session" or period of the day pass [without recognizing our mistake and purifying it through confession]. Each day is divided into six periods, called "sessions." If we transgress one of our bodhisattva vows in the first period of the morning session, for example, and we do not remedy it before the morning session expires and the afternoon session begins, then from the beginning of the afternoon session, it can be said that our vows have been broken, and that we have lost them.

If we impair our vows, the way to purify and restore them depends on the factors that motivated us to break them. If we have transgressed the vows out of all three

poisons, then they have been destroyed at the root, so we need to take the bodhisattva vows again in the ritual described earlier. Downfalls incurred through ignorance and attachment, but without anger or hatred, can be rectified by confession and retaking the vows in the presence of a representation of the Three Jewels, after invoking the three bodhisattvas. Downfalls incurred through only attachment can be rectified by recognizing the fault to be a fault, and confessing and retaking the vows in the presence of one bodhisattva. The moment a transgression arises in the mind, before it has a chance to express itself in our body or speech, we should immediately recognize it and seize our minds with mindful awareness, restraining ourselves through the antidote.

The way to stay unsullied by downfalls or corruptions of our root and branch precepts is shown in the root text:

rnyed bkur la zhen 'dod yon chags pa spang

Abandon clinging to material gain and honor; abandon attachment to sensory pleasures.

The bodhisattva who has given rise to bodhichitta should not longingly mull over memories of pleasurable indulgences of the past; should not cling to indulgences of the present; and should not lust after desirable things of the future. When someone makes an offering to you, accept it for their benefit, as a means for them to perfect the accumulations. Take it, but offer it to the Three Jewels, utilizing it in a way that serves Dharma, and abandon desire or clinging to it.

What is to be accomplished, then? The root text continues,

lus ngag yid gsum rnam dag dben pa brten

Stay in a solitary retreat hermitage, keeping body, speech, and mind pure.

To keep the body pure, abandon non-virtues of body. To keep speech pure, abandon non-virtues of speech. To keep mind pure, abandon non-virtues of mind. We should train in calming and subduing our mind, and cultivate samadhi. All of the bodhisattva conduct arises from staying in a solitary hermitage [in the beginning, for one will be less vulnerable to corruption]. Just staying in a retreat place is not enough, of course; we need to maintain watchfulness of our actions of body, speech, and mind.

What kind of bodhisattva conduct should we engage in? Jigten Sumgon writes:

bdag gis khyad du mi gsod brtson 'grus brtsam

Do not underestimate yourself. Don't feel discouraged, but give rise to diligence.

We should abandon self-sabotage, such as thinking, *How can someone like me ever hope to attain enlightenment, even if I try?* Instead, we should muster intense diligence and try our very best. Illustrious Milarepa attained the sublime and common siddhis by practicing diligently. Every positive result we experience now is only occurring because we have diligently worked hard for it in the past. Examples are good harvests that are preceded by hard work and proper cultivation, and better job opportunities that are preceded by diligent study in school.

3.4.2.3 The ethical discipline of gathering virtuous Dharma is explained in the root text:

lam bcu pha rol phyin drug bsdu dngos bzhi

The ten paths, the six perfections, and the four ways of gathering disciples

Jigten Sumgon explains this in terms of the common practice of the ten paths, or ten virtues, and the uncommon practice of the six perfections. Also included in this category of virtuous Dharma is the fourfold way of gathering disciples.

3.4.2.3.1 He further elaborates on the meaning of these as follows:

rnam bcu spang zhing lam bcu rdzogs par spyad

Abandon the ten [non-virtues] and practice the ten paths [of virtues] to perfection.

We should abandon the ten non-virtues and practice the ten virtues. The way to do so is simple: Abstain from killing and instead protect and save the lives of sentient beings. Abstain from stealing and instead practice generosity. Abstain from sexual misconduct and inspire others to maintain their ethical integrity. Abstain from telling lies and gather others by speaking words of truth. Abstain from sowing discord and use your words to help others heal rifts and reconcile their disagreements. Abstain from harsh, hurtful speech and speak gently and kindly. Abstain from irreverent gossip and mindless talk and instead, speak when it is meaningful. Abstain from envying others and instead give to others without any attachment. Abstain from ill will and look upon others with loving kindness. Try to

benefit them. Abstain from wrong views and try to practice and gain converseance with the authentic view. In this way, we can abandon the ten non-virtues and practice their antecedent, the ten virtues.

3.4.2.3.2 Bodhisattva conduct is rooted in the six perfections. Continuing from the root text, Jigten Sumgon mentions each of these as follows:

sbyin dang tshul khrims de bzhin bzod pa dang
Generosity, ethical discipline, and patience,

3.4.2.3.2.1 Generosity is divided into three categories. First, material generosity means to give things, whatever is in your capacity to give, and do so without any hidden agenda or any expectation of reciprocation or karmic reward. The generosity of giving Dharma means to speak only what is of benefit to others, even if it is just one word. The generosity of fearlessness means to teach others the four ascetic virtues.²⁰ The generosity of granting protection means to exert oneself as possible to protect beings from danger and alleviate their fears.²¹

3.4.2.3.2.2 Ethical discipline also has three categories, as discussed earlier. The ethical discipline of restraining from negative action means that all non-virtue is abandoned and virtuous actions are accomplished. The ethical discipline of gathering virtuous Dharma means that all virtuous actions are infused with the bodhichitta intention. The ethical discipline of accomplishing the benefit of beings means that all virtuous acts are done solely for the sake of sentient beings.

3.4.2.3.2.3 Patience means to abandon angry reactions to provocation or harm inflicted upon us by others, and to be able to tolerate, to bear, their antagonistic actions. When someone harms us, we can reflect, *I must have done something like this to someone in the past, and now being the victim myself, I recognize that I am reaping the karmic fruit of my own previous negative actions.*

Simply put, patience means the ability to bear all personal suffering and [tolerate the discomfort of] training to work only for the benefit of sentient beings.

The remaining three perfections are listed sequentially in the root text:

brtson 'grus bsam gtan shes rab pha rol phyin
Diligence, meditative stability, and wisdom—the perfections.

3.4.2.3.2.4 Diligence can be classed into three categories as well. Diligence of action refers to abandoning idleness, apathy, and laziness, and wanting to bring all sentient beings to the state of buddhahood. The diligence of armor, or “armor-like diligence”, means not to procrastinate engaging in Dharma activities, but to practice the moment inspiration hits. Insatiable diligence is the third type, and refers to the ongoing commitment to the Dharma that prevents feeling tired or weary no matter how much hardship we endure during meditation or for Dharma activities. It means doing away with being satisfied with a limited amount of practice or Dharma activity. It means that when it comes to the Dharma and bodhisattva conduct, we never think, *Okay I’ve done enough now.*

3.4.2.3.2.5 Meditative stability is known as the “uncorrupted, unconditioned meditation.” This refers to the application of antidotes to the three poisons, i.e., meditating on the grotesque and unattractive aspects of an object of desire; meditating on love as antidote to anger; and meditating on the nature of interdependent origination as an antidote to ignorance. The realization that the nature of samsara is nirvana comes from seeing that the essence of all of these interdependent phenomena is beyond arising, cessation, and fixed abiding, and thus recognizing that samsara’s true nature is nirvana itself.

3.4.2.3.2.6 All phenomena can be placed within the two overarching categories of relative, or conventional, reality, and ultimate reality. Relative reality, in essence, refers to the phenomena of the six senses; though things have never inherently existed from their own side, they appear real to the confused mind. Primordially, none of this has ever inherently existed, but beings perceive a diverse range of appearances based on the projections of their own meritorious and non-meritorious karma. The confused mind grasps at these perceptions as being real, hence the etymology of the word “relative reality” (*Tibetan word*), a term that means “totally false conventional appearance.” Ultimate reality is the true nature, which cannot be encapsulated into descriptions for it transcends expression, word, and thought. It is beyond discursive mind, beyond a view that affirms, and beyond a view that refutes any others. It transcends all assertions. It cannot be described in words or with conceptual labels. It is the unconditioned nature, beyond all characteristics. Its realization is what is known as “ultimate truth,” or ultimate reality. This realization can occur in the context of Mahamudra.

3.4.2.3.2.7 The results of gaining such a realization are outlined sequentially in the root text. To begin, a description of the temporary, more immediate results:

bde 'gror longs spyod gzugs bzang gzi brjid che

One will go to the higher realms, and have enjoyments (wealth), attractive physical form, and great magnetism.

Through practicing generosity, one is born into a circumstance of wealth and abundance. Through practicing ethical discipline, one has happiness and well-being. Through practicing patience, one will have a beautiful appearance. Through practicing diligence, one will have great magnetism. As the root text continues:

zhi dang rnam grol de 'bras yon tan rdzogs

One will find peace, be liberated, and attain the fruition in which all awakened qualities are perfected.

With meditative stability, we find peace; and with wisdom and intelligence, we gain certainty about the true nature of reality. Through both meditative stability and wisdom, we awaken to the ultimate fruition, the *dharmakaya* that fulfills one's own benefit. The *rupakaya*, which fulfills others' benefit, is attained through generosity, ethical discipline, and patience. Diligence serves as a support for the attainment of both the *dharmakaya* and the *rupakaya*.²²

3.4.2.3.3 Next in the root text, Jigten Sumgon mentions the four ways of gathering disciples:

don sbyin snyan smra don spyod mthun pa des

Generosity with purpose, speaking kindly, engaging in the benefit of sentient beings, and keeping conduct in tune [with the teachings].

“Generosity with purpose” means to give material gifts and thereby gather disciples to give them the generosity of Dharma. “Speaking kindly” means to speak to one's students with gentle and kind words. Engaging in beings' benefit means to intentionally act for the benefit of others. “Keeping conduct in tune with the teachings” means to apply skillful means to envelop beings in the Dharma.

The function of these four ways of gathering disciples is explained in the root text:

snod 'gyur dad dang don 'grub 'bras bu thob

They become fit vessels [for the Dharma] and [gain] faith. Benefit [for beings] is accomplished, and the result is attained.

Through the teacher's gifts of material generosity, the students become fit vessels for the Dharma. Through his speaking gently to the students, faith and devotion toward the Dharma is born in their mind-streams. Through accomplishment of the benefit of beings, the Dharma is accomplished. Through the teacher acting in harmony with the teachings, the disciples do not turn their backs on the Dharma, and thus the result is attained.

3.4.2.3.4 The way to make these roots of virtue have the power to gather disciples is to dedicate them in a manner free from the three conceptual spheres.²³ When we dedicate virtue, for what do we dedicate it? The root text answers:

kun mkhyen thob byas bskul dang yi rang dang

For the attainment of omniscient buddhahood, [dedicate virtue accrued through] your own actions, and [virtue gained by] encouraging others, and by rejoicing.

We dedicate our roots of virtue so that they become causes for attaining omniscient buddhahood. What can we dedicate? We can dedicate the virtue we have accrued through engaging in the six perfections, the four ways of gathering disciples, and other virtuous acts. We can also dedicate the virtue we have accrued from inspiring and encouraging others to engage in virtue, as well as that from rejoicing in the virtue that others have accrued . How should we dedicate this virtue? The root text explains:

'khor 'das dus gsum bsags dang yod pa'i dge

All the virtue ever accrued throughout the three times encompassed in samsara and nirvana

All the roots of virtue ever accrued by each and every single sentient being throughout the six classes of rebirth and the three realms of samsara is fair game [for us] to dedicate. This is because there is not a single being in all of samsara who has not been our own parent in countless previous lives. We can also dedicate the enlightened virtue encompassed in nirvana—that is, the virtue of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, the virtue of the two accumulations. We can dedicate the virtue that has already been accrued in the past, as well as all the virtue presently being accrued.

We can dedicate all future virtue that is yet to be accrued. In this way, we dedicate all roots of virtue throughout the three linear times of past, future, and present. Finally, we can also dedicate inherent virtue—the inherent virtue of sentient beings that is their primordially pure buddha nature. Dedication is a skillful method to preserve virtue. As the root text reminds us:

yongs bsngos de 'grub ma bsngos 'dzad 'gyur zhing

If [virtue is] completely dedicated, accomplishment ensues.

If [virtue is] not dedicated, it will dissipate.

By dedicating all virtue completely and totally to the attainment of omniscient buddhahood, whatever you wish for will be accomplished. Accomplishment will ensue if you dedicate your virtue in a state free from conceptual grasping at the three spheres, and if your dedication of virtue is imbued with the bodhichitta intention. Similarly, when we dedicate our virtue, we should try to emulate the awakened masters of the illustrious congregation and dedicate in the presence of the Three Jewels, in the same way that the great realized beings of the past dedicated their roots of virtue. Let your mind rest in its natural state, and dedicate your roots of virtue properly. If you do this, your virtue will never dissipate. Otherwise, our virtuous karma is subject to depletion. There is more than one thing that can cause our merit and virtue to be depleted. Virtue that is not sealed with the dedication is vulnerable to dissipation. When we become proud and arrogant about our virtuous acts, those roots of virtue can be depleted. When we regret doing something positive, this diminishes and depletes those roots of virtue. When we develop a wrong view about a holy object of refuge, or slander a holy object of refuge, this causes our accumulated roots of virtue to dissipate. Also, if virtue is dedicated, but to the wrong end, negative results will ensue. The root text reads:

log pas de 'gyur bsngos pas thams cad mkhyen

Wrongly dedicated virtue will ripen in accord with the intention. Therefore,

Dedicate it to omniscient buddhahood.

If we accrue virtue, but we dedicate that virtue only for the sake of attaining the state of a god or human, we will achieve that goal just once, whereupon that virtue will be used up. Therefore, such limited dedications are not very effective, so we should dedicate our virtue for the sake of our own and all beings' attainment of perfectly awakened buddhahood. If we do this, that virtue will become a cause for

the actualization of the *dharmakaya* state. Thus, we should seal our roots of virtue with the highest dedication, one made beyond all conceptual points of reference.

3.4.2.3.5 Thus dedicating our roots of virtue in the proper manner, our progression along the bodhisattva *bhumis* and paths is outlined in the root text as follows:

de ltar 'jig rten 'das dang dag pa'i sa

Like that, transcending worldly samsara and reaching the pure *bhumis*

When we practice the Mahayana Dharma, the way we traverse the *bhumis* and paths is as follows: When we are still at the stage of being an ordinary being, we ascend through the path of accumulation (the first of the five paths to enlightenment). This path consists of three levels—smaller, middling, and greater. Passing through these, we reach the next of the five paths, the path of closer approach. On this path, which consists of four stages, we progress through the stage of warmth, the zenith, forbearance, and finally, supreme Dharma. We accomplish the four legs of miraculous activity. We gain the five faculties and the five powers. If we are practicing for our own personal liberation, everything we accomplish remains in the realm of the Hinayana, or Lesser Vehicle. If we are practicing for the sake of others, all these attainments happen within the realm of the Mahayana, the Greater Vehicle. Then, when our wisdom dawns such that we can directly perceive *dharmata*, we reach the first bodhisattva *bhumi*, called *rabtu gawa*, “sublime joy.” As we practice and gain more stability in our wisdom, we progress to the second *bhumi*, called *drima mepa*: “stainless.” The third *bhumi* is “illumination;” the fourth is “radiating light;” the fifth is “difficult to master;” the sixth is “actualizing;” the seventh is “gone far.” Attaining these seven bodhisattva *bhumis*, called “the impure bodhisattva stages,” one transcends samsara and achieves four of the branches of enlightenment. Then one reaches the fourth path, the path of meditation. This corresponds to the attainment of the eight branches of accomplishment of the Illustrious Ones. Thereon one progresses through the final three *bhumis*, referred to as “the three pure stages.” These are: the eighth *bhumi*, “immovable;” the ninth *bhumi*, “excellent intelligence;” and the tenth *bhumi*, “rainclouds of Dharma.” Once these have been realized, all phenomena are recognized as having the nature of equality. The *dharmakaya* is actualized, thus fulfilling one’s own benefit. For the benefit of others, the two aspects of the *rupakaya* (form body) manifest and spontaneously and effortlessly perform the benefit of sentient beings.

The essence of these *bhumis*, or stages, is expressed in the root text:

bcu bgrod rnam dpyod grangs med gsum 'bras thob

Penetrating the ten [*bhumis*], one attains the result of three countless [eons].

The meditation itself that realizes the absolute nature of *dharmata* is the same from the first *bhumi* to the tenth *bhumi*; there is no difference. However, from the point of view of the post-meditation period, each of the ten *bhumis* represents an increase in the degree and magnitude of the bodhisattva's ability to benefit others through sending out emanations, refining appearances into buddha fields, practicing generosity, and so forth.

As for the salient definition of a *bhumi*, the Tibetan word for this is *sa*, which means "ground," "basis," or "earth." A *bhumi* is a stage, or basis for us to measure the growth of awakened qualities. Each stage forms a platform for the next.

Once we reach the first *bhumi*, we gain an additional four perfections to complete, on top of the six perfections of generosity and the rest. These additional four perfections are the perfection of skillful means, the perfection of aspirational prayers, the perfection of power, and the perfection of primordial awareness.

From the path of accumulation up to the path of close approach, we gather the first set of countless eons' worth of accumulations and purifications. From the path of seeing (the first *bhumi*) up to the seventh, we gather the second set of countless eons' worth of accumulations and purifications. From the eighth *bhumi* to the tenth *bhumi*, we gather the third and final set of countless eons' worth of accumulations. Bear in mind that it is in the interest of convenience that we attach a numerical value on these countless eons' worth of accumulations, to make the concept easier to grapple with.²⁵

This concludes a complete overview of the first portion from the root text, discussing training the mind via the causal, exoteric vehicle of the *paramitas*. We have already addressed three out of the four Dharmas to be practiced. This brings us to the fourth Dharma: how to practice the resultant vehicle of the Secret Mantra Vajrayana path.

4.0 VAJRAYANA

In the root text, Jigten Sumgon writes:

brtson gang myur skyob bde chen theg mchog 'dir

In this supreme vehicle of great bliss, where anyone who has the diligence will swiftly be rescued and protected,²⁶

The means whereby individuals with great diligence can be rescued and protected from the suffering of samsara is this vehicle of great bliss—the Vajrayana, supreme among all Vehicles. The two means to enter this vehicle are the ripening empowerments and the liberating instructions.

4.1. First, to explain the process of ripening empowerments, we should know how to identify a master who is qualified to bestow such empowerments. The root text reads:

rgyud ldan rten la zab don nus pa bzhaq

[the master should be] imbued with the tantras, and imbued with the potency and power of the profound truth...

4.1.1 The master who bestows empowerment must know not only the entire path of the *paramitas*, he should unerringly know the meaning of the tantras. The master should be skilled at the rituals and practices of mantra and mandalas. He or she should not be seeking respect or honor, but rather, working for the benefit of others. The master should have realization, and should have recognition of the true nature of the development and completion stage practices. It is also absolutely crucial that the master have the ability to point out the nature of primordial wisdom—to introduce the students' mind-streams to that wisdom in the empowerment.

4.1.2 The students who are the vessels receiving empowerment also have to meet certain criteria in order to truly receive the empowerment. Just as it is said for the exoteric path of definitions, the student should have a compassionate and loving nature, and a generous heart that gives easily. The student should have devotion for the lama. Placing the potent energy of the meaning of the four empowerments into the mindstream of such a student is the essence of conferring empowerment.

4.1.3 The meaning, or reason, behind the conferral of empowerment is expressed in the root text:

bkrus dang blugs brjod dbang bzhi'i rim pa rdzogs

The word *abhisheka* means both cleansing and pouring in. In total there are four stages of the empowerment.

The word for empowerment in Sanskrit is *abhisheka*. When we say, “*Abhikintsa*,” we are cleansing and purifying the disciple’s body, speech, and mind. When we say, “*Abhishekata*,” we are activating the innately pure wisdom. This is the etymological meaning of empowerment.

The four empowerments are the vase empowerment, the secret empowerment, the wisdom empowerment, and the precious word empowerment. Additionally, there are auxiliary empowerments. The disciple must receive the entire empowerment with all of its parts intact.

Why must we receive empowerment? The necessity of empowerment is summed up in the root text as follows:

dgos 'dod kun 'byung de min dngos grub med

Without receiving the empowerment, which fulfills all wishes and desires, there will be no *siddhis*.

Empowerments are the source of all positive qualities, common and uncommon, temporary, and ultimate. If we don’t receive it, we will lack any chance of attaining *siddhis*. However, receiving an empowerment comes with the responsibility of upholding the *samayas*, or sacred oaths. The root text states:

de thob rnam gsum mi 'da' dam pa'i tshig

Receiving empowerment, we swear words of sacred oath never to transgress the three *samayas*

4.1.4 Once we have received the four empowerments, we must maintain the *samaya* commitments. This includes practicing the development-stage deity-yoga practice of awakened form; reciting the vajra recitations and practicing with the subtle channels and energies (*tsalung*) of awakened speech; and meditating in the inseparability of emptiness and compassion—the nature of bodhichitta—the *samadhi*-wisdom of awakened mind. The Tibetan word for *samaya* is *dam tsik*, a compound word joining two syllables. The first syllable, *dam*, [pronounced like the English name Tom] means sublime or sacred, and refers to the genuine and perfectly awakened Buddha. *Tsik* [pronounced with the same long vowel sound as

meek] means word, and refers to following the word, or teachings, of Lord Buddha, by abandoning non-virtue and accomplishing virtue. The actual vows we must uphold within Secret Mantra are summarized in the root text as:

thun mong rtsa ba yan lag sogs srung gang

The general root *samayas*, the branch *samayas*, and the rest [should be upheld]

The general *samayas* of the tantras include the *samaya* oaths corresponding to the five Buddha families. The *samaya* of the Buddha family is to practice virtue and work for the benefit of sentient beings, never forsaking the Three Jewels. The *samaya* of the Vajra family is never to be without the *mudras* of the bell and vajra, and never to forsake your lama. The *samaya* of the Ratna family is to always practice the four types of generosity. The *samaya* of the Padma family is to never forsake the Dharma of the Three Vehicles—outer, inner, or secret. The *samaya* of the Karma family is to keep all your vows and to regularly practice and make offerings and give *tormas* to the Three Jewels and Dharma protectors. On top of these there are fourteen ways in which we could incur root downfalls, as expressed in the “Confession of Root Downfalls for the Vajrayana.”²⁷

The downfalls of branch *samaya* include the eight downfalls, such as engaging in consort practice without empowerment, and so forth. The root text says “and the rest” to refer to any specific *samaya* commitments one might take that are particular to the empowerment; for example, the Kalachakra empowerment comes with fifteen downfalls to be avoided, and so forth. The benefits of upholding our *samayas*, and the consequences of allowing them to deteriorate, are outlined in the root text:

phan bde kun 'byung de nyams ngan 'gror ltung

[Through] keeping *samaya*, all benefit and happiness ensue. Through impairing *samaya*, one will fall to the lower realms.

Someone who keeps his or her *samaya* will enjoy happiness, now and ultimately. If the *samayas* are broken and not repaired through confession, one will fall to the lower realms of samsara. The root text reads:

de phyir srog bzhin srung dang dus shes pas

Therefore, by guarding your *samayas* with your life, and knowing when [*samaya* is received and when it is broken],

Thus, a wise person knows to guard his own *samaya* commitments with the same care he feels for protecting his cherished life force. The *samaya* is received when the full empowerment has been obtained, from refuge on up.

The time a vow is broken is when one focuses with negative view on the lama who embodies the Three Jewels; is motivated by the negative emotions; gathers the tools for causing harm; engages in negative actions such as killing; and one is aware of what one has done, and feels no remorse or regret, and rejoices in one's negative actions. When these seven factors are present, it means one is a full-fledged *samaya* breaker, and one's downfalls are complete.

The way to repair *samaya* once it has been broken is as follows: Since all root downfalls are rooted in disparaging or undervaluing the lama, one should confess with the four powers complete; and specifically, one should beseech the lama for forgiveness and receive the blessing of the lama's forbearance, and retake the empowerment, as specified in the texts.

4.2 Fourth, out of the five Dharmas to meditate on, gather the essence of the Buddha's teachings: When we receive empowerment, we take on the responsibility to practice the two stages, development and completion. The root text states:

rnam grol don mang bstan pa'i snying po sgom

Meditate on the essence of the teachings through the many points of liberation.

The path to freedom from the bondage of samsaric existence consists of development and completion practice. There are many points to be known for the practice of these two. Development stage has many aspects to it. Completion stage contains father tantras, aspects of which include vajra recitation, blessing of mind, objects of focus, self-empowerment, the practices of indivisible luminosity, and so forth. Mother tantras are also contained in completion stage; for example, the practices of *tummo* (generation of heat), dream yoga, illusory body, and so forth. There are various practices within the completion stage of the nondual tantras as well. However, here, all is encompassed within the fivefold preliminary practice of Mahamudra, which constitutes the essence of the meaning of all of this, the essence of all the Dharma teachings taught by the compassionate Victor himself.²⁸ This easy-to-practice system, which can be practiced by one person in one session, is summarized concisely in the root text by the following:

thabs mchog rnam dag bdag nyid chen po'i sku

The supreme skillful means, the embodiment of the pure [bodhichitta] being

Jigten Sumgon is speaking of the pure bodhichitta—the supreme skillful means to attain perfect awakening, and the yoga of development stage, for meditating on the form of the great being. Continuing, the root text reads:

yid bzhin nor bu mtha' bral nam mkha'i dbus

wish-fulfilling jewel within limitless sky,

The sublime lama is like a wish-fulfilling jewel. Our own mind is beyond all limiting ideas. It is luminosity, *mahamudra*, beyond subject-object duality. As expressed in the root text:

gnyis med chu rgyun mi zad rin chen gter

is the ongoing river of non-duality, [where virtue is] the inexhaustible precious treasury.

The roots of virtue that have been dedicated will never be depleted, for they will become like an inexhaustible treasury of wish-fulfilling jewels.

4.2.1 Thus in those lines, the entire fivefold path is contained. Then Jigten Sumgon further elaborates on each of the five Dharmas to practice, starting with bodhichitta meditation:

byams chen brtser ldan mkha' mnyam rin chen sems

The precious [bodhichitta] mind of love and kindness is as vast as infinite space

Whatever development and completion stage meditation we engage in, if we are starting from the motivation of loving kindness, compassion, and bodhichitta, our mind is immeasurable, like space. Training our minds in the cultivation of these qualities constitutes the first of the five root practices [of the fivefold path].

The means to vastly increase these states of mind is expressed in the root text:

de las gang byung der 'gyur der bsngos 'grub

Whatever comes from this will become this; whatever is dedicated to this will be

accomplished.

If we seal our roots of virtue with a dedication made within a state of bodhichitta mind—inseparable emptiness and compassion—whatever qualities that ensue from such a mind state will become thus, and whatever result we wish to attain will be accomplished when we dedicate our virtue promptly. Therefore we should dedicate all roots of virtue as a non-conceptual dedication for enlightenment. The way to dedicate properly has been explained earlier.

4.2.2 The second of the five Dharmas to practice is to meditate on the *yidam* deity. The root text explains:

gdod nas lhan skyes 'dus sogs rgyud rnams don

The true essence of the tantras, such as Guhyasamaja, has always been innately present from the very beginning.

The deity, who originates from bodhichitta mind, isn't newly imagined or generated where it has never been before. Rather, the deity and the mandala have always been innately present as the true nature of all things found in the outer universe and inner inhabitants. This being the case, the way to realize one's nature as the pure deity itself, always innately present from the very beginning, is to practice. And if we practice a deity that we have a special karmic connection with, a deity that has been connected to us in previous lifetimes and who we have the karmic propensity to accomplish, the realization will come swiftly. When we meditate on the deity, we need four factors. These are expressed in the root text:

byang chub las byung brtan gnas gsal zhing dag

Coming from bodhichitta, abiding with stability, clarity, and purity.

4.2.2.1 The first important factor is deity meditation. As just mentioned above, the deity comes from the state of pure bodhichitta mind.

4.2.2.2 The second factor is to have stable deity pride. It is not that we are imagining or pretending to ourselves that suddenly we become this deity, when in fact we are not the deity. We aren't "transforming" into the deity from another state. On the contrary, we have always been this deity. We have always been the essence of a buddha. We are simply becoming aware of this original nature of ours; we are visualizing ourselves in our own original state of being, not changing from one thing

into another. We should abide in this kind of state at all times. Our own innate awareness has always been glorious Chakrasamvara, fully and vividly present, spontaneously, without needing to be generated. This is the nature of all sentient beings, but because they fail to recognize this, they wander in samsara.

4.2.2.3 The third factor is clear visualization. Primordially, we have always been the deity. We may have the deity pride, or confidence that this is so, but without cultivating a clear and vivid visualization, we will not be able to see the image of the deity clearly, with the details of face, hands, and so forth. This is why, in the beginning, it is very important to work on sharpening the image in our mind and to gain stability in our deity yoga practice. That is why, as mentioned above, it is extremely important to have a clear and vivid visualization that sees distinctly all the subtle details of the principal deities and the surrounding deities of the retinue, with crisp clarity, where even the ornaments appear vividly, not hazily. When we visualize, we should see the deity's complete appearance as spontaneously present in an instant of total recollection. If we cannot do this, we should focus on sharpening the image of different parts of the visualization, for example, focusing on the face of the central deity and consort, or the feet, until we gain absolute clarity and stability in that visualization, and then move through the deities of the retinue like that. It is important to do this for the retinue, as well as the principal figures of the mandala. There is no stability to be found in a tenuous, vague, half-baked visualization just by assuming, or fooling ourselves, that we are practicing.

4.2.2.4 The fourth factor is known as “recalling the purity.” Even if we have stable deity pride, or confidence in ourselves as the deity's form, and we abide in this nature at all times; even if we have developed vivid clarity in our visualization; if we do not recognize that, ultimately, the deity's appearance is like a reflection in a mirror, illusory, appearing yet empty; if we do not have an appreciation for the symbolic meaning of the face, hand gestures, ornaments, and so forth, then there is a danger that our deity practice will lead to transgressions. This is why we need to remember the symbolism of the deity's form—the ornaments, hand positions, and so forth—recognizing that each of them represents some meaning.

Secret Mantra practice is meant to be kept secret from those who are not fit vessels to receive these teachings. The root text reads:

gsang dang thugs bskul sngags dang de nyid 'grub

Keep the practice secret and invoke the awakened mind with the

mantra recitation. Then you will accomplish the essential nature.

We are meant to conceal and keep secret the mandala, deity, and accomplishment substances from those who have not seen the mandala [i.e., received empowerment] and from those who do not have any faith. Failing to do so will hinder our ability to accomplish the deity, and could even incur the downfall known as “broadcasting the secret teachings.”

When we recite the mantra that invokes the awakened mind-stream of the deities, we should not let our mantra recitation be interrupted or interspersed with idle talk. In the state of unwavering awakened mind, not falling under the sway of delusory thoughts, we should be imbued with the three aspects of suchness (the three *samadhis*), and we will accomplish the deity.

There is no way to awaken to buddhahood without entering into Secret Mantrayana. As the root text attests:

de med dngos min de las de 'bras thob

Without it [Secret Mantra], there can be no *siddhis*. From it, the result [of buddhahood] is attained.

Even if we practice the skillful means of the [other five] perfections, if we do not have the wisdom that does not grasp at the body, aggregates, and sensory fields as mundane, we will not become buddhas. If we have this purifying practice of deity yoga, we can avert our clinging to appearances and sounds as ordinary. Instead, they will arise to us as the display of the awakened body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities of the *yidam* deity, so outer and inner obstacles will not occur. Even when we are enjoying sensory pleasures, we will be offering our enjoyment to the buddha. In this way, we can perfect incalculable accumulations and swiftly accomplish all the sublime and common *siddhis*.

4.2.3 This brings us to the third Dharma. In the state of deity yoga, we must meditate on the sublime lama, who is the source of all positive qualities. The root text reads:

dngos grub rtsa ba dbang gi rgyal po ste

The [lama is the] root of the *siddhis*, king of the empowerments

It is extremely important to meditate on the sublime lama, who is the root of all *siddhis*, the source of all positive qualities, like the king of wish-fulfilling jewels. It is only through the kindness of the lama that we can awaken to the realization of ultimate truth—the luminosity-emptiness with the nature of great bliss. If the root of all positive qualities is the lama, then what does it mean to “accomplish the lama,” and how are we to do it? The root text answers:

sangs rgyas nyid mthong sku gsum rgyal ba'i gter

See the lama as an actual buddha, the treasury of the three *kayas*.

If you see the lama as an ordinary person, you will not attain any *siddhis* at all. If you see the lama as a bodhisattva, you will attain small *siddhis*. If you see the lama as a buddha, you will attain the highest supreme *siddhi*. Therefore, we must have the view that the lama is an actual buddha. We need three perceptions: if we perceive the lama as *dharmakaya*, then the ultimate realization will be born in us; if we perceive the lama as *sambhogakaya*, we will accomplish whatever we desire; if we perceive the lama as *nirmanakaya*, we will be able to bring forth enormous benefit to sentient beings. If we perceive the lama as the embodiment of all the buddhas, immeasurable awakened qualities will be born in us. The root text reads:

rab gus dbyer med gnas gsum brtan par bzhugs

Have sublime devotion to the lama, inseparable, abiding firmly in the three places.

Cultivate devotion for the lama such that from the very core of your heart, from the deepest part of your very being, you know him as the embodiment of all the buddhas of the three times. Pray to the lama continuously with intense longing and devotion. When your mind is free of the stains of mistaken grasping, and your awareness merges inseparably with the awakened body, speech, and mind of your sublime lama, this is called “apocalyptic devotion.”

Regarding the places to visualize the lama: If you want to gather accumulations, meditate on the lama above the crown of your head and feel that you are in the pure land of Ogmin. If you want to realize the nature of mind, meditate on the lama in your heart and feel that you are in the pure land of Ngonpar Gawa (Manifest Joy). If you want to purify faults, meditate on the lama in your navel center and feel that you are in the pure land of the Great Mother, Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom). This is how to meditate on the lama abiding firmly in the three places.

mig med mig ldan rnam grol sangs rgyas 'gyur

Like a blind person gaining sight, you will be liberated and will awaken to buddhahood.

If we lack devotion, whatever qualities or abilities we may have are comparable to blindness. But if we can become endowed with the eye of devotion, we will swiftly become free of the three obscurations, and we will directly see the nature of suchness, thus awakening to buddhahood.

4.2.4 The fourth of the five Dharmas to be practiced is the true nature of reality, the practice of Mahamudra. The way to practice this is explained in the root text:

gdod nas ma skyes mkha' ltar 'dus ma byas

Primordially unborn, like the sky, unconditioned

All of samsara and nirvana are mind; and mind itself is primordially unborn. Unborn and all-pervasive like the sky, unconditioned, natural luminosity-emptiness, this is simply given the label “*mahamudra*.” In the root text, this is explained further:

khyab dang rdo rje mi 'gyur thams cad gnas

All-pervasive and like a vajra, unchanging and always present.

The mind pervades all of samsara and nirvana. Like a vajra, it is indestructible and invincible. It is unchanging, unbound by the three linear times. This primordial knowing, this omniscient wisdom-awareness, is continually present, uninterruptedly, at all times.

The root text then describes the categorizations:

rnam dag zung 'jug phyag rgya chen po'i don

Innately pure, indivisible, the essence of *mahamudra*

All phenomena of samsara and nirvana are not separate or outside of your own mind. Mind's nature is luminosity-clarity. Mind itself is *mahamudra*, primordially and innately pure, the clear-light bodhichitta. “Indivisible” refers to the realization of the non-dual nature of samsara and nirvana; relative and ultimate truth; meditation and post-meditation. Because we can never truly go outside of, or

beyond, this nature, we say “*mudra*” (seal). Since there is no higher realization than the realization of this nature, we say “*maha*” (great). This can only be realized through the guidance of the sublime lamas who themselves have experienced the sublime nature, and through following their instructions and practicing accordingly. There is no other way to realize *mahamudra*.

When we are practicing based on the lama’s instructions, if the realization of the meditation arises, it is possible we will encounter obstacles, such as succumbing to this present life’s concerns, or encountering some strong negative circumstance. When we find that underlying thoughts that we don’t recognize, which were dormant until now, start to arise, or, in brief, when we have doubts or paranoia so that it becomes difficult to engage in virtuous practice, at these times we should take everything as fuel for the path. In a nutshell, all positive or negative thoughts, subtle and gross emotional poisons, magical displays of the gods and spirits, suffering from obstacles and adverse circumstances, sickness, suffering, pain, and whatever else comes our way: if we just totally dissolve it into the original nature as explained above, everything becomes like waves in water.

Knowing how to bring death onto the path is very important, so I want to briefly touch on this subject here. If, during the course of our lives, we have become familiar and habituated in the practice of taking whatever circumstances arise as fuel for the path, then when we are dying and we experience the stages of dissolution and such, no matter what arises at that time, we will be able to simply recognize what is happening. We ought not have hope or fear, ought not resist or try to create anything. We ought not have doubt or paranoia. Whatever arises, without modifying anything, just be in that awareness, simply sustaining naked, vivid awareness; after the stages of dissolution are complete, the natural luminosity will shine forth. At this time, if you have familiarized yourself with the luminosity of the path while you were alive, this natural luminosity will be familiar to you, and like a child recognizing its mother and reuniting with her, you will merge into this luminosity like water dissolving into water, and you will awaken to buddhahood. If your meditation was insufficient, and you do not awaken to buddhahood at that point, by the power of your familiarization with the *bardo* (the period between death and rebirth) and the practice of mindful rebirth, you will be in control of where you go.

The reason we need to realize *mahamudra* is explained in the root text as follows:

rtogs pas rnam grol 'dzin pas srid par 'ching

Realization brings you freedom; grasping keeps you stuck in samsara.

What do we realize? We realize the true nature of all phenomena of samsara and nirvana. Like the sky, unconditioned and spontaneously present, is this natural awareness, the nature of indivisible *mahamudra*. Such realization brings freedom and the attainment of enlightenment. If we do not realize this, and we grasp at the duality of mind as an inner subject that is separate from an outer object, we will be stuck wandering in samsara.

The way the yogin is to bring this onto the path is expressed in the root text:

dug ni bdud rtsi nyon mongs ye shes te

Poison is nectar; the *kleshas* are wisdoms.

Halāhala poison is said to be so lethal that even a tiny amount can kill someone who ingests it. However, a powerful *mantrika* can recite mantras to remove the toxicity of the poison and turn that same substance into life-reviving nectar. In the same way, with the practice described above, of taking everything that arises onto the path as they have the nature of same-taste, when the emotional poisons—the *kleshas*—arise, we do not have to push them away. The essence of the five poisons has always abided as the five wisdoms, and we are to simply recognize their original nature. The *Tantra of Black Yamantaka* states:

For those who have great skillful means,

The emotional poisons become the branches of enlightenment.

Samsara is innately nirvana,

Like lethal poison treated by a mantrika.

In this way, our own innate knowing-awareness has always been the essence of *dharmakaya*. Not realizing this is what we label “ignorance.” Realization of this we label “*dharmakaya*”.

4.2.5 The fifth Dharma of the fivefold path is the dedication of our roots of virtue, with the three purities—purity of the recipients of the dedication, intention, and object being dedicated. The root text reads:

mi mthun skyon dag dgos 'dod nam mkha'i mdzod

Unfavorable conditions of faults will be purified. This [dedication] is a treasury of space that fulfills all wishes and needs.

When these vast roots of virtue are not dedicated to perfect enlightenment, they are subject to depletion and they do not grow or increase. If you wish to focus on bringing vast benefit and happiness to sentient beings, dedicate your roots of virtue in the context of loving kindness, compassion, and bodhichitta. If you wish to focus on pacifying outer and inner obstacles and accomplishing all the qualities of Mantra, dedicate your roots of virtue in the context of deity-yoga practice. If you wish to focus on merging with the heart-mind of the lama and awakening the perfect qualities of the lama within your own mind, dedicate your roots of virtue within a state of devotion to the lama. If you wish to focus on continuously increasing your realization, and making great strides in your practice, dedicate your roots of virtue within the state of *mahamudra*.

As for a more extensive explanation of the way to dedicate virtue, it is just as I have discussed above, twice. In a nutshell, we should seal our roots of virtue by dedicating in a state free of the three conceptual spheres.²⁹ By doing so, the unfavorable conditions—karma, emotional poisons, and subtle obscurations to wisdom, that we have accumulated from beginningless previous lives—will be purified and completely obliterated.

In this way, we will not only see purification of our negative karma, but immediate glory, happiness, and well-being will arise effortlessly and spontaneously. With the realization of absolute bodhichitta, *mahamudra*, we polish the wish-fulfilling jewel of relative bodhichitta. As we are certain to attain the transcendent bliss, it goes without saying that worldly happiness and well-being will be accomplished automatically.

4.2.6 The ultimate result is mentioned in the root text as follows:

drug dang bzhi sogs byang chub chos rnam rdzogs

The six [perfections] and the four [means of gathering disciples], and all the Dharmas of enlightenment will be perfected.

All the Buddha Dharma qualities, such as the six perfections, the four ways of gathering disciples, and so forth, will be perfected. Similarly, when through our wisdom we realize the *dharmata*—the true nature of all phenomena as emptiness

wholly replete with all perfect qualities—then there will be nothing left to realize, nothing left to actualize beyond that.

Then the root text continues with a discussion of the progression through the *bhumis* and paths:

sa dang lam bgrod mi gnas mya ngan 'das

Traversing the *bhumis* and the paths, [one reaches] the nirvana that does not abide[in either of the two extremes].

Bhumis and paths that [otherwise] would take a long time to reach—such as the three sets of countless eons via the exoteric vehicle of the *paramitas* described earlier—can be reached in a single instant of abiding in the natural state of *mahamudra*. Through the wisdom of the profound nature, we do not remain in *samsara*. Through the skillful means of *bodhichitta*, we do not get stuck in the peaceful absorption of the partial nirvana of *shravakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. The state of buddhahood is known as non-fixed nirvana, or “nirvana that does not abide in either of the two extremes.” The text continues:

byang chub ces brjod bde gshegs sangs rgyas bstan

What we call “bodhisattvas” are shown to be *sūgatas*, buddhas.

A bodhisattva realizes his or her own mind. There is nothing to be realized outside of this! Whoever has realized his own mind has realized the omniscient wisdom-mind of the Buddha. Therefore, because they are in a state of realization of the inseparability of the two types of *bodhichitta*, they are also called *sūgatas*, or “bliss-gone ones.” Buddhas are the natural forms of bodhisattvas. A “buddha” means one who has awakened (*sang*) from the sleep-like state of ignorance, and unfurled (*gyay*) the intelligence that knows all phenomena. Some people might see the true nature, but have insufficient diligence. Continuing on from the root text:

bden mthong brtson min bar dor gsal bzhag spangs

Those who have seen the truth but are not diligent will still be free of anything to reject and anything to adopt when in the *bardo*.

A bodhisattva who sees the truth of the original nature but has insufficient diligence may not attain buddhahood during his lifetime, but certainly, in the *bardo*, he will achieve the supreme fruition through the two stages and become free from the four

great rivers of suffering. In summary, one is either liberated in the present lifetime or in the *bardo*, depending on one's degree of diligence. Either way, in that final moment, the two benefits will be accomplished.

The *dharmakaya* fulfills one's own benefit. The root text describes:

sgrib gsum dri bral dbyer med chos sku thob

One will attain inseparable *dharmakaya*, free of the stains of the three obscurations.

Our original nature has always been perfectly pure as *dharmakaya*. As we train in the practices of the Three Vehicles—Pratimoksha, Bodhisattva, and Secret Mantra, we purify the three obscurations, those of karma, emotional poisons, and subtle obscurations to wisdom. We realize the nature of *mahamudra* and thus we attain the *dharmakaya* of the twofold purity.³⁰ What do we mean by *dharmakaya*? Jigten Sumgon writes:

don dam zhi khyab rtog bral nam mkha' bzhin

Ultimate truth, all-pervasive peace, free of concepts, like space.

Unconditioned and spontaneously perfected, it is ultimate truth. (9) Because it is unsullied by the concepts of limiting projections, it is peace. Since it is the root of both samsara and nirvana, it is all-pervasive. Free of concepts, like the sky without demarcation or division of center and periphery, the *dharmakaya*, since it is also characterized by not being muddled, abides as the nature of the mind of all sentient beings.

From the *dharmakaya* that fulfills one's own benefit, the *rupakaya*, form bodies, arise to fulfill the benefit of others. As expressed in the root text:

chos dang long spyod sna tshogs 'dod dgur sprul

Dharmakaya and *sambhogakaya*, and myriad emanation bodies, appear in response to beings' wishes.

The unceasing spontaneous energy of unelaborated *dharmakaya* is the *rupakaya*, appearing in the two form bodies for the sake of sentient beings to be tamed. The way it works is akin to the way in which the empty sky makes it possible for there to be clouds; and clouds make it possible for there to be rain. In the same way, the

sambhogakaya can appear in dependence upon the *dharmakaya*, and the *nirmanakaya* can appear in dependence upon the *sambhogakaya*. *Nirmanakaya* emanations are not limited to appearing as a perfect *nirmanakaya* buddha. *Nirmanakaya* emanations can appear high, low, and in all kinds of ways in accordance with the predilections and needs of the boundless beings to be tamed.

*Some appear to burn in the fires of hell;
Others emanate in the higher realms.
Emanating in such ways as these,
They tame the sentient beings.*

Thus, emanations of the awakened ones appear in all kinds of forms, everything from high to low and in between. And yet, even though the awakened ones manifest in such ways, they don't have concepts or discursive thoughts. The root text reads:

mi rtog yid bzhin nor ltar mdzad pa'i rgyun

Without concept, like a wish-fulfilling jewel, ongoing is the stream of enlightened activity.

A precious wish-fulfilling jewel has no concepts or thoughts, yet it spontaneously fulfills all the wishes of beings. The *dharmakaya* doesn't have concepts or thoughts, yet spontaneously fulfills the benefit of sentient beings; as long as there are sentient beings, there will be unceasing emanations of awakened ones to benefit them. The tathagatas are utterly non-conceptual; they have no thoughts whatsoever, but because of unconfused knowing, they manifest spontaneously and unceasingly in response to the needs of sentient beings.

When we talk about the wisdom mind of a buddha, what is this like? The root text describes it as:

mtha' bral kun mkhyen zag med ye shes gzigs

Beyond extremes, all-knowing, unconditioned and undefiled wisdom seeing,

A buddha's wisdom is beyond the duality of having wisdom or not having wisdom. Even to say one has wisdom is to imply a dualistic extreme of having, or existing, which presupposes the opposite extreme of not having, or not existing. Here, the *dharmakaya* beyond all such extremes and all limitations is the wisdom of basic space, *dharmadhatu*. As its natural expression, the *sambhogakaya* appears like a

reflection in a mirror. This is the mirror-like wisdom. Pure in the equality of samsara and nirvana is the wisdom of equanimity. Knowing all phenomena of the three times without obstruction is the wisdom of discernment, or discriminating wisdom. Engaging in the enlightened activity of benefiting sentient beings in accordance with each one's needs and proclivities, and filling the world of sentient beings with emanations, is the all-accomplishing wisdom. All of these five wisdoms are subsumed within the two kinds of omniscience: the wisdom that knows the true nature just as it is, and the wisdom that sees the infinite display of phenomena in all its myriad forms.

The qualities of freedom, or transcendence, that a buddha possesses are described here:

stobs bcu mi 'jigs ma 'dres yon tan rdzogs

With enlightened qualities in perfect bloom, such as the ten powers, [four types of] fearlessness, and [eighteen types of] distinctive qualities,

A buddha possesses ten powers, four types of fearlessness, eighteen distinctive qualities, and so forth. All of these perfect awakened qualities are the result of being free [of obscurations].

The qualities of being fully ripened are expressed in the root text as well:

mtshan dang dpe byad kyis rgyan chu zla bzhin

Adorned with the marks and signs of a fully awakened buddha, like the reflection of the moon in water,

The result of fully ripened buddhahood manifests as the beautiful adornments of the thirty-two major, and eighty minor, marks of a fully enlightened buddha. The way the buddha appears to the perceptions of sentient beings is akin to the way the moon mandala, without intention, appears reflected in each and every body of water, large and small. In the same way, the *dharmakaya*, without intention, appears in myriad forms to the perceptions of beings—high, low, and in-between. To some, the buddha appears adorned with the marks and signs, while to others, the buddha appears unadorned.

The root text describes how the buddha's enlightened activities come about:

phrin las lhun grub rgyun chad med par 'byung

Spontaneous enlightened activities occur uninterruptedly.

Although a buddha has no concepts or discursive thoughts, through the power of beings' needs, enlightened activities are unconditioned and continue uninterruptedly. Until there are no more beings left to be tamed, the Buddha's enlightened activities will continue unceasingly. The inexhaustible display of the three secrets of awakened body, speech, and mind, and the expression of enlightened activity are as stated in the *Deshek Tzagyud Tantra*:

*To sentient beings with manifold proclivities and devotions,
Buddhas manifest with many different displays of conduct.
In myriad manners, myriad skillful means
Are revealed to the beings in order to tame them.*

The enlightened activities of the buddhas will always continue until samsara is emptied. The *Sutra of Sublime Golden Light* reads:

*Buddha doesn't really pass away into nirvana.
Dharma won't really fade away.
In order to tame sentient beings,
Buddhas simply display the appearance of passing into nirvana.*

Part Three: Concluding Section

In summary, the root text reads:

bka' lung mdo rgyud bstan bcos man ngag don

Thus is the essence, the meaning of all the Buddha's teachings, all the Buddhist scriptures, sutras, tantras, shastras, and oral instructions.

Thus, Jigten Sumgon wrote this root text for the sake of those who do not yet know or understand properly the crucial points of the fivefold Mahamudra, and for those who have doubts about the path. This fivefold Mahamudra practice contains the essence of all the sutras, the key to all the holy scriptures, the teachings that synthesize the essential points of the four classes of tantra, that unlock the secret

teachings of the *dakinis*, that flow forth from the secret treasury of the awakened mind of the root and lineage lamas. This is the path that takes all the vital points of the *Tripitaka* and the four classes of tantra and synthesizes all without exception into one system of practice that can be accomplished by one person, on one seat, in one session.

Third, as the final section at the conclusion of a holy scripture, there is the formal dedication of virtue. The root text reads:

zab mo'i bcud bsdus gzhi lam 'bras bur bcas

Thus having synthesized the nectar essence of the profound truth, encompassing the ground, path, and fruit,

Thus, Jigten Sumgon has written these teachings, which synthesize the nectar, or heart essence, of the profound meaning of the Buddha's teachings and the holy commentaries, and teach the ground, path, and fruition. Continuing with the dedication from the root text,

'dir brjod dge bas mkha' mnyam 'gro ba rnams

By the virtue of articulating this, may all beings as infinite as space

dag pa gnyis ldan thams cad mkhyen thob shog

attain omniscient buddhahood—the twofold purity.

May all beings attain the state of omniscient buddhahood, which is known as “the twofold purity.” This refers to the inherent purity of beings' nature, the *sugatagarbha* (buddha nature), and the purity of becoming free of the temporary, adventitious obscurations.

After consulting numerous commentaries, composed by myriad knowledgeable and realized masters and spanning various lengths ranging from extensive to concise, on Jigten Sumgon's Essence of the Mahayana Path, and relying primarily on the explanations found in the commentary by the omniscient Drigung master Chökyi Drakpa entitled Instructions on Jigten Sumgon's 'Essence of the Mahayana Path': A Beautiful Ornament of a Wish-Fulfilling Jewel Garland, I compiled my understanding of the essential points and wrote this in a simple-to-understand and easy-to-follow format for the sake of some Western students with interest in the Buddha Dharma. My aspiration is that this will become a source of benefit.

This text was first begun at the Garchen Institute in Arizona, USA, by Khenpo Konchog Samdrup, and later completed in Ohio in the year 2015, in the 2nd month, and on the 10th day.

¹ (editor’s note) The Tibetan in the lines of the root text (*sangs*) is a letter-by-letter transliteration; that printed in the body of the commentary (*sang*) is a phonetic transcription that readers unfamiliar with Tibetan will more easily pronounce.

² *mkhas pa*=skilled; knowledgeable; talented; accomplished; qualified

³ Here the original Tibetan word was *shin tu gus pas*, which translates literally as “with extreme devotion,” or “very devotedly”. I liked the way “deep devotion” sounded, so I checked with Khenpo Rinpoche, who said it was fine to change the adjective from the general “very”, to the more specific “deep”.

⁴ *mngal bzang po*: literally, “a good womb”, referring to the womb of a mother in the one of the three higher realms. A “bad womb” would be a womb within the three lower realms.

⁵ The Tibetan is *stong gyur* which etymologically means, “a thousand-fold,” or “a thousand times more,” but in fact, in this context it does not literally mean only one thousand. Khenpo Samdrup explained that in Tibetan, the word “thousand-fold” evokes an image of a very large amount, even more strongly than the word “hundred-thousand-fold” or “million-fold”. In fact, the exact numeric ratio is not specified in this text, although you might find it in Patrul Rinpoche’s *Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

⁶ The Tibetan word here is “*spros pa thams cad dang bral ba*”, which has often been translated into English as “beyond all elaborations.” This is a strictly subjective decision on my part, but I have never resonated on a felt level with that particular manner of expressing the term, despite its arguable etymological accuracy. The Sanskrit for *spros pa* is *prapañca*, which means “proliferation,” or “projection,” specifically the proliferation of endless networks of concepts and definitions. “Elaboration” is a fair translation of the term itself, but as the twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein noted, words are not fixed labels pointing to inherently existing meaning in the external world, but rather, fluid and malleable place-holders that acquire meaning through repeated use in social contexts and through their relationship to other concepts. While I am still on the search for a perfect translation of *spros bral*, my first intention is to keep the English moist and relatable, rather than deliver a dry and impersonal word that fails to touch the heart of the reader. In so doing, I sometimes sacrifice etymology for felt meaning. If I choose to do so, however, my rule is to apply an endnote so the reader is aware of the original richness of the Tibetan word, and so its etymology does not become an anonymous grave without an epitaph. Perhaps the greatest irony of translating words that are meant to represent the ineffable nature is that, ultimately, there is no intrinsically correct word to be found anywhere; for the only right word is the

one that is spoken from the lips of the kind-eyed lineage master, even if it comes in the form of an old shoe.

- ⁷ *Nyungney* is a purification ritual during which participants take a set of temporary vows, such as vows of fasting and silence, for only a few days.
- ⁸ *rtsa bal pa rdza*: a type of plant or root that cannot be taken apart without unravelling the entire root. Originated in India.
- ⁹ Khenpo is emphasizing how important the Vinaya is, in response to the tendency to undervalue the Vinaya as being just for Hinayana monks and practitioners.
- ¹⁰ Tib. *theg pa chen po*; Skt: *Hinayāna*: literally, “Lesser Vehicle.” Some Buddhologists will argue that the politically correct word to use should be “Theravadan tradition,” so as not to use a comparative word implying inferiority, for one of the paths taught by Lord Buddha. Some translators adhere to this newer convention in translating, but I have discussed this with many elderly lamas who feel that the word “lesser” actually should not be eliminated for fear of offending anyone, as this loses the intended meaning that identifies the extraordinary differences between the vehicles, indicating that there are higher and lower levels of Dharma teachings intended for the varying levels of capacity and understanding in the disciples.
- ¹¹ Drigungpa Chenpo: The Great Drigungpa is another epithet for Jigten Sumgon.
- ¹² Tib. *gsol bzhi'i las*: the fourfold Vinaya vow-disseminating ritual (vow-bestowing?).
- ¹³ Tib. *sa*: this means stage, or level. *Bhumi* is the Sanskrit term. There are ten recognized *bhumis*, or stages, on the bodhisattva path, with the eleventh *bhumi* being buddhahood. Tenth-level bodhisattvas are said to voluntarily choose to refrain from attaining ultimate and complete enlightenment until all beings are freed before them.
- ¹⁴ Khenpo Samdrup Rinpoche's *Stages of Meditation*.
- ¹⁵ Khenpo Rinpoche said, “Becoming victorious: it's like in colloquial English, when you say, ‘win’.”
- ¹⁶ “Forsaking a being with one's mind,” sometimes translated as “forsaking a being from the depths of one's heart:” The essence of the vow of aspiring bodhichitta is to never forsake a single being; it means never to exclude a single sentient being from one's bodhichitta commitment. No matter what a being has done to us, we must never let ourselves forsake him from our compassionate commitment to bring all beings out of suffering. We lose our bodhisattva vow when we think, “When I become enlightened, I will liberate all other beings, except for this one. Let him stay in samsara for all I care;” or, “In the future, if a time comes when this being needs my help and I am able to help him, I will never help him.”
- ¹⁷ Tibetan is *bre mo'i gtam*, which literally means “the speech of a brothel maid.” It refers to talk that is fueled by the three poisons and that naturally stirs up the poisons, as tabloids do.
- ¹⁹ Khenpo explained that if a bodhisattva feels uncomfortable going to a Dharma teaching or transmission because he feels that the lama will not want to teach or will feel too humble to teach if he is there, that is not non-virtuous. If one's motivation is that one thinks one's knowledge and qualities are too great to deign

to receive teachings from someone else, then it is non-virtue.

²⁰ *dge sbyong gi chos bzhi*: The four ascetic virtues are not responding in anger despite being treated with anger; not mistreating in response to being mistreated; not returning a blow for a blow; not returning slander with slander.

²¹ Usually this is described as the practice of giving life by doing live release of beings who were marked for slaughter.

²² The *dharmakaya*, “Dharma body,” is a “body” of wisdom. The *rupakaya*, “form body,” has two aspects, the *sambhogakaya* “enjoyment body” and *nirmanakaya* “emanation body.”

²³ *'khor gsum yongs dag*: purity of the three spheres; the three spheres are the subject, the act, and the recipients, and they are pure when there is no grasping at their reality.

²⁵ Tib. *grangs med gsum*: three periods of countless eons; one might logically ask how one can put a finite number as a modifier of something that is “countless.” This is another common paradox in Buddhist lore. The word “countless” here is meant to connote an amount that surpasses our conceptual ability to quantify. However, dividing into three sets gives the practitioner hope and the ability to envision the possibility of attaining the result.

²⁶ Tib. *brtson gang myur skyobs*: I translated the single verb *skyob* as “rescued and protected,” because in this context I feel that it has both connotations. It means that one will be rescued from suffering in the present and protected from future suffering; hence, both verbs seem important.

²⁷ See the translation of “Vajrayana Samaya Confession”.

²⁸ Victor (Tib. *rgyal ba* Skt. *Jīna*) is an epithet for a buddha. In this case, it refers specifically to Lord Buddha Shakyamuni.

²⁹ Being free from grasping at the reality of action, act, and recipient: in this case, not reifying the sentient beings for whom we dedicate, the person making the dedication, or the virtue being dedicated.

³⁰ Tib. *dag pa gnyis ldan*: “twofold purity” refers to innate buddhahood, which all beings have, and fully manifest buddhahood, which buddhas have realized.