

8. HOW TO TRAVERSE THE PATH

HAVING COVERED HOW to realize one's potential and how to deal with obstacles, we now move on to how one progresses on the spiritual path. We will be using two frameworks to understand the yogi's development on the path: the four yogas and the twelve stages. First, we will discuss how to traverse higher and higher on the path by way of the four yogas, and then by way of the twelve stages.

TEACHING HOW TO TRAVERSE HIGHER AND HIGHER ON THE PATH BY WAY OF THE FOUR YOGAS

The four yogas are an important part of the mahāmudrā teachings. The four yogas are (1) single-pointedness, (2) freedom from fabrication, (3) one taste, and (4) nonmeditation. The twelve stages are actually arrived at by dividing each of the four yogas into three substages: lesser, middling, and superior.

I should emphasize right at the beginning that, in some sense, mahāmudrā does not depend on exerting effort to traverse a path. As Shang Rinpoche said, “Mahāmudrā itself is a single stride. Fools who delineate stages and paths are deluded.” It is true that mahāmudrā is one realization, and if you try to elaborate it in terms of grounds and paths, then this is a delusion. However, generally speaking,

in order to bring a practitioner to the right path, different skillful means are taught, based on the capacity of the disciple—for instance, whether they are a simultaneist, a bypasser, or a gradualist. So, in the mahāmudrā tradition, the four yogas can be used to describe how to traverse the Buddhist path from the very beginning until the achievement of enlightenment.

The First Yoga: Single-Pointedness

**Firstly, as for the yoga of single-pointedness:
awareness of the true nature of mind,
remains clearly and lucidly in the state
of space-like unceasing luminosity and emptiness, without
center or limit.**

**Dividing that into lesser, middling, and superior:
The lesser is seeing the essence of bliss and luminosity.
The middling is attaining mastery in meditative
concentration.**

The superior is meditative experience becoming constant.

The first of the four yogas, single-pointedness, is the stage of practice when a practitioner has some level of stabilization of their meditative experience in relation to the nature of their mind. Awareness is not blurred but completely clear. At this time, the meditative experiences of bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality will arise.

There are three levels of single-pointedness, which are related to the level of familiarity with these experiences of bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality. Single-pointedness for those of the lower level involves the meditative experience that the mind is blissful, luminous, and empty. Whenever a thought arises, the instruction is to simply leave things as they are, and one will see that mental activity will simply dissolve. The thoughts will just dissipate like a cloud disappearing into the sky, and these three meditative experiences of bliss, clarity, and nonconceptuality will dawn. Everything that

arises is experienced as bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality once all ordinary thoughts have ceased. At that time, one has attained the lesser level of single-pointedness; however, one has not mastered this technique.

Sometimes when you meditate, you may have these experiences of bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality, and then at other times, these experiences may not arise. At this stage, you only have meditative experience, not realization. This meditative experience of single-pointedness is like the first day after a new moon, where you only see a sliver of the moon, but cannot see the whole moon. You have the beginning of wisdom and are just starting out on the path. You must continue with your practice of meditation.

As for single-pointedness for those of the middling level, even when you are not meditating, these meditative experiences of bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality will arise automatically. At this stage then, even post-meditation activities can become the path of meditation, and when you do meditate, your meditations become more stable. Earlier, thoughts would arise, but now thoughts become fewer and fewer, and whatever arises becomes the path of meditation. It is said all kinds of miraculous powers can be attained at this stage.

As for single-pointedness for those of the higher level, earlier there was a distinction between meditative equipoise and post-meditation. At this point, whether one is engaged in any of the four kinds of conduct, the three kinds of meditative experience are fully present at all times. At this stage of superior single-pointedness, one has reached the state where meditative experience is constantly present.

The Second Yoga: Freedom from Fabrication

**Freedom from fabrication is the realization that the mind
itself is ungrounded.**

**Having become liberated from fabrications
concerning the arising, ceasing, and abiding
of all dualistic phenomena,
and from grasping at characteristics,**

cut superimpositions concerning unborn emptiness.

All meditative experiences are without a place to reside; all are empty. When you realize the true essence of mind, the true essence of rigpa, then like removing the husk of a grain, you will discover what is truly inside, like a treasure. At this time, you become truly realized. This is called freedom from proliferation.

The freedom from fabrication is the realization that the mind itself is free of a fixed foundation. When you remain meditating single-pointedly without attachment, and do not rely on effort, whether the mind is resting or moving, the simultaneously born wisdom dawns. At that time, you will truly understand that everything is empty, or free from fabrication.

The lesser [level] is the realization that one's mind is unarisen.

The middling is freedom from the fundamental root of grasping at appearances and grasping at emptiness.

The superior is cutting the superimpositions that fabricate all phenomena.

During the time of lesser freedom from fabrication, you realize the essence of your mind as free from arising and ceasing. During the time of middling freedom from fabrication, you experience that there is no foundation at all, and all things simply dissolve. During the time of superior freedom from fabrication, you have confidence that whatever is seen is in the nature of mind, and that mind itself is empty, and everything is like space.

The Third Yoga: One Taste

The yoga of one taste is the mixing of appearances and mind.

All phenomenal appearances of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, are equal in terms of the natural state,

neither free nor unfree from the fabrication of arising and
 ceasing,
 neither empty nor nonempty,
 neither negated nor established, neither discarded nor
 adopted.

The lesser [level] is the mixing into one equal taste
 of all phenomena included in both [saṃsāra and nirvāṇa].
 The middling is when appearance and mind are like water
 poured into water.
 The superior is when all phenomena are pacified in the
 state of equality.

Nothing is unique or different from anything else in terms of its essence, just like an apple that has the same taste wherever you bite it. In terms of essence, all appearances are one.

The higher you go through the levels of one taste, your meditative experience becomes deeper, stronger, and more stable, and you realize that all appearances in saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are equal in being unborn. By the time you arrive at the middling level, appearance and mind become completely nondifferentiable, like water poured into water. Finally, at the superior level, whatever appears, you will never reify it, being completely pacified within the state of the equality of all dharmas. The realization of nonthought will be continually present, day and night.

The Fourth Yoga: Nonmeditation

Nonmeditation is the purification of one's earlier
 meditative experiences
 or the utter cessation of the intellectual mind.

That has lesser, middling, and superior levels:

The lesser is when there is no object of meditation or
 meditator.

The middling is when you have taken hold of the natural

place of spontaneity.

The superior is when, having mixed the mother and son
clear light,
and having become diffused into the expanse of wisdom,
the dharmadhātu,
one accomplishes the two aims and attains complete
enlightenment.

Earlier, mindfulness was used as a tool to assist with your meditation, but when you reach the state of lesser nonmeditation, mindfulness is no longer required, and everything becomes meditation. There is no longer the thought of objects of meditation, the action of meditation, or the meditator. All states are simply meditation.

Middling nonmeditation occurs after you have been able to reach spontaneity and you are able to hold your position of spontaneity. Your level of realization then becomes cemented. You will realize that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are beginninglessly self-arisen; no one created any of this.

When you reach nonmeditation of the highest capacity, all consciousness will transform into wisdom, and all obstacles to knowledge will be eliminated. The mother-like luminosity and son-like luminosity will become inseparable. During this time, one will attain liberation, and there will be no distinction between meditation and post-meditation. It is at this stage that you acquire the dharmakāya and svabhāvakāya for the sake of oneself and the saṃbhogakāya and nirmāṇakāya for the sake of others.

THE TWELVE STAGES: DIVIDING EACH OF THE FOUR
YOGAS INTO THE THREE OF LESSER, MIDDLE, AND
SUPERIOR

If one were to correspond the twelve yogas
to the grounds and paths according to the perfection of
wisdom:

Lesser single-pointedness is the path of accumulation.

Middling is the heat and peak levels of the path of preparation.

Superior single-pointedness is the forbearance and supreme attribute levels of the path of preparation.

Lesser freedom from fabrication is the path of seeing, the first bodhisattva level.

Middling is from the second to the fifth bodhisattva levels.

At the time of the superior, the sixth bodhisattva level is attained.

Through the realization of lesser one taste, one [reaches] the seventh bodhisattva level.

Middling is the eighth bodhisattva level.

Superior one taste corresponds to the ninth bodhisattva level.

Lesser nonmeditation corresponds to the tenth bodhisattva level.

Middling is the limit of the continuum.

Superior is the completion of the path, corresponding to the eleventh bodhisattva level.

The lesser level of single-pointedness is part of the path of accumulation. The middling level of single-pointedness corresponds to the heat and peak levels, which are the first two levels of the path of preparation. Here, you may have the meditative experience of luminosity and emptiness if you have mindfulness, but if mindfulness is not thoroughly present, then the experience of luminosity and emptiness will not be continuously present. Before you experience the unfabricated blaze of wisdom of the path of seeing, you reach the heat level of the path of preparation, and an experience close to the clarity and appearance of dharmatā will arise. At this point, your experience will begin to become

perfected, and your realization is about to dawn. The superior level of the yoga of single-pointedness corresponds to the third and fourth levels of the path of preparation, the forbearance and supreme attribute levels. Here, meditative experience will be continuously present, and all thoughts will dissolve into your meditative experience. Day and night, you will have the meditative experience of space-like luminosity and emptiness, and you will feel that you have reached nonmeditation, though you have not yet attained that state.

Having stabilized and habituated your experience of the clarity of *dharmatā*, you then move closer to the realization of the freedom from fabrication of the path of seeing, which is beyond worldly paths. Maintain your practice conjoined with devotion, and during this time, whatever arises, do not grasp onto it or engage in conceptual fabrication. Simply remain in such a state. The meditative experience of single-pointedness will become perfect and the meditative experience of freedom from fabrication will arise. As soon as it has arisen, you will have attained the path of seeing, which corresponds to the lesser level of the yoga of the freedom from fabrication. When you realize that all dharmas are beyond arising, ceasing, or abiding, this realization becomes the foundation for all knowledge to be acquired. At that moment, you become so joyful, and thus, this path, the first bodhisattva level, or *bhūmi*, is called the “Joyous.”

Having realized that all phenomena are free from the clouds of fabrication and defilements of what is to be abandoned by the path of meditation, you have reached the second bodhisattva level, which is called the “Stainless.” This stage corresponds to the start of the middling level of freedom from fabrication. Mind that never arises, abides, or ceases is not something new but has been there throughout time without beginning. This realization has always been present, and with the blessing of the light of the guru, it has finally been recognized and actualized. Therefore, the third bodhisattva level is called the “Luminous.” When you attain the realization of the freedom from foundation, the knowledge of the buddhas will begin to brilliantly arise, enabling you to fulfill the aims of sentient beings and carry

out beneficial activities on their behalf. For this reason, the fourth bodhisattva level is called the “Radiant.” When you realize the union of emptiness and compassion, all the subtle habitual tendencies will be totally purified, and for this reason, the fifth bodhisattva level is called the “Difficult to Conquer.”

The superior level of freedom from fabrication begins with the attainment of the sixth bodhisattva level. At this point, you will manifestly realize the nonexistence of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. The sixth bodhisattva level is thus called the “Manifest.”

Now you will begin to feel that you and others are one, mixed together inseparably like water poured into water. When such a realization arises in your mental continuum, you will also have the realization of union of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. This will help you to overcome attachment to the emptiness of the *Śrāvakayāna* and *Pratyekabuddhayāna*, and you will distance yourself from these lesser vehicles. This is the attainment of the lesser division of the yoga of one taste, which corresponds to the seventh bodhisattva level, the “Gone Afar.”

Then, upon attaining the middling level of the yoga of one taste, dualism will be totally eradicated, and everything will appear in the form of the ultimate truth, the natural state. This corresponds to the eighth bodhisattva level. Since at this point you will never be able to be moved from the state that is free from dualistic perception, the eighth bodhisattva level is called the “Unshakable.”

At the superior level of the yoga of one taste, whatever appears in the post-meditation period will be seen as an unreal illusion. When such a realization dawns and is habituated, you will gain the profound knowledge arisen from meditation, such as the four types of wisdom, and you will have attained the ninth bodhisattva level, which is accordingly called “Good Intelligence.”

Upon reaching the lesser level of nonmeditation, you will realize that there is no object of meditation or act of meditation. All the knowledge of a buddha will begin to appear like clouds gathering in the sky. This is the tenth bodhisattva level, called “Cloud of Dharma.”

When you reach the middling level of nonmeditation, you have

a tight hold on the place of self-arisen spontaneity, and at this time, the subtlest obstacles to knowledge will be thoroughly eradicated. At this time too, you will reach the final meditation of the “Special Path of the Limit of the Continuum,” which is the final path immediately before buddhahood. This corresponds to the vajra-like samādhi of the moment before enlightenment.

Finally, you will realize the essence of nonthought, whereupon all subtle defilements of negative tendencies become purified, and all the knowledge of the Buddha is thoroughly attained. At this point the mother-like luminosity and son-like luminosity will merge, and the superior level of nonmeditation is attained. This corresponds to the attainment of buddhahood, which is the eleventh bodhisattva level.

9. HOW TO ACTUALIZE THE RESULT

In that way, once the twelve yogas have progressively arisen
in one's mental continuum and nonmeditation is
accomplished,
the two obscurations and the entirety of karmic imprints
will be eradicated
and the fruition of the wisdom of the two knowledges will
be completed.
Though not moving from the dharmakāya for one's own
sake,
for the sake of others, the rūpakāya will enact the benefit of
beings
until saṃsāra is empty,
without conceptual thought, effort, striving, or
proliferations,
with continuous enlightened activity
and the spontaneous presence of the pervasive nature.

Through this profound practice it is possible to overcome the
two obscurations, the afflictive obscurations and the knowledge
obscurations, and to thereby reach complete enlightenment.
Complete enlightenment consists of the union of the dharmakāya

and rūpakāya. The dharmakāya consists of the jñānadharmakāya and svabhāvakāya. The jñānadharmakāya corresponds to luminosity while the svabhāvakāya corresponds to emptiness. The rūpakāya consists of the saṃbhogakāya and the nirmāṇakāya. The saṃbhogakāya acts for the benefit of bodhisattvas on the tenth bhūmi, while the nirmāṇakāya acts for the benefit of all sentient beings. In this way, as a buddha, one will benefit sentient beings continuously, according to their different needs and capacities.

DEDICATION

Consequently, it is said:

By virtue of this effort and the merit acquired here,
in this life and in all lives to come,
may I properly remain in a state of renunciation of
saṃsāra,
and may I never transgress even the slightest of the
fundamental precepts!

May I never forget even in my dreams the two bodhicittas
that benefit others,
and using the four means for gathering disciples
and the practice of the six perfections,
may I establish all beings in bliss!

May I cherish qualified spiritual guides
as I do my own life,
and pleasing them with all kinds of service,
may I always have faith and maintain my samaya.

In dependence on the power of this [virtue], with respect
to the entire tripiṭaka—
the pratimokṣa, bodhisattva, and Mantrayāna of the

knowledge holders—
 for my own sake, may I listen, contemplate, and meditate.
 For the sake of others, may I teach, debate, and compose
 treatises.
 For both myself and others, may I become learned,
 disciplined, and good hearted.
 For the sake of the teachings, may I uphold, protect, and
 propagate them.
 May all this be fully accomplished!

Having gained realization in accordance
 with the treatises on the irreversible definitive meaning,
 and particularly the natural state of mahāmudrā,
 may I become the one to spread it!

In summary, may I alone be able to establish
 all beings without exception
 filling the extent of space
 in the state of complete and perfect buddhahood!

With the blessings of the triple gem
 and the power of my pure superior intention,
 and through the force of the profound emptiness and
 dependent origination,
 may all these aspirations be achieved just so!

This text was requested by Nedo Kuchung Choktrul Rinpoche and
 Dilyak Lama Tsethar during their three-year retreat. With a pure
 intention to help others, Bokar Tulku Rinpoche composed this text
 at Rumtek Monastery.