



A Casket of Sacred Dharma

Stages of Meditation on Dependent Arising

by Künkhyen Pema Karpo

*Along the vast, open path on which you see all things,
You guide all beings without exception—
To you, the Kagyü gurus, I pay homage
With vast, ocean-like inspiration.*

All things are none other than dependent arising. And the oral instruction for arriving at certainty about this, the stages of meditation on the *Seven Excellent Connections*, has two parts: meditative equipoise, which is the dependent arising that gives rise to excellent qualities; and post-meditation, which is the dependent arising for perfecting the capacity.

1. Meditative Equipoise, the Dependent Arising that Gives Rise to Excellent Qualities

In an isolated place somewhere delightful and pleasing, away from distraction, which is like a thorn to meditative concentration, set aside anything that may cause the desires, attachments, and cravings of this life to increase. And, avoiding the thieves and bandits of the five hindrances and ten non-virtues, sit on a comfortable seat with your legs crossed in the vajra posture. Place your hands below the navel in the *mudra* of meditative equipoise; straighten your spine; widen your shoulders; tilt your chin slightly towards your neck; leave your tongue and lips as they are; and fix your gaze directly in front of the tip of your nose. Exhale the stale breath once, and then breathe naturally, without making any deliberate effort to breathe in and out.

Begin by thinking, “For the sake of all sentient beings, I must attain perfect buddhahood. And to do so, I will engage in profound yogic practice.” Then visualise yourself on a jewelled throne, lotus, and moon disc seat in the form of the perfect buddha, shakya-muni. His body is like purest gold, extremely beautiful with its thirty-two major marks and eighty minor signs. His hands are in the earth-touching and meditative equipoise mudras. And he is wearing the three brilliant saffron-coloured dharma robes and sitting in full lotus posture.

In the space above the crown of your head, visualise your root guru. Saying, “Grant your blessings, so that appearances may dawn as dependent arising!”

supplicate him or her with intense longing. Directly in front of you, at about a yoke's distance, visualise an extremely clear and bright round moon disk, and focus your eyes and mind on it one-pointedly.

Don't entertain thoughts about the past ("Before, I did this, as a result of which, such and such happened...") Don't anticipate the future ("Now I will do this, as a result of which this other thing might or might not happen...") And don't reflect on or analyse the appearances of the present, thinking, "This is good. That is bad. This is that. This is not that." Don't meditate with preconceptions, thinking: "It is like this!" Don't hold a nihilistic view of absolute nothingness by thinking for even so much as a single moment, "It is empty!" And don't meditate with any mind-made concepts about emptiness, or imputations and mental images, such as, "This is primordial wisdom!"

Well then, you might wonder: how should you meditate? By not conceptualising anything, and not fixating on anything. Abandon all conceptual mindfulness and mental engagements, and simply remain undistracted, resting the mind one-pointedly in equanimity and in natural non-contrivance. The protector of beings, Tsangpa,¹ said:

Mind, when uncontrived, is at ease.
Water, when not stirred, is clear.

Ling² said:

When settling naturally and without contrivance, realization
dawns.
When maintaining that state, like the flow of a river, it dawns in
full.
Completely relinquish all forms of conceptual focus and grasping,
And constantly settle in equanimity, O yogi!

The great Deshek of Kham³ said in his Mahamudra pointing-out instruction:

Taking Mahamudra as something to be cultivated in meditation is
mental fabrication. So how should you meditate? By settling in
natural luminosity with no thoughts or habitual tendencies arising,
and without contriving. This is how you will see your own nature.

Saraha taught:

Having completely cast aside all thoughts and thinking,
If you then remain naturally, like a young child,
And persevere devotedly, concentrating on the guru's instructions,
There is no doubt that the co-emergent will arise.

The Protector Maitreya said:

Here there is nothing to be cleared away,
And nothing whatsoever to be added.
Look genuinely at the genuine—
In genuine seeing, there is genuine liberation.

Also, in the Prajñāparamita Sutras it says:

If they even so much as think, “The aggregates are empty”,
bodhisattvas apply characteristics and must lack faith in the
unborn nature.

The *Two Segments* (the condensed version of the *Hevajra Tantra*) says:

Thus, not meditating with the conceptual mind
Is how everyone should meditate.

In this regard, some people quote Padampa Sangye, who said:

In the space of emptiness, whirl the spear of awareness.
The view is unobstructed, O people of Tingri!

They claim that this means that non-analytical meditation is ‘stupid meditation’ and that the realisation of superior clear seeing, or *vipashyana*, will not arise.

However, this quotation does not discredit us. Its meaning here is as follows. From the perspective of whatever appears, there is appearance. And when we search for where that appearance might be established we do not find anything—therefore, it is empty. The one who searches is called ‘the knower’ (*rig pa*). But this is not the same knower who arrives at certainty through listening and reflecting.

In this context, the knower, while remaining undistracted and still, is nevertheless aware (*shes pa*) of all occurrences. And as soon as we are aware of them they are liberated in their own place. This is “the whirling spear of awareness”. Here there is no separation at all between the object of awareness and the knower who is aware; they are inseparable. Moreover, the observing awareness (*rig pa*) has no identifiable essence whatsoever. And that is why this is classified as the unity of awareness and emptiness.

Becoming overly tense due to excessive mindfulness and conscientiousness will only make thoughts proliferate. But if you are too relaxed, you will end up lost in delusion. Therefore, you must bind the elephant of mind to the column of one-pointedness with the rope of non-distraction. By meditating like this you will remain completely untouched by samsara or nirvana and will be free from all baseless identification and mental constructs. This is something no one can illustrate with words, and which must be experienced or realised for oneself. There is nothing new to be seen, and yet a supreme form of seeing, which is

uncontrived, dawns from within. This is meditation, the recognition of ordinary mind.

As the master Toktsewa⁴ said:

Ordinary mind is awakened in the centre of one's heart.

And the glorious lord Atisha put it like this:

When realising by way of freedom from thoughts
This is conventionally labelled 'seeing emptiness.'
"Not seeing—that is seeing indeed"
So say the extremely profound sutras.
Here, there is no seeing and no one that sees.
There's no beginning or end. It is peace.
Entities and non-entities are relinquished,
It is thought-free, without focus.
There is no abiding and no abode,
Neither coming nor going, and without analogy.
Inexpressible and imperceptible,
It is unchanging, unconditioned.
When practitioners realise this,
They eradicate afflictive and cognitive obscurations.

2. Post-Meditation, the Dependent Arising of Perfecting the Capacity

If, when meditating as described above, the mind does not remain still, but is active, recognise it immediately and then relax, without fabricating or contriving. By doing so, the stirrings of mind will be liberated right where they are, as when pouring water into water. Similarly, we should not reject intense afflictions like attachment, aversion, or stupidity. Nor should we allow ourselves to fall under their power, or even to subdue them with an antidote. Instead, we must recognise whatever has arisen and let go within it. This is how affliction itself will dawn as unobstructed and empty. The precious protector of beings, Pagmodrupa,⁵ said:

Even if thoughts should arise, don't be afraid,
Mindfulness means they are instantly the innate.

And:

Even if thoughts arise in the innate nature, they are naturally
dispersed, like darkness at dawn.

Lord Milarepa said:

While at ease, meditating on mind essence,
Thoughts are the mind's magical display—

Still, you must be certain as to their magicality.

Saraha said:

As long as thoughts proliferate in the mind,
They are of the nature of the Protector—
Are waves different from the water?

In the *Tantra of the Enlightenment of Mahavairocana*⁶ it is said:

When abiding in thought-free samadhi,
There is sky-like clarity, free of thoughts.

In *Sambhuti* it says:

Thoughts themselves purify thoughts.

Through this practice of bringing thoughts onto the path like this, first recognise the mind that perceives whatever appears to the six senses. Then, develop your capacity. With familiarity, allowing appearances to be will mean that they arise and are liberated simultaneously. This, which is known as ‘the merging of appearances and mind’, is truly amazing. This is the time of true practice, when there is neither acceptance nor rejection of whatever arises on the path. As Saraha said:

In front, behind, and in the ten directions,
All that is seen is this.
Today a protector, with confusion at an end,
Now I will not ask anyone at all.

And,

When this has been realized, it is everything.
And no one will find it to be any other way.
Reciting is this; memorizing and meditating too.
Even keeping treatises in one’s heart is just this.

When this happens, samsara and nirvana, thoughts and dharmakaya, and afflictions and primordial wisdom all belong to the same domain.

Should you wish to get up, do so slowly. With a mind attuned to illusion, perform whatever virtuous deeds of body, speech, and mind you can. Unless emptiness is infused with compassion, it will not serve as the path to buddhahood. So you must train in loving kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta. With a mind attuned to illusion, meditate on the thought, “May all sentient beings have happiness.” This “happiness” is the attainment of the state of perfect buddhahood. Letting loving-kindness permeate your mind, think: “In order that they might achieve

that state, may they practice the tainted and untainted sources of virtue, which are its cause.”

Cultivate the thought, “May these beings be free from the sufferings of the three realms of samsara.” And meditate on compassion by thinking, “In order that they may be free from suffering, may they part from its causes, the twofold origin: karma and the afflictions.”

Then, imagine that rays of light shoot out from your right nostril and enter the right nostrils of all sentient beings. Consider that all their suffering then returns to you in the form of light-rays which enter your right nostril. Think: “The suffering of all beings has ripened on me, and all beings are free from suffering.” Then consider that you send all your own happiness out of your left nostril in the form of rays of light. And consider that by giving this away to all sentient beings they come to have happiness. Imagine that all their suffering ripens on you, and, by settling within that, it becomes untainted great bliss. If you perfect this, you will also be able to train directly in the bodhicitta of exchanging oneself with others.

After meditating in this way, think: “By the power of this meditation, combined with whatever sources of virtue have been accumulated throughout the three times, may I and all sentient beings be freed from the ocean of suffering and attain the state of omniscient buddhahood.” Then recite the aspiration prayers of noble Maitreya, Samantabhadra and so on.

This text, Pith Instructions on the Stages of Meditation on Dependent Arising, A Casket of Sacred Dharma, was composed by the Kagyü monk Pema Karpo according to the practice of the precious regent, the glorious great forefather, Pagmodrupa. By this, may the teachings of the victorious ones spread and flourish and remain for a long time. Sarva mangalam.



Translation Origin

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- 1 i.e., Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (gtsang pa rgya ras ye shes rdo rje), 1161–1211.
- 2 i.e., Ling Repa Pema Dorje (gling ras pa padma rdo rje), 1128–1188.
- 3 i.e., Katok Dampa Deshek (kañ thog dam pa bde gshegs, 1122–1192), who was the younger brother of Pagmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo.
- 4 i.e., Kotali, a mahasiddha.
- 5 i.e., Pagmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo (phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po), 1110–1170.
- 6 i.e., *Mahavairocanaabhisambodhi-sutra*.