

The Nine Yanas

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In the Nyingma school, the spiritual journey is framed as a progression through nine spiritual approaches, which are typically referred to as "vehicles" or "*yanas*." The first three *yanas* include the Buddha's more accessible teachings, those of the *Sutrayana*, or Sutra Vehicle. The latter six vehicles contain the teachings of Buddhist tantra and are referred to as the *Vajrayana*, or Vajra Vehicle.

Students of the Nyingma teachings practice these various approaches as a unity. Lower vehicles are not dispensed with in favor of supposedly "higher" teachings, but rather integrated into a more refined and holistic approach to spiritual development. Thus, core teachings like renunciation and compassion are equally important in all nine vehicles, though they may be expressed in more subtle ways. In the Foundational Vehicle, for instance, renunciation involves leaving behind "worldly" activities and taking up the life of a celibate monk or nun, while in the Great Perfection, renunciation means to leave behind all dualistic perception and contrived spiritual effort.

Each vehicle contains three distinct components: view, meditation, and conduct. The view refers to a set of philosophical tenets espoused by a particular approach. On a more experiential level, the view prescribes how practitioners of a given vehicle should "see" reality and its relative manifestations. Meditation consists of the practical techniques that allow practitioners to integrate Buddhist principles with their own lives, thus providing a bridge between theory and experience, while conduct spells out the ethical guidelines of each system.

The following sections outline the features of each approach. Keep in mind, however, that each vehicle is a world unto itself, with its own unique philosophical views, meditations, and ethical systems. This array of new concepts and terminology can be bewildering to the novice practitioner. The following presentation is meant as a brief introduction to these rich traditions.

The Sutra Vehicle

The Sutra Vehicle, or *Sutrayana*, contains two distinct approaches: the Foundational Vehicle, or *Hinayana*, and the Great Vehicle, or *Mahayana*. The former contains the most basic teachings of the Buddhist tradition, including the Four Noble Truths, impermanence, and interdependence. The Great Vehicle expands the view and scope of the Foundational Vehicle with concepts like bodhichitta and emptiness. In this approach, the outcome of spiritual practice is the attainment of buddhahood, whereas the end point of the Foundational Vehicle is a lesser level of realization known as the state of the foe destroyer, or *arhat*.

The Foundational Vehicle is broken down further into the Vehicles of the Listeners and Solitary Buddhas—the Shravakayana and Pratyekabuddhayana. The basic mind-set of these vehicles is the same, in that both approaches focus on individual liberation, rather than the liberation of all beings. There are, however, subtle differences when it comes to the level of realization and the style of practice espoused by each system.

The Foundational Vehicle

As stated above, practitioners of the Listener Vehicle are primarily motivated by a desire to free themselves from the suffering of samsara. The starting point in this approach is the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha's very first teaching. The first two truths highlight the unsatisfactory nature of samsara and the factors that generate suffering. As an alternative to this cycle of ignorance and misery, the last two truths present the possibility of the cessation of suffering and the path that leads to this cessation.

The view of the Listener Vehicle focuses on the absence of self. More specifically, practitioners of this approach aim to realize that there is no independent, unitary, and lasting identity to be found in any aspect of our physical or mental existence. Through analysis and direct observation, they come to see the mind and body as an ever-shifting constellation of individual components, none of which constitutes a "self."

This realization is limited, however, insofar as the individual components of the mind and body are believed to truly exist. According to this system, body and mind are composed of indivisible particles of matter and discrete moments of mind. These instances of matter and consciousness, moreover, are believed to be indivisible and ultimately real. According to more advanced vehicles, this belief indicates a subtle level of clinging and ignorance, and it is precisely this subtle ignorance that blocks the attainment of complete buddhahood.

In Tibet, the views of the Foundational Vehicle are typically studied via the philosophical tenets of two Buddhist schools: the Vaibashika, or Particularists, and the Sautrantika, or Followers of Sutra. The Particularists base their views primarily on the Abhidharma teachings, an incredibly detailed presentation of the mind, mental events, and the laws of the natural world, as seen through the lens of Indian Buddhist cosmology. According to this presentation, both the mind and physical objects can be broken down into constituent parts. All such coarse phenomena, therefore, do not truly exist; they constitute the relative truth. Once mind and matter have been thoroughly dissected, however, one will find the indivisible particles and instants of mind noted above. As these are held to truly exist, they are said constitute the ultimate truth.

The Sutra Followers have a slightly different view. According to this school, the primary sources of suffering are the mistaken concepts we have about ourselves and the world around us. These notions do not actually perform the same functions that their real-world counterparts do, however. The concept “cup,” for example, does not function as a real cup does. Unfortunately, we constantly mix up our ideas about things and the things themselves, thus creating an endless cycle of confusion. Our biggest mistake, of course, is to think that there is an “I” or “self” somewhere in the psycho-physical components of our existence. This is a classic example of our tendency to conflate theory with reality. In light of this process, the Sutra Followers hold that the relative truth consists of all that does not truly function—meaning the realm of concept and imputation—while the ultimate truth refers to that which does.

As with the other eight vehicles, meditation in the Listener Vehicle involves two forms of meditation: tranquility and insight, which are also known by their Sanskrit names—*shamata* and *vipashyana*. Tranquility is designed to pacify destructive

emotional patterns and bring the mind to a point of stillness, while insight elicits an understanding of the nature of the focal point of one's meditation. All the various approaches to Buddhist practice employ these two forms of meditation, yet there is a great degree of variability when it comes to specific techniques. In the Foundational Vehicle, there are many forms of tranquility meditation, which may involve focusing on the breath, absorbing oneself in states of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity, or concentrating on the physical body, sensations, the mind, and phenomena. Insight meditation relates primarily to realizing the various facets of the Four Noble Truths, and basic principles like impermanence and the absence of self, in particular.

The ethical code of the Listener Vehicle stresses strict discipline and nonviolence. Followers of this approach often take various sets of vows to ground their ethical practice. These vows range from relatively straightforward lists of five or eight precepts, all the way up to the incredibly detailed monastic rules of fully ordained monks and nuns that number in the hundreds. In addition to such vows, they also pledge to live by the principle of nonviolence. In practical terms, this means abstaining from the "ten forms of vice": (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) sexual misconduct, (4) lying, (5) sowing discord, (6) idle chatter, (7) harsh speech, (8) malice, (9) envy, and (10) distorted beliefs.

In the following passage, Vimalamitra summarizes this approach:

The Vehicle of the Listeners has seven principles: First, the gateway to this approach is the four truths: suffering, its source, its cessation, and the path. Second, the view that is realized pertains to the two selves. With this approach, individual selflessness is realized, while the selflessness of phenomena is not. To elaborate, the individual self is realized to be empty and devoid of a self. In terms of phenomena, however, objectively apprehended objects and the subjective mind that perceives them are believed to ultimately exist in an extremely subtle form. Third, the meditation of this approach consists of employing solely the tranquility of cessation to bring the objects of the six collections to a point of cessation. Fourth, its conduct involves engaging in the ten virtues for one's own benefit alone. Fifth, its result is the level of a foe destroyer, which is the culmination of progressing through the four pairs and eight levels of attainment. Sixth, according

to the general approach of this vehicle, in terms of duration it is believed to take two, three, or more lives to attain the result of becoming a foe destroyer. Superior individuals attain this result in one hundred eons; mediocre individuals do so in two hundred; and those who are inferior do so in three hundred eons. Seventh, in terms of its benefit for oneself and others, this approach entails applying oneself solely to methods that pacify one's own afflictions and the five poisons.

The Vehicle of Solitary Buddhas is very similar to the Listener Vehicle. Both share the same basic motivation of liberation for oneself, and both lead to the result of the foe destroyer (though there are subtle distinctions between the foe destroyer of the listeners and the foe destroyer of the solitary buddhas). There are, however, differences between the two. In terms of view, the solitary buddhas are said to have a slightly more sophisticated understanding of the absence of self. Whereas the listeners only realize the absence of self in relation to the person, the solitary buddhas also realize that the "partless particles" of matter are also devoid of any essential identity. Nonetheless, followers of this vehicle fall short in terms of the subjective mind, which they hold to consist of truly existent moments of mind, a belief they share with the listeners. In terms of meditation, the solitary buddhas focus on the twelve links of interdependence, while their ethics are similar to those of the listeners. The solitary buddhas are referred to as such because they do not need to rely upon a spiritual teacher in their final birth and because, in some instances, they dwell and practice alone.

On this approach, Vimalamitra writes:

There are seven principles in the Vehicle of Solitary Buddhas: First, the gateway to this approach is the twelve links of interdependent origination. When these twelve links occur in their usual manner, samsara occurs, whereas nirvana results once this process has been reversed. The Vehicle of Solitary Buddhas elicits an understanding of this process. Second, the view of this approach relates to the two truths. The outer relative truth holds the twelve links of interdependent origination to be illusory. In terms of the ultimate, their view concerning individual selflessness is equivalent to the Listeners. In terms of phenomena, they

assert external objective perceptions to be empty, while believing the internal subjective mind that perceives them to be ultimately existent. Third, meditation in this approach consists of meditating on the emptiness of the aforementioned twelve links in their reverse order. Fourth, its conduct emphasizes those activities that benefit oneself, though there are also some, such as miraculous physical displays, that benefit others. Fifth, the result of this path is the attainment of the wish-fulfilling state of bliss. Sixth, the duration it takes to reach this level of attainment is equivalent to that of the listeners. Seventh, the benefit for oneself and others enacted by this approach was discussed in the context of conduct.

The Bodhisattva Vehicle

The Bodhisattva Vehicle, also known as the Great Vehicle, or *Mahayana*, builds upon the renunciation and insights of the Foundational Vehicle. One distinct feature of this approach is the principle of *bodhichitta*—the wish to bring all beings to the state of buddhahood and the activities engendered by this wish. Unlike the Foundational Vehicle, in which practitioners strive to liberate only *themselves* from the suffering of samsara, adherents of the Bodhisattva Vehicle work to awaken *all* beings. Those who have pledged to do so are known as *bodhisattvas*—enlightened warriors.

The two truths, another hallmark of the Great Vehicle, offer a model of reality that encompasses both the distorted perceptions of ordinary beings and the Buddha's deep insight into the true nature of existence. The *relative truth* refers to the confused minds of ordinary beings and all that they perceive through the distorted lens of dualistic fixation, the belief that self and other truly exist. The *ultimate truth*, on the other hand, refers to reality itself and the wisdom that beholds this reality once the mind has been divested of ignorance.

In terms of view, the Bodhisattva Vehicle stresses the importance of realizing emptiness, or *shunyata*. In realizing emptiness, one comes to see that all phenomena, both the external material world and the mind that perceives it, lack any essential existence. No basic building blocks of matter or eternal mind can ever be found. In other

words, the seemingly solid and stable world around us, and even our own minds, are utterly ephemeral and illusory. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is nothing at all, for while we may not find anything when we take the time to investigate, the entire range of relative appearances still manifests. In fact, it is precisely because these appearances have no true existence that they can manifest at all. If they truly existed, they would be fixed and static, stuck with an essence that is immutable and incapable of change.

Another principle in this approach is *sugata-garbha*, or buddha nature. The theory of buddha nature stipulates that all sentient beings possess the innate potential to achieve perfect and complete awakening. From this point of view, there is no essential difference between buddhas and ordinary beings. Though buddhas have actualized this potential and ordinary beings have not, the fundamental nature of both remains the same. Buddha nature does not get worse in samsara, nor does it improve in nirvana. Rather, the process of awakening is simply a matter of removing the destructive emotions and habitual patterns that block the radiance of this innate nature, like removing mud from a piece of gold.

There are two main philosophical schools in the Great Vehicle: the Mind Only School and the Middle Way. The Mind Only School has its roots in the works of Vasubhandu and his older brother Asanga, two Indian masters who lived in the fourth century CE. Asanga experienced visions of the future buddha Maitreya and transcribed a number of teachings on the view and practices of the Great Vehicle. The Mind Only School, which grew out of these teachings, holds that all the various appearances that we experience as the “external” world are nothing more than the mind’s projections. True reality, they hold, is devoid of perceiver and perceived. Thus, the Mind Only School understands emptiness to be the absence of duality within consciousness itself, which they hold to be ultimately existent.

The Middle Way takes this critique even further. According to masters like Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti, two Indian pioneers of the Middle Way teachings, even the view of a truly existing nondual consciousness is untenable. Just like external phenomena, the mind cannot be found when subjected to examination. In fact, the Middle Way takes issue with every theoretical model that is meant to present an

accurate snapshot of reality. While it is fine to speak in conventional terms about our day-to-day lives, language and theory are held to be utterly inadequate when it comes to the true nature of reality. All one can say, according to the Middle Way, is that reality transcends all conceptual formulations.

In terms of meditation, once again we have the two core practices of tranquility and insight. As in the Foundational Vehicle, tranquility serves to concentrate the mind and provide a solid foundation for the cultivation of insight. In this approach, insight involves realizing that all phenomena are unreal and illusory, and that both subject and object lack inherent existence. In other words, one gains insight into the empty nature of the entire universe and its inhabitants.

In postmeditation, one uses the six perfections, or *paramitas*, to work for the welfare of all beings. These six—generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditative stability, and knowledge—are the main practices of the bodhisattva. The sixth perfection, knowledge, is of particular importance because all the remaining five perfections become transcendent when linked with the knowledge of emptiness.

Summarizing this approach, Vimalamitra writes:

There are also seven principles in the Vehicle of the Bodhisattvas: First, the gateways to this approach are the two truths and six perfections. Second, the view of this approach involves realizing that both the individual and phenomena are devoid of self and empty, divesting them of the obscuring overlay of ignorance. Third, meditation here consists of cultivating a nonconceptual state of concentration, the union of tranquility and insight. Fourth, its conduct entails refraining from the ten forms of nonvirtue for one's own benefit and practicing the ten forms of virtue for the benefit of others. In this way, this vehicle emphasizes the pursuit of altruism. Fifth, the result of this approach is the gradual progression through the ten levels, culminating in the eleventh, the level of complete illumination. Sixth, the duration it takes to reach this level is three incalculable eons. Seventh, in terms of the benefit for oneself and others, one's own benefit is brought to a point of culmination, and one works solely for the welfare of others via the six perfections.

The Vajra Vehicle

The Vajra Vehicle contains the tantric teachings of the Buddhist tradition. On the surface, the practices and philosophies of the Vajra Vehicle seem a world apart from the accessible teachings of the Foundational and Great Vehicles. These differences, however, are merely superficial. The end result of both vehicles is the state of complete awakening—buddhahood. Renunciation and bodhichitta, moreover, are indispensable elements of both approaches, as are the view of emptiness and the enlightened potential of buddha nature.

The two approaches do diverge, however, in terms of technique. The methods of the Vajra Vehicle speed up the process of spiritual growth, and at the same time involve less hardship than the practices of the Sutra Vehicle. They are so efficient, in fact, that it is said that the Vajra Vehicle enables the practitioner to attain in a single life and single body what would otherwise take three immeasurable eons to accomplish—the state of buddhahood itself.

The supreme efficiency of the Vajra Vehicle lies in its willingness to use all the various facets of human existence as aids on the spiritual path. Whereas emotions and sense pleasures are often viewed as impediments in the Foundational and Great Vehicles, the Vajra Vehicle harnesses their power and channels it in a more constructive direction. This open attitude allows the Vajrayana practitioner to skillfully use all activities and experiences—even negative thoughts and emotions—as fuel for the fire of awakening.

Though there are many different styles of practice in this vehicle, the development stage and completion stage are often viewed as the hallmarks of tantric practice. The development stage uses visualization, mantra recitation, and deep states of concentration to disrupt the habitual tendency to view the world and its inhabitants as impure and truly existent. The imaginary process of visualizing oneself as a deity in a

pure realm, for example, allows the practitioner to experience directly the fluid, ethereal nature of perception.

The completion stage has two components: the conceptual completion stage and nonconceptual completion stage. The first aims to harness the subtle energies of the body and consciously bring them into the central channel. These practices, which often involve intense yogic postures, focus on the link between the energetic body and the mind, the idea being that by controlling the former one will be able to undo the negative conditioning of the latter. The nonconceptual completion stage, by contrast, is an effortless approach. Often associated with the Great Perfection and Mahamudra, this form of completion stage practice emphasizes recognizing the nature of mind and experiencing its pure expressions without the filter of dualistic fixation.

The gateway to tantric practice is empowerment, or abhisheka. Conferred by a guru, empowerments authorize students to practice the teachings of the Vajra Vehicle. Each lineage and style of practice has its own unique empowerments, which are said to “ripen” the students’ entire being and prepare them for tantric practice. The commitments of each empowerment are known as samaya vows.

The Nyingma and Sarma schools formulate the various approaches to Buddhist tantra in slightly different ways. In the Sarma schools, the Vajra Vehicle is commonly broken down into the four classes of tantra: Kriya Tantra, Upa Tantra, Yoga Tantra, and Anuttarayoga Tantra. Anuttarayoga Tantra is then broken down further into Mother Tantra, Father Tantra, and Nondual Tantra. In the Nyingma school, a different approach is taken. Instead of this fourfold classification, the various tantras are categorized into two groups: the three outer tantras and three inner tantras. The three outer tantras correspond to the first three mentioned above. The three inner tantras—Mahayoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga—correspond roughly to Father Tantra, Mother Tantra, and Nondual Tantra, respectively.

The Three Outer Tantras

Kriya Tantra

Kriya Tantra, or Activity Tantra, is the first of the three outer tantras. The view of this approach concerns the ultimate and relative truths. In terms of the ultimate, Kriya stresses the inseparability of appearance and emptiness, and that all phenomena are essentially beyond arising and cessation. In terms of the relative, these same phenomena are viewed as divine forms.

Kriya stresses the vital role of meditation in spiritual practice, as do all Buddhist traditions. What sets this approach apart is its use of purification rituals, ablutions, and specific requirements concerning diet and clothing. Such activities are linked with tantric meditations, such as the visualization of deities and mantra recitation. In Kriya meditation, the deity is regarded as superior to oneself, whereas in later approaches the deity is considered an expression of the nature of one's own mind.

Explaining the Kriya approach, Vimalamitra writes:

There are seven principles in the Kriya Vehicle: First, the *gateways* to this approach are ablutions and acts of ritual purity. Ablutions include using water to cleanse externally, as well as the cultivation of nonconceptual states to cleanse internally. Ritual purity involves acts like partaking of the three white foods and the three sweets. Second, the *view* of this approach involves realizing ultimate reality, free of the four limitations of the genuine. In terms of the relative, by virtue of realizing the ultimate, [all phenomena] are viewed as the deities of the three buddha families and asserted to appear as such. Third, *meditation* in this approach consists of viewing oneself (as the samaya being) and the deity (as the wisdom being) as master and servant. Fourth, its *conduct* entails working for the welfare of both oneself and others by following the five root and two subsidiary principles laid out in the treatises of this tradition. Fifth, the *result* of this approach is the attainment of the level of a vajra holder of the three families.

Sixth, the *duration* it takes to reach this level is either sixteen or seven lifetimes. Seventh, in terms of *benefit*, one carries out the four forms of enlightened activity for the welfare of both oneself and others.

Upa Tantra

Upa Tantra, or Practice Tantra, is the second of the three outer tantras. This approach is also referred to as Dual Tantra, or Ubhaya Tantra, because it links the view of Yoga Tantra (the third outer tantra) with the practices of Kriya Tantra. Thus, it is essentially an amalgam of Kriya Tantra and Yoga Tantra. In contrast to the previous approach, here the deity is viewed as a friend or companion, rather than one's superior.

Summarizing this approach, Vimalamitra explains:

There are also seven principles in Upa Tantra: First, the *gateways* to this approach are mantra, mudra, and concentration, in addition to ablutions and acts of ritual purity. Second, the *view* of this approach is in harmony with that of the Yoga Vehicle. Third, *meditation* in this vehicle consists of familiarizing oneself with the four actualities. One meditates on the actuality of the self as the samaya being, on the actuality of the deity as the wisdom being, on the actuality of the syllable as the seed syllable at the heart center of both the samaya and wisdom being, and on the actuality of verbal recitation as emanation and absorption of light rays from oneself and the wisdom being. Fourth, its *conduct* is equivalent to that of the previous section. Fifth, the *result* of this approach is the attainment of the level of a vajra holder of the four families. Sixth, the *duration* it takes to reach this level is either five or seven lifetimes. Seventh, in terms of *benefit*, this approach is the same as the previous vehicle. It enacts the welfare of both oneself and others.

Yoga Tantra

The last of the three outer tantras is *Yoga Tantra*, the Tantra of Union. Unlike the first two outer tantras, this approach does not place as much emphasis on acts of ritual purity. In terms of the view, *Yoga* practitioners see the ultimate truth as the pure wisdom of reality itself, while in terms of the relative truth, they see all phenomena as the expression, or luminosity, of the ultimate. In meditation, practitioners of this vehicle view themselves as inseparable from the deity and practice a formless meditation that involves immersing oneself in the ultimate nature of reality itself.

Vimalamitra explains further:

The seven principles of *Yoga Tantra* are as follows: First, as the *gateway* to this approach, concentration is emphasized. Second, the *view* of this approach has two aspects: The ultimate is viewed as the sphere of reality, naturally pure wisdom. The relative is held to be the result of realizing this ultimate, namely, the assembly of deities of the five families, or of the vajra family. Third, *meditation* in this vehicle consists of meditating on the deity via the manifest enlightenment that involves images, and settling continually in the state of reality itself, which transcends images. When meditating on the deity, moreover, oneself (as the samaya being) and the deity (as the wisdom being) are treated as companions. Fourth, in terms of *conduct*, one must act in harmony with the scriptures of this tradition, such as maintaining the vows of the five buddha families. Fifth, the *result* of this approach is the actualization of wisdom, which is pure inside and out, and the subsequent attainment of the level of the pure, rich array. Sixth, the *duration* it takes to reach this level is either five or three lifetimes. Seventh, in terms of *benefit*, this approach utilizes the four forms of enlightened activity to work for the welfare of both oneself and others.

The Three Inner Tantras

The three inner tantras—*Maha*, *Anu*, and *Ati*—are typified by their use of the various development and completion stage yogas. While all three approaches involve both forms of practice, each emphasizes one particular form of meditation. *Mahayoga*, or Great Yoga, emphasizes the deity visualizations and mantra recitations of the development stage, while *Anu* and *Ati* focus on the completion stage. Within the completion stage, *Anuyoga* is primarily associated with the subtle body practices of the completion stage with symbolic attributes. *Atiyoga* is synonymous with the Great Perfection, the completion stage without symbolic attributes.

One of the unique features of the inner tantras is their use of the four empowerments. Each of the four empowerments—the vase, secret, knowledge-wisdom, and word empowerments—prepares the student for a different form of tantric practice, helps dispel a particular obscuration, and forms a karmic link with a particular aspect of enlightenment. The vase empowerment prepares the student to practice the development stage, dispels physical obscurations, and forms a connection with the nirmanakaya, the embodied aspect of buddhahood. The secret empowerment prepares the student to practice mantra recitation, dispels verbal obscurations, and forms a connection with the sambhogakaya, the luminous aspect of buddhahood. The knowledge-wisdom empowerment prepares the student to practice the subtle body practice of yogic heat,ⁱ dispels mental obscurations, and forms a connection with the dharmakaya, the empty aspect of buddhahood. Finally, the word empowerment prepares the student to practice the Great Perfection, dispels the obscurations to full realization, and forms a connection with the svabhavikakaya, the unified aspect of buddhahood.

Mahayoga

Mahayoga, or Great Yoga, is the first of the three inner tantras. This approach to practice is intended for those whose dominant emotional pattern is anger and who are inclined to a more elaborate form of meditation practice. In terms of view, this vehicle stresses the inseparability of the two superior truths. The superior ultimate truth is the sphere of reality itself, along with the various forms of wisdom and embodiment that constitute the state of buddhahood. The superior relative truth consists of the universe and its inhabitants, which are manifestations of the ultimate.

As noted above, *Mahayoga* stresses the visualizations and mantra recitations of the development stage. The meditative liturgies of this approach, moreover, are extremely elaborate, with detailed visualizations that may involve hundreds of figures. The three absorptions, or three *samadhis*, form the framework for *Mahayoga* meditation. With these three steps, the meditator immerses the mind in emptiness, compassion, and then the union of these two—expressed as a seed syllable—before moving on to the complex visualizations and mantra recitations of development stage proper.

Like all tantric practice, the ethical component of *Mahayoga* revolves around the various tantric pledges, or *samaya*, that one commits to when receiving an empowerment. There are a vast number of *samaya* vows, but the simplified approach stipulates that the tantric practitioner must view all experiences as expressions of deity, mantra, and wisdom: all appearances are to be seen as divine forms, all sounds as mantra, and all thoughts and mental events as wisdom.

Summarizing this approach, Vimalamitra writes:

There are seven principles in Mahayoga: First, as the *gateway* to this approach, one trains in the union of development and completion, the inseparability of skillful means and knowledge. Second, the *view* of this approach is to realize reality itself; to see all phenomena, whether of samsara, nirvana, or the path, as one's own awareness, the enlightened mind—empty, illuminating, and free of all elaborations. Third, *meditation* in this vehicle emphasizes absorbing the mind in the deity, either through complete perfection or the threefold ritual, and resting in

the completion stage that constitutes the nature of the deity—the state of reality itself, beyond conceptual mind and devoid of elaborations. Fourth, in terms of *conduct*, one practices the Three Roots, the twenty-five subsidiaries, union and liberation, and being free from concepts and all moral judgments. Fifth, the *result* of this approach is the attainment of the essential five kayas and the actualization of the level of the lotus endowed. Sixth, the *duration* it takes to reach this level is, for diligent practitioners who maintain their *samayas*, a single lifetime. Seventh, in terms of *benefit*, this approach utilizes the four forms of enlightened activity to work for the welfare of both oneself and others.

Anuyoga

Anuyoga, or Subsequent Yoga, is the second of the three inner tantras. This approach to practice is intended for those whose dominant emotional pattern is passion and who are inclined to a simpler form of meditation practice. In terms of view, this vehicle aims to realize the indivisibility of emptiness and bliss, which are referred to as the mandalas of Samantabhadri and Samantabhadra, respectively.

In terms of meditation, the hallmark of this approach is its use of the various completion stage yogas, and especially those that involve harnessing the energies of the subtle body and redirecting them into the central channel. Though this system does employ deity visualizations, here visualization is simpler and more direct. Here the meditator is advised to manifest the visualization in a single instant, rather than construct an elaborate environment and the deities that dwell there one element at a time. This process is often likened to a fish leaping out of water.

As with *Mahayoga*, *Anuyoga* also has numerous *samaya* vows that must be maintained once one has received empowerment. In addition, the ethics of this system stress the importance of utilizing sense experiences as an avenue to awakening. In other words, one is advised not to discriminate or make moral judgments that reinforce a dualistic perspective.

On this approach, Vimalamitra writes:

The seven principles of *Anuyoga* are as follows: First, the *gateway* to this approach is the inseparability of the sphere of reality and wisdom, through which the natural mind itself is experienced. Second, in terms of *view*, in this approach one realizes all dualistic phenomena of both samsara and nirvana to be one's own awareness, the sole sphere of the dharmakaya, beyond all elaborations and with the supreme of all aspects. Third, *meditation* in this vehicle does not involve a progressive approach, nor one that uses rituals and other causes to bring about a specific result. Rather, in this system development is perfected through an instant of mindfulness, or simultaneous perfection. All of the energetic channels, elements, and centers are meditated upon as being primordially the mandala of the deity. Fourth, the *conduct* of this approach is in accord with that of *Mahayoga*. In addition, one works with the energies and yogic heat, the yoga of the blazing and melting of blissful warmth. Fifth, as the *result* of this approach, the wisdom of indivisible means and wisdom actualizes the level of the great mass of the wheel of syllables. Sixth, in terms of *duration*, elevated by extraordinary methods, this level is attained in a single lifetime. Seventh, in terms of *benefit*, within a view and meditation that require no effort or exertion, one accomplishes the four activities as a byproduct and thereby tames beings.

Atiyoga

Atiyoga, or Supreme Yoga, is synonymous with the Great Perfection. This system is intended for those whose dominant emotional pattern is ignorance and who are inclined to an extremely simple form of meditation practice, in which the sole focal point is the pure, luminous essence of mind. Known as the Supreme Vehicle, it involves a level of directness and profundity that far surpasses the other eight vehicles, transcending cause and effect.

The Great Perfection is divided into three classes: the Mind Class, Space Class, and Key Instruction Class. All three focus on the essence of mind, yet each has its own unique orientation.

The Mind Class points out that all appearances are manifestations of the mind. The Space Class, by contrast, focuses more on emptiness, emphasizing purity and innate liberation. The Key Instruction Class shows that these two are, in fact, inseparable. In other words, this approach does not overemphasize either appearance or emptiness, and instead teaches that the swiftest path to buddhahood entails working with both.

The Key Instruction Class is itself divided into four categories: the Outer, Inner, Secret, and Extremely Secret Unsurpassed Cycles. This last division, the Extremely Secret Unsurpassed Cycle of the Key Instruction Class, is more commonly referred to as Nyingtik, the “Heart Essence” of the Great Perfection. The Heart Essence teachings present the most profound and direct path to spiritual awakening. In contrast to the elaborate philosophies of the sutra tradition, and even the complex development and completion stage practices found in other forms of Buddhist tantra, this approach is grounded in the understanding that the enlightened state is directly accessible each and every moment.

According to this system, our own awareness is already pure and pristine; it always has been. This fundamental state is termed *original purity*.ⁱⁱ The mind’s pure nature is not a void or blank state, however, but luminous and capable of manifesting spontaneously. This *spontaneous presence*ⁱⁱⁱ is the second main principle of the Heart Essence.

The principles of original purity and spontaneous presence relate to the practices of the breakthrough^{iv} and direct leap.^v Together, these two form the core of Heart Essence practice. With the view of breakthrough, the guru introduces the student directly to the mind’s fundamental nature of original purity. From that point on, the student’s sole task is simply to sustain recognition of the mind’s true nature. For those who are unable to master the breakthrough view instantaneously, the meditations of the direct leap may be utilized to speed up the process of realization, assuming that one is already grounded in the nature of mind. In this approach, one uses physical postures and gazes to directly experience the manifestations of reality itself.

Summarizing the core principles of the Great Perfection, Vimalamitra states:

The seven principles of *Atiyoga* are as follows: First, the *gateway* to this approach is a spontaneous state of carefree effortlessness in which there is nothing to be done. Second, the *view* that one must realize is emptiness—ineffable, without

reference point, and beyond the intellect. Third, *meditation* in this approach does not employ focal points or imagery. Rather, it is an uncontrived and fixation-free innate lucidity, a spontaneously present and completely perfect equality, a rootless transparency. Fourth, in this approach *conduct* is spontaneous, free of conscious action, and beyond moral deliberations; in essence, it is a unified play. Fifth, the *result* of this approach is the so-called “level of supreme wisdom,” which is not something that can be eliminated or attained; it is a primordial, spontaneous, and vast perfection. Sixth, in terms of *duration*, there is no distinguishing between the three times. This attainment is innate and occurs on its own, originally and primordially. Seventh, this enacts the twofold *benefit* effortlessly, as a vast, all-encompassing, primordially perfect, spontaneous presence.

- Excerpted from [Great Perfection: A Guide to the Dzogchen Preliminary Practices](#)

ⁱ Tib. *tum mo*.

ⁱⁱ Tib. *ka dak*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tib. *lhun drup*.

^{iv} Tib. *trekchö; khregs chod*.

^v Tib. *tögal; thod rgal*.