

The Third Dzogchen Rinpoche

Great Perfection

Volume II: Separation and Breakthrough



Foreword by Dzogchen Ponlop

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Translator's Introduction

THIS VOLUME contains a translation of the second half of *The Excellent Chariot*, a unique Great Perfection practice manual written by the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche. The first half of this manual, published as *Great Perfection: Outer and Inner Preliminaries*, provides background teachings on the Heart Essence lineage, as well as detailed instructions on the preparatory practices of the Great Perfection. Building on these foundational teachings, this volume presents detailed instructions on the unique preliminaries and breakthrough meditation of the Nyingtik, or Heart Essence, of the Great Perfection.

In the Nyingma School, the spiritual journey is framed as a progression through nine spiritual approaches, which are often referred to as “vehicles” or “yanas.” The first three—the Listener Vehicle, Solitary Buddha Vehicle, and Bodhisattva Vehicle—are collectively referred to as the “Sutra Vehicle.” In these approaches, one trains successively in the basic principles of renunciation, interdependence, bodhichitta, and emptiness.

The next six vehicles comprise the “Tantra Vehicle,” or “Vajrayana,” in which a series of increasingly subtle methods are used to speed up the process of spiritual transformation. First are the Three Outer Tantras—Kriya, Charya, and Yoga. In Kriya Tantra, acts of ritual purification and physical austerity are emphasized, while in Charya Tantra ascetic practices are used in tandem with methods designed to bring about a state of meditative concentration. In Yoga Tantra, these acts of asceticism are dropped altogether; the emphasis is solely on the internal process of meditative absorption.

The final three vehicles—Mahayoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga—are known as the Three Inner Tantras. The hallmark of these vehicles is their use of the various development and completion stage yogas. All three of these vehicles utilize these yogas to some degree, yet they vary in terms of emphasis. Mahayoga focuses on the development stage, whereas Anuyoga and Atiyoga both emphasize the completion stage. In Anuyoga, however,

the subtle body practices of the symbolic completion stage take precedence, while in Atiyoga formless completion stage practices receive the most attention. Atiyoga—the final stage of the nine-vehicle journey—is synonymous with the Great Perfection.

The Great Perfection contains many divisions and approaches. Of these, 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. Liberation, in other words, is not a goal to attain, but rather an immanent reality that must be recognized. In the Great Perfection there is no need to strive towards some future objective. Enlightenment is here and now.

The following passage from *The Precious Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* summarizes this approach:

According to the key instructions of the Great Perfection, when it comes to self-occurring wisdom there is no samsara and no nirvana. Hence, wisdom is inherently free; it is beyond being something to embrace or reject. While this Great Perfection does not exist as any *thing* whatsoever, it is unimpeded as the wisdom of universal freedom. It is at once both *originally pure* of faults and *spontaneously present* in terms of its enlightened qualities. This is the ground that one must realize. Once one has come to a decisive understanding of this ground, one meditates on self-occurring wisdom by viewing whatever manifests as the play of reality itself. Meditation, here, does not involve the slightest sense of deliberate concentration. Instead, meditating on this sublime and uninhibited self-liberation is a *nonmeditation*, the natural manifestation of the flow of wisdom.¹

As Longchenpa points out here, there are two main principles in this system. The first is that our own awareness is already pure and pristine, and that it always has been. This fundamental state is termed *original purity*. The only difference between buddhas and ordinary beings is that the former recognize this innate purity, while the latter do not. This pure nature of mind is not a void or blank state, but luminous and filled with the

entire range of enlightened qualities. The mind's luminous nature, moreover, spontaneously manifests to the realized practitioner. This *spontaneous presence* is the second main principle of the Great Perfection.

The principles of original purity and spontaneous presence are actualized through the practices of *trekchö* and *tögal*, respectively, the *breakthrough* and *direct leap*. Together, these two form the core of Heart Essence practice. Longchenpa explains:

In *breakthrough*, one brings naked awareness into one's own experience. On this effortless path, one need not utilize appearances, for liberation occurs all on its own. This *buddhahood without meditation* is geared for lazy individuals, its vital points intended for those of the highest caliber. The *direct leap*, on the other hand, is for those who are more industrious. In this approach, liberation requires effort and one must utilize the appearances of luminosity to purify the corporeal body into a body of light, thereby bringing the attainment of buddhahood in this very life.²

With the view of breakthrough, the guru introduces the student directly to the mind's fundamental nature of original purity. This pure essence does not need to be changed or altered in any way. The practitioner need not strive to purify obscurations, nor work at gathering the two accumulations. On the contrary, such purposeful effort is taught to be a major obstacle on the path of the natural Great Perfection. The only thing to do here, if one can be said to *do* anything, is simply recognize and sustain the flow of pure awareness. For students of the highest caliber, recognition and realization occur simultaneously. In the *Illuminating Lamp of the Copper Lettered*, Vimalamitra writes:

Breakthrough carries the meaning of *immediacy*, indicating that liberation requires no effort and occurs all on its own.³

For those who are not of capable of mastering the breakthrough view instantaneously, the meditations of the direct leap may be utilized to speed up the process of realization. In this approach, one uses physical postures and gazes to directly experience the manifestations of reality itself. While this stage does involve working actively with appearance, the

approach here differs significantly from the development and completion stages found in other forms of Buddhist tantra. In the direct leap, meditation is imbued with the breakthrough view. Thus, there are no fabricated visualizations to develop (as is the case in the development stage), nor is there any need to work at bringing the subtle energies into the central channel (as in the symbolic completion stage). For this reason, the practitioner must already have a stable recognition of the nature of mind for the direct leap to be effective. If one is thoroughly grounded in the breakthrough view, the meditations of the direct leap provide a powerful and swift method to bring one's experience of pure awareness to its fullest expression.

— GREAT PERFECTION IN INDIA AND TIBET —

In light of their great power and profundity, the teachings of the Great Perfection have been safeguarded and practiced in secret for ages. In the human realm, the Great Perfection was first practiced in the charnel grounds of India, and later amidst the snowy peaks and barren plains of Tibet.⁴ The texts of the Great Perfection abound in tales of the siddhas and saints who mastered these teachings, many of which are recounted in the translation of *The Excellent Chariot* that follows.

The Great Perfection is not a static body of teachings, but a fluid tradition that has grown and evolved over time. The literary tradition of the Great Perfection began with Garap Dorjé. This master was the first person to commit the 6,400,000 verses of the Great Perfection to writing. Garap Dorjé's student, Manjushrimitra, divided these teachings into the Mind, Space, and Key Instruction Classes. Shri Simha, Manjushrimitra's heart son, then further divided the Key Instruction Class into the Outer, Inner, Secret, and Extremely Secret Unsurpassed Cycles.⁵ 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. It is this profound set of teachings that concerns us here.

In its early history, the Heart Essence teachings were practiced and taught by a lineage of remarkable masters. The precise details of the lineage succession vary depending on the source, yet in most accounts a number of important figures emerge. The following passage from *Clarifying the Practice of the Heart Essence* gives a general overview of the Great Per-

fection lineage, starting with the primordial buddhas Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri, and then descending through a series of Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan siddhas:

Glorious Samantabhadra and his female counterpart taught the male and female buddhas of the five sambhogakaya families, as well as the sixth buddha, the great Vajradhara. Vajradhara taught the glorious teacher Vajrasattva, who went on to teach the nirmanakaya buddha Garap Dorjé. This master then taught the vidyadhara of enlightened form, Manjushrimitra, who transmitted the teachings to the vidyadhara of enlightened mind, Shri Simha. Shri Simha taught them to the great vidyadhara Padmakara, the wise Vimalamitra, and the translator Vairochana. These three masters passed the teachings on to King Trisong Deutsen, the dakini Yeshé Tsogyal, Nanam Dorjé Dudjom, and other great treasure revealers and vidyadharas.⁶

Though the individuals listed here figure prominently in most of the Great Perfection's lineage histories, it is important to note that each individual cycle of teachings offers its own distinct presentation. In *The Excellent Chariot*, for example, Garap Dorjé is said to have transmitted the teachings directly to Shri Simha, who then passed them on to Padmasambhava. This is the presentation of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis. The Heart Essence of Vimalamitra, by contrast, states that Garap Dorjé passed on the teachings to Manjushrimitra, and the lineage then descended to Shri Simha, Jnanasutra, and finally to Vimalamitra. These two lineages will be discussed in more detail below.

Three masters brought the Heart Essence teachings to Tibet: the Indian saints Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra, and the Tibetan translator Vairochana. Vairochana's teachings pertain primarily, though not entirely, to the Mind and Space Classes mentioned above.⁷ These teachings have largely lost currency due to the prevalence of the revelatory "treasure" teachings of Padmasambhava, which discuss the Great Perfection almost exclusively in terms of the Heart Essence teachings.⁸

Of these three lineages, the teachings of Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra have been the most widely practiced in Tibet, though early on in the history of the Great Perfection there seems to have been more parity in terms of the influence these three had. In the early days of the Great Per-

fection, the teachings of Vimalamitra were the first to gain prominence. Vimalamitra transmitted these teachings to a few close disciples and later concealed them as treasures for future generations. The lineage then descended to Dangma Lhungyal (tenth-eleventh centuries), who received the transmissions of the oral tradition and also revealed the concealed treasures.

After some time, the influence of these teachings began to wane and the teachings of Padmasambhava began to flourish. In the following passage from the *Precious History of the Treasure*, Padmasambhava shares his predictions concerning the future of the Dzogchen teachings in Tibet with Yeshé Tsogyal:

Lady Tsogyal wrote all this down and then asked, "Should these secret instructions on the Heart Essence be propagated or concealed?"

"The time has not yet come to spread these teachings," the master responded, "so they should be concealed as treasure . . . After some years the great master Vimalamitra will arrive and the time will have come for his disciples. The Heart Essence teachings will then be spread far and wide. My teachings on the Heart Essence of the Dakinis will appear once the Heart Essence teachings that were translated earlier have entered into a state of decline and are on the verge of disappearing altogether. When the earlier teachings are just about to die out, these instructions will manifest. They will do so quickly and on a vast scale, but only for a short while, like the flame of a butter lamp flaring up before it burns out."⁹

The Great Perfection teachings of these two masters came to be known as the Early Heart Essence and Later Heart Essence, respectively. Each master passed on his teachings to numerous disciples, and the transmission of the Great Perfection soon blossomed into a diverse range of lineages.

The Great Perfection is rooted in the teachings of the Nyingma School, the most ancient lineage of Buddhist practice in Tibet, yet these teachings have also been widely practiced by many highly regarded masters of Tibet's other three main lineages. The Dalai Lamas of the Geluk lineage, the Karmapas of the Kagyü tradition, and the Khyentsé incarnations of the Sakya School have all practiced and taught the Great Perfection.¹⁰

Even Milarepa (1052-1135), the great patriarch of the Takpo Kagyü, studied the Great Perfection, though his initial efforts met with failure. More recently, Jamgön Kongtrul (1813-1899) and other lamas of Tibet's nonsectarian Rimé movement advocated the Great Perfection as the pinnacle of the Buddha's teachings. Interestingly, even Tibet's non-Buddhist Bön religion has its own strand of Great Perfection teachings, some of which are nearly identical to those presented in this very book.¹¹

The Great Perfection is also notable for the number of female masters it has produced. Two of the earliest examples are Princess Mandarava and Yeshé Tsogyal. These figures are often mentioned as the spiritual partners of Padmasambhava, yet they were also great masters in their own right. Yeshé Tsogyal in particular played a critical role in transmitting the Great Perfection teachings to Tibet and helping to ensure their preservation for future generations. Later female masters continued to practice, transmit, and teach the Great Perfection, and many were instrumental in maintaining and shaping their respective lineages. One such example is Mingyur Paldrön (1699-1769) of the Mindroling lineage, whose profound writings on the Great Perfection were included by Jamgön Kongtrul in his *Treasury of Precious Treasures*.¹² Remarkable female masters of recent times include Shuksep Lochen Chönyi Sangmo (1865-1953)¹³ and Sera Khandro (1892-1940),¹⁴ two women who trained some of the foremost Great Perfection masters of the twentieth century, including Zhadeu Trulshik Rinpoche (b. 1924) and Chatral Rinpoche Sangyé Dorjé (b. 1913).¹⁵

In the Nyingma School, the vast majority of Great Perfection teachings are contained in revealed treasures, or *terma*. Along with transmitted teachings and pure visions, treasures are one of three primary lineages through which the Nyingma teachings, including those of the Great Perfection, are disseminated. *Transmitted teachings*, or *kama*, are passed on from teacher to student and maintained in an unbroken continuity of study and practice, while *pure vision* teachings, or *dak nang*, can be traced to the visionary encounters between realized masters and enlightened manifestations. Pure visions often result in the composition of new liturgical practices and, occasionally, commentarial literature. Treasures may be either teachings or sacred objects that are hidden by a spiritual teacher for the benefit of future generations. These teachings and objects are later revealed by a reincarnation of the spiritual teacher him or herself, or by a reincarnation of one of the teacher's primary disciples.¹⁶ In Tibet, most treasures were hidden by Padmasambhava and his spiritual partner Yeshé

Tsogyal, though there are numerous examples of this practice occurring in other lineages as well.¹⁷

Over the past millennium, various cycles of treasure teachings have been revealed, only to fade into obscurity decades or centuries later. Others have withstood the test of time and remain influential to this day. Of those that relate to the teachings of Vimalamitra, two of the most important are the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra, which will be discussed below, and the Heart Essence of the Karmapa, which was revealed by the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorjé (1284-1339). More recently, an important treasure cycle was re-revealed in the nineteenth century by Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (1820-1892), entitled the Heart Essence of Chetsün.¹⁸

Relatively speaking, the number of treasure cycles linked to the teachings of Vimalamitra pales in comparison to the number of cycles associated with Padmasambhava. Padmasambhava's concealed teachings are so numerous, in fact, that the word "terma" has become nearly synonymous with this great Indian siddha. It is hard to single out which of his treasure cycles are most important, but a few deserve special mention. Of the earliest treasure cycles to be revealed, Rigdzin Gödem's (1337-1409) *Unimpeded Wisdom Mind* has been held in high regard since its discovery in the fourteenth century. This cycle is still widely practiced in certain regions, such as Sikkim, and at some of the Nyingma School's most important monasteries, including Dorjé Drak in Central Tibet. Rigdzin Gödem is often mentioned alongside Guru Chöwang and Nyang Ral Nyima Özer as one of the three most important tertöns. Other cycles, such as Mingyur Dorjé's (1645-1667) *Space Dharma* and Longsel Nyingpo's (1625-1692) revelations, have also been integrated into the practice curriculum of some of the Nyingma tradition's most important monastic centers, and have made a lasting impact on the trajectory of Great Perfection thought and practice for this reason.¹⁹ More recently, cycles discovered by the Rimé masters Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo and Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa (1829-1870) have profoundly shaped the Great Perfection tradition, as have the cycles revealed by Dudjom Rinpoche Jikdrel Yeshe Dorjé (1904-1988) and Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche (1910-1991) in the twentieth century.²⁰

It is also worth noting that some treasure cycles are considered distillations of the Great Perfection teachings of both Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra. These include some of the most influential treasure revelations, such as Terdak Lingpa's *Essence of the Profound Nature of Ati*, one of the most important Dzogchen teachings in the Mindrolling tradition.

Another example is Jigmé Lingpa's (1729/30-1798) Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse, the Longchen Nyingtik. This cycle is now one of the most widely practiced treasure revelations in the Nyingma world, thanks in large part to the extensive body of commentarial literature it spawned. Two of the most well known texts from this lineage are Patrul Chökyi Wangpo's (1808-1887) *Words of My Perfect Teacher* and Jigmé Lingpa's own instruction manual on the Great Perfection, *Supreme Wisdom*.

— FOURFOLD HEART ESSENCE —

In the fourteenth century, Longchen Rabjam compiled the Nyingma tradition's most famous collection of Great Perfection teachings, the Fourfold Heart Essence. This massive compilation spans thirteen volumes and contains hundreds of individual titles. It is perhaps the most thorough presentation of the Heart Essence teachings ever put down in writing. Over the centuries, the greatest scholars and meditators of the Nyingma School have looked to these sacred texts for guidance on the most profound meditative practices of Vajrayana Buddhism. Later works on the Great Perfection, such as Jigmé Lingpa's renowned *Supreme Wisdom*, draw heavily from its lucid explanations and pith instructions. Its texts are even used as a primary source of information by Tibetan historians.

The Fourfold Heart Essence contains five sections: the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra (Vima Nyingtik), the Heart Essence of the Dakinis (Khandro Nyingtik), the Guru's Quintessence (Lama Yangtik), the Quintessence of the Dakinis (Khandro Yangtik), and the Profound Quintessence (Zabmo Yangtik).²¹ The first two sections contain the Heart Essence teachings of Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava, respectively. The following three sections contain the writings of Longchenpa: The Guru's Quintessence contains his commentaries on Vimalamitra's teachings; the Quintessence of the Dakinis contains his clarifications of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis; and the Profound Quintessence deals with the teachings of both. In the following passage, the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche gives a brief overview of the contents of the Fourfold Heart Essence:

The import of the Three Classes, the Ninefold Expanse, and all the other key instructions of the Great Perfection were condensed by the Kashmiri scholar Vimalamitra and codified in

the Secret Heart Essence, the Sangwa Nyingtik. These teachings came to be known as the vast Heart Essence of Vimalamitra, or Vima Nyingtik. Padmasambhava, the master from Oddiyana, codified the Heart Essence of the Dakinis, or Khandro Nyingtik. His teachings came to be known as the profound Heart Essence of Padma, or Pema Nyingtik. The omniscient Longchenpa then wrote brief clarifications on the first set and more extensive commentaries on the second. The former are collectively referred to as the Quintessential Wish-Fulfilling Jewel, which is also known as the Guru's Quintessence, or Lama Yangtik, and the latter as the Quintessence of the Dakinis, or Khandro Yangtik. All of these teachings were then gathered into one compilation, thus condensing both the transmitted teachings and treasures. This collection is referred to as the Fourfold Heart Essence, the Nyingtik Yabshi.²²

The Fourfold Heart Essence covers a wide range of Buddhist practices. Its two main sections, which contain the teachings of Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava, respectively, each comprise a complete path to liberation. Both cycles contain a series of instructions on the outer, inner, and unique preliminary practices, as well as on the various meditations that make up the main body of tantric practice. As might be expected, the two core Heart Essence practices, breakthrough and direct leap, receive the most attention. Yet though the emphasis is clearly on these two stages, there are also numerous texts that relate to other forms of Vajrayana practice, such as the development and completion stages.

The Fourfold Heart Essence devotes far less attention to the development stage than the completion stage, especially in the teachings of Vimalamitra. Moreover, its few sadhana practices are presented in a style and format that sets them apart from the more complex and lengthy development stage sadhanas of the Mahayoga tradition.²³ The usual sadhana divisions of lama, yidam, and dakini are also absent. Instead, the majority of its ritual practices concern Dorjé Yudrönma, Sokdrup Nakmo, Danglha, and other important Dzogchen Dharma protectors.

In terms of completion stage practice, a diverse range of approaches is represented. The Fourfold Heart Essence includes texts on the practices of yogic heat, luminosity, transference, yogic union, as well as extensive instructions on the various intermediate states, or bardos. Though these

practices are not unique to the Great Perfection, they are often integrated into this path as methods that prepare the student for the fruitional practices of the Heart Essence.

The Fourfold Heart Essence's most outstanding contribution to the Great Perfection tradition is its extensive treatment of the breakthrough and direct leap, the most fundamental practices of the Heart Essence tradition. Longchenpa's collection contains scores of texts that relate to these two stages. These include detailed instructions on the unique Heart Essence preliminary practices, which are covered extensively in the translation of *The Excellent Chariot* that follows, as well as elegant poems and detailed treatises designed to lead the meditator first to a recognition of the *originally pure* nature of mind, and then to an experience of its *spontaneously present* manifestations.

In contrast to Longchenpa's Seven Treasuries, which outline the philosophical underpinnings of the Great Perfection, the texts of the Fourfold Heart Essence are short and to the point. They are not intended to be theoretical expositions, but practical guides to the subtleties of meditation. As such, they are often pithy and evocative, and many are just a few pages in length.²⁴ Not all of its texts deal strictly with practice, however. As with most treasure cycles, the teachings contained in the Fourfold Heart Essence center on a number of important tantras.²⁵ There are also numerous biographies of lineage masters, detailed lineage histories, and instruction manuals that explain how to bestow the empowerments of the Great Perfection.

THE HEART ESSENCE OF VIMALAMITRA AND GURU'S QUINTESSENCE

The Heart Essence of Vimalamitra contains the Dzogchen teachings that Longchenpa received from his own root guru, Kumaradza (1266-1343). The Indian master Vimalamitra first gave these teachings in secret to five disciples during his sojourn to Tibet. As mentioned in the previous section, these teachings were then passed on as an oral transmission, and also written down and hidden as treasures by Vimalamitra's student Nyang Tingdzin Zangpo (eighth-ninth centuries). Centuries later they were revealed by Dangma Lhungyal and propagated by Chetsün Sengé Wangchuk (eleventh-twelfth centuries). Though the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra combines the lineages of the transmitted teachings and revealed

treasures, it is often cited as belonging to the tradition of the transmitted teachings.

The first grouping of texts in this collection is divided into four categories: the *Golden Lettered*, the *Conch Lettered*, the *Turquoise Lettered*, and the *Copper Lettered* and *Ornamented Letters*, which are grouped together. Of these four, the aptly entitled *Golden Lettered* group forms the core of the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra. It contains a lengthy inventory of the contents of the collection, a root tantra, as well as a lengthy commentary on this tantra composed by Garap Dorjé.

The *Golden Lettered* collection also includes a series of teachings called "last testaments." The first group of last testaments includes three teachings transmitted by the buddha Vajradhara to Garap Dorjé. These three are called the *Three Last Testaments of the Buddha*. The next set, entitled the *Four Last Testaments of the Masters of Awareness*, consists of four posthumous teachings transmitted by the very first Great Perfection masters. These four texts contain what are, perhaps, the most famous Heart Essence teachings in the entire Great Perfection lineage: Garap Dorjé's *Three Statements That Strike the Vital Point*, Manjushrimitra's *Six Experiences of Meditation*, Shri Simha's *Seven Nails*, and Jnanasutra's *Six Methods of Resting*. A fifth testament by Vimalamitra is also included.

The remaining volumes of the collection contain a wealth of material on the intricacies of Great Perfection practice. Many of the texts are filled with annotations that flesh out the cryptic root verses. Most are quite brief, with some just a few pages long. The majority of these texts deal with the Great Perfection's breakthrough and direct leap practices, and there is a notable absence of ritual-based sadhana literature.²⁶ There are, however, nearly two hundred pages devoted to the various empowerments of the Vima Nyingtik, as well as a lengthy lineage history and numerous biographies of important lineage masters.

Longchenpa's commentaries on the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra fill two volumes. Collectively, these commentaries are entitled the Guru's Quintessence, though they are more popularly known as the Quintessential Wish-fulfilling Jewel, or Yangtik Yizhin Norbu. Of all Longchenpa's writings—which remain unrivaled as comprehensive presentations of Great Perfection thought and practice—this collection is held in especially high regard. It was this body of writings that the great master himself directed his students to consult when in doubt concerning their Great Perfection meditation. Shortly before he passed away, Longchenpa told his students:

Those of you who are able to benefit others should do so without any sense of attachment. Bestow upon your fortunate students whatever empowerments, tantric teachings, and key instructions they wish to receive. Those of you who are focusing on practicing the sacred Dharma, do not let yourself get caught up in mundane activities. Instead, rest evenly in the nature of the breakthrough and direct leap. When there are things you do not understand, consult *The Quintessential Wish-fulfilling Jewel*. This work of mine is like a wish-granting gem, so you should study it in great detail and meditate on what you learn. This will bring an end to samsara and allow you to reach the state of nirvana.²⁷

The commentaries that comprise the Guru's Quintessence are based primarily on a Dzogchen tantra entitled the *Garland of Pearls*. This precious tantra is one of the Seventeen Key Instruction Class Tantras, each of which addresses various aspects of the view, meditation, and conduct of the Heart Essence teachings. According to Longchenpa, the unique contribution of the *Garland of Pearls* is the series of skillful key instructions it employs to bring about liberation.²⁸ Elaborating further, the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorjé, explains that the *Garland of Pearls* shows the practitioner how to develop his or her meditation by fully integrating the fruitional state, and how to recognize the various experiential signs that herald the onset of true realization.²⁹

As with the other sections of the Fourfold Heart Essence, the Guru's Quintessence covers a broad range of topics. It opens with an inventory of its contents, a lineage history, and supplications and offering rituals meant to serve as preliminary practices. Next, we find a series of texts for the empowerments associated with this collection, followed by nearly 540 pages on the main and subsidiary practices of the Heart Essence. The compilation concludes with a series of sadhana practices for the main protectors of the lineage.

HEART ESSENCE OF THE DAKINIS AND THE QUINTESSENCE OF THE DAKINIS

The most treasured cycle of Padmasambhava's Great Perfection teachings is the Heart Essence of the Dakinis. This is not only one of the most exhaustive presentations of Dzogchen theory and practice, but also one of the clearest. Its texts lay out straightforward guidelines for each and every

stage of the Heart Essence, starting with the common preliminary practices, and then progressing through the unique Dzogchen preliminaries, the various stages of tantric practice, and finally to the practices of breakthrough and direct leap.

Padmasambhava sought out the Heart Essence teachings after receiving a prophecy from the dakini Vajravarahi, who told him that his destined teacher was Shri Simha. Once he found this master, he dwelt in the charnel grounds of ancient India for twenty-five years studying and practicing the teachings he received. At the close of the eighth century, the Dharma king Trisong Deutsen invited Padmasambhava to Tibet to help construct Samye Monastery. While there, he taught the entire range of Buddhist teachings and helped plant the Dharma firmly in Tibetan soil.

Padmasambhava transmitted the Heart Essence teachings in secret to a few close disciples. He first taught the Heart Essence of the Dakinis to Yeshé Tsogyal at the cave complex of Zhotö Tidrö in Central Tibet, and later at Samyé Chimpu. The following passage from the *Precious History of the Treasure* recounts how this transmission took place:³⁰

One time the master Padmasambhava was practicing at Zhotö Tidrö Trak along with his spiritual partner, Lady Tsogyal of Kharchen. While they were there, wisdom dakinis exhorted Yeshé Tsogyal with the following prophetic declaration: "The enlightened mind of this great master, the nirmanakaya buddha, holds a set of profound key instructions called the Heart Essence of the Dakinis. These direct instructions bring buddhahood in three years and cause the corporeal aggregates to disappear in this very life. You must request these teachings!"

Hearing this, Yeshé Tsogyal offered a great tantric feast and requested the teachings. "Great master," she said, "please give me the direct instructions that will cause the aggregates to disappear and bring buddhahood in this very life. Please bestow upon me the key instructions of the Heart Essence!"

With this supplication, she made innumerable prostrations and circumambulations, upon which the great master replied, "Tsogyal, your request is an excellent one, for I possess instructions that are unlike those I have given you in the past. These teachings lie beyond the nine vehicles and are the very pinnacle of them all. Just seeing these key points is enough to destroy

all intellectually fabricated beliefs and meditations. With this approach, the levels and paths are perfected without any need for effort. Without correcting or changing anything, the afflictions are freed on their own; there is no need to use antidotes. This fruition is not produced by causes, but is perfected in and of itself, for the wisdom mind is spontaneously present and arises instantaneously. In this very life, the corporeal, flesh and blood aggregates will be freed into the luminous sambhogakaya. Within three years, you will venture forth to the Supreme Realm and be able to seize the stronghold in the realm of the spontaneously present dharmakaya. These instructions I will now teach you!"

The great master then revealed the true mandala of the peaceful and wrathful deities in the great feast hall, empowering and offering instructions to a hundred thousand wisdom dakinis, headed by the lady from Kharchen. He taught them all the Seventeen Tantras, with the *Tantra of the Clear Expanse of the Sun* as the eighteenth, along with a great many key instructions.³¹ All these teachings were then grouped into two categories. The first set contained key instructions on the vastness of the tantras, while the second collection was composed by the master himself and contained cycles for simple yogis. Each was then committed to writing and cataloged by the master and Yeshé Tsogyal.

It was at this time that the king extended an invitation to the master and his spiritual partner to visit Chimpu. The two then set off, accompanied by the king, the queen, and the royal children. Once there, they began a series of one hundred and eight tantric feasts. During the course of these feasts, a young, eight-year-old princess named Pemasel, the daughter of the noble Queen Changchup Men of the Drom clan, passed away. Seeing her body, the king burst into tears and fell to the floor unconscious. Yeshé Tsogyal then covered him with a white sash and sprinkled him with sandalwood water, upon which the king regained consciousness.

The master then spoke:

"Alas, noble king, worldly affairs are but a dream.

By their very character, conditioned things are illusory.

Politics, too, are like last night's dream,
And wealth and subjects, like the drop of dew on a blade
of grass.

Life is as impermanent as a bubble about to burst,
And all conditioned things are subject to decay.

All that comes together must part in the end—

This is the nature of all conditioned things.

Nothing whatsoever is stable and permanent,

So do not believe the impermanent to be permanent.

Instead train in the nature of the birthless dharmakaya!"

To these words of advice, the master added many prophecies concerning future events and told the king about the series of incarnations that Princess Pemasel was to take. At the conclusion of all this, he prophesied the coming of Tsultrim Dorjé and Trimé Özer. The princess was commanded to be the guardian of the profound Heart Essence teachings, and they were then concealed as a profound treasure. Later, just as the master had prophesied, these teachings were revealed by the omniscient Tsultrim Dorjé and spread far and wide by Trimé Özer.³²

As noted here, the Heart Essence of the Dakinis was hidden as treasure and then revealed by the reincarnation of Princess Pemasel, Pema Ledrel Tsel. Longchenpa was the immediate reincarnation of Pema Ledrel Tsel. He came into contact with the treasure revelations of his previous incarnation, and also received the Heart Essence teachings directly from Padma-sambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal in a visionary state. The details of these transmissions are discussed extensively in *The Excellent Chariot*.

The texts of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis follow a similar, though slightly different, structure than those of the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra. The collection opens with an inventory of the treasure's contents and a short presentation of the lineage history. The next section contains the *Six Essence Tantras That Liberate upon Wearing*, which begins with the root tantra, *Essence Tantra That Liberates upon Wearing*. These six tantras are accompanied by six short commentaries. A series of three testaments follows, which are for the most part identical to the *Three Last Testaments of the Buddha* found in the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra. The *Four Last Testaments of the Masters of Awareness*, however, are absent in this collec-

tion. Following these testaments, there is a more lengthy commentary on the six essence tantras, entitled *Essential Instructions on the Essence Tantras That Liberate upon Wearing*. This grouping of texts, which forms the core of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis, contains some of the most frequently quoted literature in the entire Great Perfection tradition.

The next two texts are the main sadhana practices of this cycle, the *Outer and Inner Sadhanas of the Sugatas*. Following these two concise ritual practices is an extensive series of texts that present the various levels of empowerment. The following passage gives an overview of these empowerments and their relationship to Heart Essence practices:

To begin, novice practitioners should be granted the vase empowerment and instructed to practice the approach of the threefold ritual of the yidams of the five buddha families. They should then meditate on these yidams until the experiential signs of success have manifested in their entirety. Next, bestow the secret empowerment and instruct them to meditate on a suitable yogic heat practice until all the experiential signs of success for this practice have manifested. Once this has come to pass, grant the knowledge-wisdom empowerment and have the students utilize a mudra until the bindu is workable and there is some degree of facility concerning the nature of bliss-emptiness. Then bestow the word empowerment and instruct them to meditate on the breakthrough stage until its nature has been recognized. Following this, bestow the empowerment into the display of awareness and introduce the direct leap, instructing them to meditate until the four visions have reached a point of perfection. There is nothing wrong with bestowing all of these empowerments and instructions simultaneously, but doing so in a gradual manner is particularly effective.³³

A number of practice-related teachings follow this series of empowerment texts.

The second volume of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis begins with a text entitled *Questions and Answers: A Rosary of Golden Amrita*. This wonderful composition contains a dialogue between Yeshé Tsogyal and Padmasambhava, in which Yeshé Tsogyal requests clarifications concerning the view, meditation, and conduct of the Great Perfection. Following this are

a number of completion stage writings, including pithy teachings on the practices of yogic union, the intermediate states, luminosity, yogic heat, and the extraction of essences. The volume continues with texts related to the protector practices of the cycle; outer, inner, and secret guru yoga practices; short texts on the breakthrough and direct leap practices; writings on various usages of the cycle's tantras; writings on the intermediate states; and various prophecies, supplications, and lineage histories. Summarizing the unique contribution of this cycle, Terdak Lingpa writes:

Generally speaking, in other classes of tantra found in the Vajrayana, the meaning is concealed using vajra words. In contrast, this meaning is taught explicitly in the Seventeen Tantras and the commentaries that elucidate their essential meaning. In particular, the style and approach of the *Six Essence Tantras That Liberate upon Wearing*, the *Three Last Testaments of the Buddha*, and the key instructions on these teachings composed by the Great One of Uddiyana and his spiritual partner are in harmony insofar as they all teach the innermost realization of the buddhas. This eminent and supreme path, the profound and secret Great Perfection, is what we now know as the "Heart Essence of the Dakinis." In this tradition, symbolic representations are used to point out the true, fundamental nature of things. For those fortunate individuals with a karmic connection to these teachings, this provides an unsurpassed avenue for bringing about a swift realization of this true nature.³⁴

Longchenpa's commentaries on the Heart Essence of the Dakinis span three volumes. Of all his works, this collection receives a unique level of praise as one of the most significant contributions to the practice literature of the Great Perfection. In terms of its length and systematic structure, it is certainly one of the most comprehensive presentations of Heart Essence practice ever composed, yet its true contribution lies in the seemingly limitless pith instructions it contains and its marvelously clear instructions on the subtleties of Great Perfection meditation practice. Commenting on the unique status of this collection, Dudjom Rinpoche writes:

It is clear that in the land of snow mountains all the other writings on the [Heart Essence], those which are considered to be

profound, contain not even a fraction of the profound points which are elucidated in this ocean of indestructible reality, the mind treasure of this second Samantabhadra.³⁵

As might be expected, the circumstances surrounding the composition of these texts were far from ordinary. In fact, though its contents are commentaries, the Quintessence of the Dakinis is also considered a mind treasure.³⁶ Longchenpa received the transmission of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis directly from Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyal in a visionary state, an encounter that is said to have lasted six days. The following passage relates the wondrous circumstances that surrounded these transmissions:

One winter, in the Year of the Female Wood Rabbit, Longchenpa was practicing at Chimpu Hill in Rimochen Cave, along with eight of his fortunate male and female students. As he was giving them the empowerments and explanations of the Secret Heart Essence, many protectors and dakinis suddenly arrived and exhorted him to begin teaching the Heart Essence of the Dakinis. He then sent the yogi Özer Kocha to fetch the texts.

When they gathered together later, the practitioners there could actually see all the innumerable gatherings of dakinis that were taking place. At night, the din of the dakinis' natural sounds could be heard in every direction, as could various instruments. The yogis and yoginis, each and every one, had neither dreams that indicated that they were asleep, nor anything that showed they were wide awake. Instead, everyone remained in a state of blissful, clear, and thought-free wisdom day and night for an entire month. When introductions were given, everyone beheld the light of deep, pervasive blue, as well as the light of the fivefold wisdom. When instructions were given, and during the course of all the supportive teachings, the entire sky would fill with rainbows. This went on for an entire month.

When Longchenpa composed the treatises of the great Heart Essence commentaries that have come to be known as the Quintessence of the Dakinis, various wondrous omens occurred. A great many beings were brought to the state of liberation and omniscience through the empowerments, explanations, and instructions of the Heart Essence.³⁷

As in the other cycles of the Fourfold Heart Essence, the first two texts in this collection are an inventory of the cycle's contents and a lineage history. Following this is a lengthy empowerment text, a series of writings on various preparatory practices, and finally two groups of three texts on the breakthrough and direct leap.

A single five-hundred-page treatise takes up almost the entire second volume. Entitled *An Ocean of Clouds of the Profound Reality*, this vast text is the longest composition in the Fourfold Heart Essence. It offers a comprehensive presentation of Great Perfection thought and practice, from descriptions of the ground of reality to practical instructions on tantric practice, all the way up to the fruition of Great Perfection meditation. This is a rare example of Great Perfection literature that gives equal attention to both the theoretical grounding of the Heart Essence and its practical implementation, treating both in an incredibly detailed manner. It also covers related topics such as the lineage history of the Great Perfection and the various samaya vows associated with the four empowerments.

The third and final volume of the collection contains a great number of practice-related texts. It includes texts on the development stage, completion stage, and of course Heart Essence practice proper: the breakthrough and direct leap. There are also various texts associated with a sadhana of the five buddha families, as well as various rituals and Dharma protector practices.

The fifth and final component of the Fourfold Heart Essence is the Profound Quintessence, which comprises the final two volumes of the collection. As mentioned earlier, this compilation contains instructions that relate to the teachings of both Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava. For the most part, this collection contains further instructions and clarifications of the teachings contained in the preceding sections of the Fourfold Heart Essence. One interesting addition is a short text on the direct leap practice of dark retreat.³⁸ The Profound Quintessence is not as comprehensive or systematically organized as the other components of the Fourfold Heart Essence and contains no inventory.

—— PRACTICING THE HEART ESSENCE ——

The first step an aspiring Dzogchen practitioner must take is to seek out a qualified teacher. The qualities needed by teachers and students of the

Great Perfection are explained extensively in the first half of *The Excellent Chariot* (contained in *Great Perfection: Outer and Inner Preliminaries*). Once a committed student has made a heartfelt connection with a genuine Dzogchen master, the next step is to follow the teacher's instructions, which usually entails practicing the outer and inner preliminaries. The outer preliminaries consist of a series of contemplations designed to elicit a feeling of disenchantment towards mundane activities, along with a sense of enthusiasm towards the state of liberation and the practices that lead to this state. This attitude of joyful renunciation ensures that one's practice on the spiritual path doesn't end up reinforcing ordinary states of desire and attachment. The inner preliminaries build on this foundation by clearing away obstacles and obscurations, while simultaneously creating circumstances that set the stage for realization to take place. Once the mind has been thoroughly trained and refined via these preliminary steps, the advanced practices of breakthrough and direct leap are utilized to help the meditator first identify the pure, nondual awareness that permeates all experience, and then hasten the process of realization by working directly with the active manifestations of reality itself.

The following passage highlights the various stages that comprise this process, starting at the fruitional state of buddhahood, and then working backwards to show all the steps leading up to this fruition:

Generally speaking, all the inconceivable number of teachings, treatises, and key instructions that have been transmitted by the buddhas, bodhisattvas, gurus, and siddhas are nothing more than skillful ways to bring about the attainment of buddhahood, the perfect fruition of the twofold benefit. To attain buddhahood, one must utilize the practical instructions of the profound path of the direct leap to bring the conscious effort and concepts associated with materiality to a point of exhaustion. To reach such a point, one must completely perfect the display of the self-manifest mandala. For this to take place, manifest appearances must evolve, which necessitates witnessing the appearances of manifest [reality]. To witness these appearances, one must completely purify and eliminate all of the afflictions in one's own stream of consciousness, yet without repressing the afflictions (as is done by the listeners). This takes place by practicing breakthrough, the nature of the ground. For this to

happen, the wisdom of insight must arise, as this will lead to the realization that the very essence of the afflictions is fundamentally free of all elaborations. To arouse the wisdom of insight, one must be able to rest the mind one-pointedly in a state of tranquility, which, in turn, means that one must let go of mundane activities and attachment to this present life. Each of these paths must be actualized in dependence upon the path that precedes it. This will take place when the stages outlined here are traversed one by one in the correct manner, like the rungs on a ladder.³⁹

Each step outlined in the preceding passage has a corresponding practice, or set of practices, associated with it.

THE OUTER AND INNER PRELIMINARIES

To begin, the student must complete the outer and inner preliminary practices mentioned above. Over the centuries, these preliminary practices have gradually taken on a fairly rigid structure. The current formulation of the four contemplations that change the mind as the outer preliminaries, and the sequence of refuge, bodhichitta, Vajrasattva, mandala, and guru yoga as the inner preliminaries, was not always the standard form of practice. In the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra, for example, the outer preliminaries consist of a seven-point contemplation that differs quite significantly from the standard format just mentioned.⁴⁰ These seven points do address common themes like impermanence, karma, and the nature of samsara, yet they also contain instructions on practices normally considered more advanced than the relatively accessible meditations of the standard formulation. The seventh point, in particular, contains a three-step process in which the meditator uses a simplified version of completion stage practice to meditate on bliss-emptiness, clarity-emptiness, and nonconceptuality. Longchenpa's instructions on the third and final step bear a striking similarity to his teachings on breakthrough practice. He writes:

To train the mind in nonconceptual reality, relax your body and mind from deep within. Without moving your eyes, meditate in a state free from conceptual discursiveness and withdrawal, and devoid of thoughts and memories.⁴¹

Though not as widely practiced as the standard formulation, this sevenfold contemplation is preserved in at least two lineages that are actively practiced today.⁴²

Another interesting presentation is given in Longchenpa's *Profound Quintessence*. In a text entitled *Precious Instructions on the Common Preliminaries*, the ordinary progression of the outer and inner preliminaries is completely reversed: The student begins by practicing guru yoga, followed by the mandala offering and contemplations of the precious human existence, impermanence, the suffering of samsara, and the principle of karma. Next is the cultivation of faith and compassion, then a meditation on the dreamlike, illusory quality of experience. Two subtle body yogas designed to elicit an experience of nonconceptuality conclude the presentation. Keep in mind that all of these practices are presented here as *outer* preliminaries. Most contemporary formulations, in contrast, list these practices as either *inner* preliminaries or *main practices*, with the exception of the fourfold contemplation listed above.⁴³

The Heart Essence of the Dakinis contains a number of different formulations of these preliminary practices. In *The Sun, Moon, and Stars*, Longchenpa lays out a six-year plan in which complete liberation is said to coincide with the completion of the teachings.⁴⁴ In this extensive approach, the preliminary phase takes six months: one month contemplating impermanence, one month on the shortcomings of samsara, one month on the principle of karma, one month on the freedoms and endowments combined with Vajrasattva, one month on the outer, inner, and secret mandalas, and one month of guru yoga. Noticeably absent from this structure are refuge and bodhichitta, presumably because all Mahayana and Vajrayana practices implicitly contain these two elements.

One of the most well-known commentaries on the Heart Essence of the Dakinis is Terdak Lingpa's *Illuminating the Profound Path*.⁴⁵ This text sets out a fivefold version of the preliminaries: impermanence, refuge, compassion and bodhichitta, Vajrasattva, and guru yoga. As the basis for this formulation, the author cites a passage from the *Last Testament* that instructs the meditator to "train in impermanence, compassion, and bodhichitta."⁴⁶ Elaborating on this approach, he explains that this simplified version of the preliminaries highlights those principles that are of central importance. For the beginner, however, it is more beneficial to take a more extensive approach, in which subsidiary topics like the preciousness of human existence are explicitly addressed. This latter approach, he

concludes, is clearest and in harmony with the general presentation of the Great Vehicle.⁴⁷

According to *The Excellent Chariot*, the primary practice manual used at Dzogchen Monastery, the outer and inner preliminaries are to be practiced in tandem, rather than sequentially as is often the case. The sequence of these practices is as follows: contemplation of the precious human existence is paired with refuge, impermanence with bodhichitta, karma with the three vows, the suffering of samsara with Vajrasattva, the benefits of liberation with mandala offering, and faith with guru yoga.⁴⁸ These practices are explained in the first half of *The Excellent Chariot*.

Of all the outer and inner preliminaries, the practice of guru yoga is taught to be of paramount importance in the Great Perfection. In guru yoga, the student's mind merges with the wisdom mind of the guru. When the devotion of the student is sincere and heartfelt, this merging of minds can bring about an immediate and profound shift in consciousness. In the following passage, Patrul cites Longchenpa, stressing the importance of this practice:

In the development stage, completion stage, and other such practices, it is not the essence of the path that brings liberation, as one must also utilize certain factors to work with one's conduct and deepen one's practice. In guru yoga, however, it is the essence of the path alone that triggers a realization of the true nature within, and which thus leads to liberation. For this very reason, guru yoga is the most profound of all paths.⁴⁹

THE UNIQUE HEART ESSENCE PRELIMINARIES

Once the student has completed the outer and inner preliminaries, the next step is to practice the unique preliminaries of the Heart Essence teachings: the outer and inner separations of samsara and nirvana (known in Tibet as *kordé rushen*); the physical, verbal, and mental preliminaries; and the practices of resting in the natural state and revitalization. These practices, all of which are discussed extensively in *The Excellent Chariot*, prepare the student for the advanced practices of breakthrough and direct leap.⁵⁰

As with the outer and inner preliminaries, there is no set order for the unique preliminaries; each lineage has its own distinct approach. Even within the Heart Essence of the Dakinis a number of different presenta-

tions are given. In the *First Testament of the Buddha*, for example, the inner separation is mentioned first, followed by the practices of resting in the natural state and revitalization. In the *Second Testament of the Buddha*, the outer separation is linked with the physical, verbal, and mental preliminaries: first the physical aspect of the outer separation is practiced followed by the vajra stance, then the verbal separation and the four HUM yogas, and finally the mental separation and mental preliminary of analyzing the origin, presence, and departure of the mind. Following these are the practices of resting in the natural state and revitalization. The *Third Testament of the Buddha* deals solely with the direct leap and does not address these unique preliminaries. Thus, though they do address the individual practices of the Heart Essence, it is difficult to discern their order due to the fact that each of the three testaments has a different orientation and presentation.

The next text in the Heart Essence of the Dakinis is entitled *Essential Instructions on the Essence Tantras That Liberate upon Wearing*. In this short set of instructions, Garap Dorjé condenses the content of the tantras and key instructions into a more accessible format with a clearly structured set of practices. This presentation is based on the first of the three testaments. Following the condensed version of the outer and inner preliminaries (meditating on impermanence, compassion, and bodhichitta), the student is advised to practice the inner separation. No mention is made of the outer separation or the physical, verbal, and mental preliminaries.

Resting in the natural state and revitalization are included in the main practice, rather than the preliminaries. They are also considered a single practice. One uses the gazes presented in the practice of revitalization to rest in the natural state, rather than first gaining familiarity with the natural state and then using the practice of revitalization to integrate this state with mild, moderate, and intense activities. It is important to note that here, "natural state" is equated with the nature of mind, i.e., breakthrough. In later presentations, "natural state" is taken to mean unfabricated, not in the sense of the "natural" nonmeditation of breakthrough, but rather formless tranquility.⁵¹

As mentioned earlier, Longchenpa's *Sun, Moon, and Stars* contains the single most elaborate and comprehensive approach to Heart Essence practice found in the Heart Essence of the Dakinis. One interesting feature of this system is that the unique Heart Essence preliminaries are practiced in conjunction with the four empowerments and the "main practices" linked to them, namely the various development and completion stage yogas.

Following the six-month preparatory period outlined above, the student and teacher commence a series of empowerments and their corresponding practices. The first step entails the bestowal of a dakini empowerment, followed by three months of practice. Next is the vase empowerment and six months of practicing the outer and inner sadhanas of the five buddha families. Following this are twenty days of the physical outer separation practice and ten days of the vajra pose. Note here that Longchenpa follows the traditional approach of breaking the outer separation practice into its physical, verbal, and mental components and practicing them in tandem with the preliminaries of the three gates.

Once these practices have been completed, the secret empowerment is bestowed. At this stage, one practices the verbal separation for twenty days, each of the HUM yogas for twenty days, the inner separation for one month and ten days, yogic heat for one month, and other subtle body practices for three months. Following these practices, the knowledge-wisdom empowerment is bestowed and one practices the mental separation for twenty days and the mental preliminary of analyzing the origin, presence, and departure of the mind for nine days. Next, the state of tranquility is introduced by resting in the natural state and practicing revitalization for three days each, and finally a series of subtle body practices are practiced for a total of six months and ten days. These stages conclude the unique preliminaries, after which the word empowerment is bestowed in conjunction with the practice of breakthrough and the empowerment into the display of awareness in conjunction with the direct leap.⁵²

In two of the most well-known commentaries on the Heart Essence of the Dakinis, Terdak Lingpa's *Illuminating the Profound Path* and the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche's *Excellent Chariot*, the unique Heart Essence preliminaries are structured differently. Both of these texts present the physical, verbal, and mental elements of the outer separation as a single practice. The inner separation follows this outer separation, after which one practices the preliminaries of the three gates, resting in the natural state, and finally revitalization. This sequence is explained in detail in *The Excellent Chariot*.⁵³

In the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra yet another approach is taken. To the preliminaries mentioned above, a practice involving the sounds of the four elements is added.⁵⁴ In some systems stemming from this lineage, the practice of the four elements and the outer and inner separation practices

are not addressed, or are mentioned only in passing. In his *Background Teachings on the Direct Leap* from the Guru's Quintessence, Longchenpa clearly emphasizes the importance of the preliminaries of the three gates relative to these other practices. In this text, he explains the preliminaries of the three gates as the main preliminary practices, while concerning the yogas of the four elements and the separation practices, he states, "It is permissible to precede the preliminaries of the three gates by training in the sounds and nature of the four elements and the conduct of the separation of samsara and nirvana, or to simply skip these steps."⁵⁵ Some instruction manuals omit these practices altogether.⁵⁶

In other traditions, certain preliminaries are linked with the practice of breakthrough and others with the direct leap, though again there is no standard presentation. In *Stages of the Path: The Essence of Wisdom*, from the Chokling Tersar lineage, the preliminaries of the three gates, resting in the natural state, and revitalization are presented as a preparatory practice for the breakthrough stage, while the outer and inner separation are listed as the preliminaries for the direct leap. In his well-known *Essence of Wisdom*, Adzom Drukpa explains this approach:⁵⁷

Once those who are internalizing the view, meditation, and conduct of the breakthrough have attained stability, the entire range of thoughts that comprise all that appears and exists will be understood and experienced as the display and play of awareness. Practicing the so-called "unique preliminaries" at this point, even if one has already done so in the past, is especially effective. Hence, practicing the separation prior to the direct leap is a wonderful approach.⁵⁸

Yet another system is found in *Clarifying the Practice of the Heart Essence*, which stems from the Northern Treasure tradition of Rigdzin Gödem. In this text, breakthrough is preceded by the outer separation practice, while the physical and verbal preliminaries, inner separation, resting in the natural state, and revitalization are practiced prior to the direct leap (the mental preliminary is not included in this system). Other widely practiced manuals contain yet more unique presentations of these practices.⁵⁹ Thus, while there is clearly no set order to these practices, the individual Heart Essence lineages all contain some variation of the preliminaries discussed here.

THE MAIN PRACTICES OF THE HEART ESSENCE

Following the outer, inner, and unique preliminary practices, the student will ideally be ready to start the main practices of the Great Perfection: the development stage and completion stage. In the Heart Essence of the Dakinis, the practices of these two stages are linked with five empowerments: the vase empowerment, secret empowerment, knowledge-wisdom empowerment, word empowerment, and the empowerment into the display of awareness. The latter of these five is unique to the Great Perfection teachings. Terdak Lingpa's commentary on the Heart Essence of the Dakinis shows the link between these empowerments and the practices of development and completion:

If one wishes to guide mature students through the entire path of development and completion, they should begin by training their minds with the preliminary practices. Next, the vase empowerment should be offered along with teachings on the outer and inner development stage sadhanas of the five buddha families. Following this, the secret empowerment should be granted with teachings on the path of yogic heat, then the knowledge-wisdom empowerment along with the path of the spiritual partner. Next, the word empowerment may be offered with teachings on the breakthrough stage of original purity, and the empowerment into the display of awareness along with the path of the direct leap.⁶⁰

This passage shows the most common progression of tantric practice in the Nyingma School. The practitioner begins with the preliminary practices outlined above. In the next phase, the student receives the vase empowerment and practices the development stage. In development stage practice, the meditator uses the visualization of pure realms and deities, mantra recitation, and meditative absorption to disrupt the ordinary processes of distorted perception and replace them with the pure appearances of a divine mandala. Such practices may have one deity or a pair of deities as their focal point, and typically involve the recitation of lengthy liturgies and numerous repetitions of sacred mantras.⁶¹ By absorbing one's mind in these visualized appearances and mantric sounds, the habitual tendency to view the world as impure and problematic is progressively refined away.

Eventually, one's mind, and then even the body, merges with this divine identity.⁶²

Though development stage practice is an effective method for undoing the habitual patterns associated with impure perception, it can also lead to a fixation on the newly developed pure vision of reality. The completion stage functions to counteract this tendency, and also to help the practitioner identify and directly experience the subtle energetic body and the empty radiance of pure awareness. There are two main divisions of completion stage practice: completion stage with symbolic attributes and completion stage without symbolic attributes. In the former, emphasis is placed on working with the subtle energies of the body and, in particular, on bringing the energies of the right and left channels into the central channel. In the completion stage without symbolic attributes, the nature of mind is emphasized. This includes formless practices such as Mahamudra and the breakthrough stage of the Great Perfection.

The passage above states that once a practitioner has received the vase empowerment and meditated on the development stage, they should be given the secret empowerment and instructions on the practice of yogic heat (a completion stage practice with symbolic attributes). Though this practice is often associated with the Kagyü tradition's Six Dharmas of Naropa, it is also commonly practiced in the Nyingma School. This yoga, known in Tibet as *tummo*, employs visualization techniques, along with physical and breathing exercises, to create a blazing, blissful sensation that fills the entire body. This blazing bliss incinerates all forms of confusion and negativity, removes blockages in the central channel, and swiftly activates the practitioner's innate wisdom. The knowledge-wisdom empowerment is bestowed in the next phase along with instructions related to sexual union with a spiritual partner.

Following these two stages, the sacred word empowerment is bestowed along with instructions on the breakthrough stage. Of the two Heart Essence practices, breakthrough is designed for those inclined to an effortless approach, where the focus is on emptiness and original purity. In this phase of practice, which is explained extensively in the translation of *The Excellent Chariot* that follows, the meditator is introduced to awareness, or *rigpa*. By this time, the teacher and student will ideally have developed a mutual trust in one another. The student's devotion, coupled with the teacher's realization, will set the stage for a direct realization of the nature of mind on the student's part. Once awareness has been pointed out and

recognized, the main practice consists of repeatedly familiarizing oneself with this experience until it becomes a stable, living experience.

In the final stage, the empowerment into the display of awareness is bestowed and the meditations of the direct leap are taught. As noted before, this practice enables the practitioner to work directly with the appearances of reality itself, through which a series of four visions gradually unfold. This style of practice is geared towards those who are more industrious by nature. Here, the focus is on luminosity, rather than emptiness, and spontaneous presence.

Though the progression laid out here is a common approach in the Nyingma School, there are also more concise styles of practice that reflect the simplicity of the Heart Essence teachings. In *The Excellent Chariot*, for example, the various empowerments are not linked with the completion stage practices just mentioned, but with the unique preliminaries discussed above. The Third Dzogchen Rinpoche writes:

The various instructions that have been given up to this point should be practiced in conjunction with the four empowerments, as taught by the omniscient lord of Dharma in the Quintessence of the Dakinis. Once the elaborate vase empowerment has been bestowed, one should begin by contemplating the rarity of the opportunities and endowments, and then proceed through the physical preliminary of the vajra stance. Next, the unelaborate, secret empowerment is given and one practices the verbal preliminaries. Following this, the knowledge-wisdom empowerment is bestowed in conjunction with the mental preliminaries, and then the word empowerment in tandem with probing the conceptual mind and seeking out its hidden flaw.⁶³

The breakthrough-oriented approach outlined here is unique in the Heart Essence tradition. Most Heart Essence instruction manuals present the breakthrough and direct leap stages together, often placing more emphasis on the latter in terms of length of discussion.⁶⁴ In *The Excellent Chariot*, only a passing reference is made to the direct leap. In the colophon, the author instructs the reader to consult Terdak Lingpa's commentary on the Heart Essence of the Dakinis, *Illuminating the Profound Path*, should he/she be inclined to practice the direct leap. Despite the fact that

this stage is not taught, it is said that twenty-eight Great Perfection yogis attained rainbow body by relying solely on this text.⁶⁵

In contrast to the unique preliminaries, there is no standard set of practices that constitute breakthrough meditation. Though some meditations and pointing out instructions may be shared, each lineage has its own distinct way of presenting them. One of the more extensive presentations of breakthrough practice is found in Longchenpa's *Essential Instructions on Breakthrough*, from his Guru's Quintessence. In this manual, breakthrough practice is divided into three phases: (1) the preparatory step of dismantling the mind's abode, (2) the main practice of introducing awareness in its original state, and (3) the concluding step of sustaining one's experience of awareness. The first of these entails three steps: an analysis of the origin, presence, and departure of mind, an analysis of whether the mind is unitary or composite, and an analysis of the naked observation of one's own original state. The main body of the practice consists of being introduced to awareness in its original state, at which point the guru gives a series of experiential pointing out instructions to trigger a recognition of the nature of mind in the student. In the third and final phase, the student is instructed to simply maintain this recognition.⁶⁶

A text entitled *Pointing Out the Breakthrough: The Spacious Expanse of Liberation from Extremes* outlines the structure of the most common presentation of breakthrough practice in the Heart Essence of the Dakinis. Although breakthrough instructions are found in other central texts of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis, including the *Last Testaments* and *Essential Instructions on the Essence Tantras That Liberate upon Wearing*, it is in this text that one finds the full range of breakthrough contemplations and pointing out instructions as they are structured in later commentaries, such as those by Terdak Lingpa and the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche. This short text presents not only the structure of breakthrough practice that has become standard in this particular lineage, but also many of the scriptural quotations cited throughout Great Perfection literature.

According to this approach, breakthrough practice consists of a series of three contemplations, followed by a sevenfold set of pointing out instructions. The first contemplation is termed *probing the conceptual mind*, or, more literally, *cutting through to the very root of conceptuality*. In this contemplation, the practitioner inquires into what it is that cycles through samsara, experiences happiness and suffering, and attains liberation. This practice aims to bring about a sense of inner certainty that the mind is at

the root of everything. In the next contemplation, *seeking out the mind's hidden flaw*, the practitioner analyzes the mind's qualities and its relationship to sensory experience, emotions, and thoughts. With this practice, one comes to feel certain that the mind cannot be found anywhere or identified in any way.

The third contemplation is an analysis of the origin, presence, and departure of the mind, similar to the mental preliminary mentioned earlier. In both cases, the point is to see that the mind does not exist in any way whatsoever. According to Longchenpa, the reason for practicing this analysis twice is that the mental preliminary focuses on the objective setting of the mind. In other words, one looks for the *location* where the mind arises, abides, and ceases. Here, however, one analyzes the subjective mind itself, rather than its location, the aim in this case being to recognize its essence.⁶⁷

Once the meditator has a thorough grounding in these contemplations and a stable sense of certainty that transcends mere intellectual understanding, the next step is to receive a series of seven pointing out instructions.⁶⁸ In the commentaries of Terdak Lingpa and the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche, these seven instructions are included as part of a larger three-fold outline. According to these two instruction manuals, awareness is first pointed out via the transmission of blessings, then through the view, and finally on the basis of meditative experience. The seven pointing out instructions mentioned above constitute the second of these three steps. The first stage that precedes these seven introductions is essentially a group guru yoga practice, in which both the teacher and student supplicate the root and lineage gurus, merge their minds together, and then simply rest in the ensuing state. Both Terdak Lingpa and the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche note that while this stage is not explicitly addressed in the root texts of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis, this practice carries a great deal of blessings and is capable of triggering a powerful experience of the teachings.⁶⁹

In the sevenfold pointing out instruction, the guru points out the nature of mind by imparting pith instructions on the view. These seven steps, which stem from the *Essential Instructions on the Essence Tantras That Liberate upon Wearing*, are as follows: (1) thoughts are pointed out to be mind, (2) mind is pointed out to be empty, (3) emptiness is pointed out to be appearance, (4) appearances and emptiness are pointed out to be inseparable, (5) inseparability is pointed out to be self-liberated, (6) the five poisons are pointed out to be self-liberated, and (7) the six collections

of consciousness are pointed out to be self-liberated.⁷⁰ At the conclusion of this section, both Terdak Lingpa and the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche note that this sevenfold set of pointing out instructions is essentially the same as Garap Dorjé's well-known *Three Statements That Strike the Vital Point*.⁷¹

The third step presented by these two authors is not found in the root texts of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis. Instead, it seems to be an amalgam of material found in Longchenpa's *Dakini's Quintessence*.⁷² This stage as well contains a series of pointing out instructions. In contrast to the previous step, however, these instructions are not philosophical in nature, but more evocative and inspirational. In the first introduction, the natural stillness of mind is pointed out within a state of meditative absorption. This introduction contains a beautiful set of instructions that the guru is instructed to read aloud to the student.⁷³ Next, the natural radiance of awareness is pointed out to be the play of wisdom. This introduction takes place in three steps. First, stillness is pointed out to be the mind's adornment, then movement is pointed out to be the play of the mind, and finally movement and stillness are pointed out to be nondual. As with the first pointing out instruction, these introductions are evocative and experiential, rather than theoretical.

Following these contemplations and pointing out instructions, both Terdak Lingpa and the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche offer general advice on studying and practicing the breakthrough teachings, how to advance in practice, and how to identify the obstacles to meditation and apply their respective antidotes. This general advice, followed by a short colophon, concludes the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche's presentation of the Heart Essence teachings. Terdak Lingpa's text continues on with approximately forty pages devoted to the direct leap, four pages to the intermediate states, and three pages to the nirmanakaya pure realms.⁷⁴ He concludes with a short discussion of the profundity of the Heart Essence teachings and their seal of extreme secrecy.

— TEACHING THE HEART ESSENCE —

According to Jamgön Kongtrül, there are three ways to impart the instructions of the Heart Essence: (1) as a system of experiential guidance, (2) as a series of pointing out instructions, and (3) as parting advice to someone on the verge of death. Concerning the first, he writes that those who are

more discursive by nature and enthusiastic about experiencing the ordinary signs of spiritual progress should first practice the yoga of the four elements to prepare for the pointing out instructions. Those who are diligent and inclined towards yogic conduct should begin by practicing the separation of samsara and nirvana. Finally, those who are lazy and inclined towards conceptual analysis should practice the preliminaries of the three gates. Once the practitioner completes the appropriate set of preliminary practices, they may then fruitfully receive the pointing out instructions of the main Heart Essence practices.

In the second approach of imparting the teachings, pointing out instructions are given immediately after bestowing empowerments. This approach is appropriate for those who are karmically ripe for the teachings, i.e., those who have undergone extensive training in previous lifetimes or practiced other systems of meditation prior to encountering the Great Perfection. Here, only the breakthrough and direct leap are taught, though various symbolic introductions may be given to supplement the instructions.

The third approach, Kongtrül writes, can be likened to giving instructions "to someone about to set out on a journey." This refers to the death process. Since the various stages of death are experienced with resistance by those who are not familiar with them, the Heart Essence teachings may be imparted to a dying person so they may recognize and understand what they are experiencing, and thereby use the death process as a way to liberate themselves.⁷⁵

Following this discussion of the various ways one may impart the Heart Essence teachings, Kongtrül goes on to explain how those with differing backgrounds and limitations may approach these instructions. The most complete approach involves a style of training referred to as "maturing guidance" (*smin slob*), in which the practices and instructions are imparted in their entirety. If this is the case, one begins with the common outer and inner preliminaries, before moving on to a set of yogas that relate to the energies and essences of the subtle body. In the next step, one practices the unique preliminaries of the Heart Essence, and then the various stages of breakthrough meditation. Following this is the separation of samsara and nirvana and the key instructions of the direct leap. Each of these steps, he explains, "must be practiced until actual experience has taken birth in one's being."⁷⁶

For those who have already trained in a different form of completion stage practice, a more abbreviated approach may be taken. Such individu-

als may start with whatever form of the outer preliminaries seems appropriate, and then move straight into the preliminaries of the three gates and breakthrough practice. For those whose age prohibits them from practicing the subtle body yogas, or who for whatever reason are not able to derive benefit from these practices, it is permissible to simply omit these yogas. Similarly, it is perfectly fine to teach breakthrough alone to those unfit for the direct leap, such as those with faulty sense faculties. On the other hand, Kongtrül cautions, it is not permissible to skip over breakthrough and teach the direct leap alone.⁷⁷

— THE EXCELLENT CHARIOT —

The teachings contained in this volume build on the instructions found in *Great Perfection: Outer and Inner Preliminaries*, which contains the first half of *The Excellent Chariot*, a profound text compiled by the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche for use at the retreat center of Dzogchen Monastery in eastern Tibet. The first half of *The Excellent Chariot* deals primarily with the outer and inner preliminaries. The second half, presented in this volume, addresses the unique Heart Essence preliminaries and the main Great Perfection practice of breakthrough meditation. In addition to an extensive treatment of these topics, the Third Dzogchen Rinpoche also includes biographies of the lineage masters of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis and general instructions on how to study and practice the Great Perfection.

The Excellent Chariot is a compilation of writings from various Great Perfection masters. While the teachings contained in *Great Perfection: Outer and Inner Preliminaries* were drawn primarily from Longchenpa's *Precious Wish-fulfilling Treasury* and *Resting in the Nature of Mind*, the main sources for the instructions that follow are the root texts of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis, Longchenpa's *Quintessence of the Dakinis*, and Terdak Lingpa's *Illuminating the Profound Path*. The biographies included in this work were taken from Longchenpa's *Precious History of the Treasure*. These sources are among the most authoritative works on the Heart Essence in the entire Nyingma lineage.

As a final note, these instructions are meant to be studied under the guidance of a qualified lineage master. The Great Perfection, moreover, carries a strict seal of secrecy. Its teachings are meant to be studied and practiced

privately, not shared with those who have not received the appropriate transmissions. In *Supreme Wisdom*, Jigmé Lingpa writes:

To eliminate the fault of committing the seventh root downfall, which concerns secret conduct, be sure to [perform these practices] in a place where there is no human activity and where you cannot be seen or heard.⁷⁸

If such a strict injunction is given concerning simply being *seen* practicing the teachings, then it should be obvious that one should not teach or discuss them with others, unless a lineage master has explicitly authorized one to do so. With this in mind, please honor the request made by The Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche in the preceding foreword: Please do not read these teachings unless you have completed the preliminary practices and received pointing out instructions from a qualified lineage master, or have received explicit permission to read this text from such a teacher.

— ACKNOWLEDGMENTS —

This translation project was carried out at the request of the seventh Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, without whose guidance, blessings, and support the translation of this profound text would not have been possible. The very first Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, Namkha Ösel, was a great master of the teachings contained in this book. He was also a clear source of inspiration for the author, as evidenced by the latter's extensive praises of Namkha Ösel in the lineage history chapter of this very work. Throughout their successive incarnations, the Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoches continued to uphold the teachings of the Heart Essence of the Dakinis at Dzogchen Monastery in eastern Tibet, working together with the Dzogchen tulkus to ensure that this profound lineage of teachings and realization remained available to future generations in its purest form.

It is fitting, then, that the seventh incarnation of Namkha Ösel, the current Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, is one of the driving forces in transmitting these teachings to the West. In 2006 and 2007, Rinpoche transmitted the teachings contained in this book in their entirety at the annual Nalandabodhi Sangha retreat in Seattle, Washington. Rinpoche also took