

The Development Stage

By Cortland Dahl

Following the outer and inner preliminary practices, the student will ideally be ready to start the main practices of the Vajra Vehicle: the development stage and completion 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 mandala—a divine palace and the deities that inhabit it. 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. By absorbing one's mind in these visualized appearances and mantric sounds, the habitual tendency to view the mundane world as impure and problematic is progressively refined away. Eventually, one's mind, and then even the body, merges with this divine identity.

Each development stage practice is centered on a particular yidam deity or group of yidam deities. Yidams are not gods, but rather archetypal projections that enable the practitioner to connect with certain aspects of his or her own buddha nature. Manjushri, for example, is the embodiment of wisdom. Thus, imagining oneself to be Manjushri is a skillful way to actualize one's indwelling wisdom. Likewise, one may focus on Avalokiteshvara to develop compassion, Vajrakilaya to overcome obstacles, or Vajrasattva to purify negativity. By repeatedly envisioning oneself as an enlightened being, any lack of confidence in one's own enlightened potential is gradually worn away.

As with the preliminary practices, the development stage begins with an empowerment, reading transmission, and practical instructions. The empowerment one receives depends on the yidam deity one is going to practice. If one has been advised to practice *Gathering of the Masters of Awareness*, for instance, one would receive a specific empowerment for that practice. Likewise, one would also receive a reading transmission for the liturgy, or sadhana, that is used in daily meditation and then instructions on how to do the practice.

Each development stage practice has an associated sadhana—a structured liturgy that guides the meditator step-by-step through the practice.ⁱ Typically, sadhana practice begins with a series of preliminary steps that serve to remind the meditator of the basic principles of the Buddhist path. These preliminary steps consist of cultivating renunciation, taking refuge, and generating bodhichitta. There are also preliminary steps that are unique to the development stage, in which one expels malicious forces, establishes a protective boundary, and then consecrates oneself and the environment by invoking the compassion of the Three Roots—the guru, yidam deity, and Dharma protectors and dakinis.

The main practice opens with the three absorptions. In these three contemplations, the meditator becomes absorbed in emptiness, compassion, and the expression of these two, visualized as a seed syllable. Following this, one will visualize a mandala, with the practitioner imagined to be the deity that resides at its center. Depending on the style of practice, the visualization may be developed in an instant, or constructed in a step-by-step manner.ⁱⁱ Once the visualization is complete, the meditator proceeds to invoke the blessings of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas and to imbue the visualized images with this enlightened energy. One then visualizes the surrounding deities making offerings and praising the central deity (or deities, should there be a pair of deities in union).

When visualizing, there are three main elements that one should not lose sight of: clear appearance, stable pride, and the purity of the visualized imagery. Clear appearance refers to the visualized image of the deity, which should be clear and precise. It is also worth noting that the visualized forms are not solid, corporeal entities, but rather ethereal and made of light. Stable pride indicates that the practitioner should have the confidence that he or she truly *is* the deity. In recollecting the purity of the deity, one recalls that the imagined deity is actually an expression of the mind's enlightened nature.

Once the visualization is clear and stable, one may add the practice of mantra recitation. Each yidam deity has its own mantra, which is recited a certain number of times to complete the practice. Typically, the number of mantras that need to be recited is determined by the number of syllables in the mantra, with one hundred thousand

repetitions for each. Thus, since the mantra of Padmasambhava—OM AH HUM VAJRA GURU PADMA SIDDHI HUM—has twelve syllables, it would be recited 1.2 million times. Depending on the number of deities in the mandala, the practitioner may have to recite numerous additional mantras, though for the surrounding deities the number of mantras that must be accumulated is substantially less.

The final step of development stage practice is the dissolution phase. Here, the visualized mandala is gradually dissolved from without: the external world melts into light and dissolves into the surrounding deities, the surrounding deities dissolve into the central deity, and finally the central deity dissolves into emptiness. The meditator then rests in an open, nonconceptual state. During the post-meditation period, the goal is to experience all forms, sounds, and thoughts as the display of deity, mantra, and wisdom.

When studying the development stage, one typically receives teachings on the sadhana one is going to practice. While most sadhanas have their own instruction manuals, it is also helpful to study works that discuss the general principles of development stage practice. In the Longchen Nyingtik lineage, Jigmé Lingpa's *Ladder to Akanishta* and two texts by Patrül Rinpoche—*Clarifying the Difficult Points in the Development Stage and Deity Yoga* and *Four Stakes That Bind the Life-Force*—are considered authoritative works on this subject.ⁱⁱⁱ

As with the preliminary practices, there are various ways to gauge whether or not one is ready to move on to more advanced forms of practice. Common requirements relate to duration, number of recitations, and experiential signs of success. For the first, one may be instructed to practice for a certain number of months. With the second, one commits to accumulate a set number of mantra recitations. The ideal, however, is to practice until one has experienced the signs of success that are spelled out in the relevant instruction manual. Such signs may manifest in dreams or waking life.

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

ⁱ There are many sadhana practices in the Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse. The three peaceful guru sadhanas are as follows: an outer guru yoga associated with Padmasambhava (Tib. *Lamey Naljor*; *Bla ma'i rnal 'byor*); an inner guru yoga, entitled *Gathering of the Masters of Awareness*, associated with

Padmasambhava and the eight masters of awareness (Tib. *Rigdzin Düpa; Rig 'dzin 'dus pa*); a secret guru yoga, entitled *Great Compassion: The Self-Liberation of Suffering*, associated with Avalokiteshvara (Tib. *Tukjé Chenpo Dukngel Rangdrol; Thugs rje chen pos sdug bsngal rang grol*); and an extremely secret guru yoga associated with Vimalamitra and Longchenpa (Tib. *Tiklé Gyachen; Thig le rgya can*). There are also two wrathful guru sadhanas: *Gathering of Great Glorious Ones*, which is associated with the deities of the Eight Great Sadhanas (Tib. *Palchen Düpa; dPal chen 'dus pa*) and *Takyung Barwa*, which is associated with Hayagriva (Tib. *Takyung Barwa; rTa khyung 'bar ba*). The two feminine sadhanas are *Yumkha Dechen Gyalmo*, which is associated with Yeshé Tsogyal (Tib. *Yum mkha' bde chen rgyal mo*) and *Lion-Faced Dakini* (Tib. *Sengé Dongchen; Seng nge'i gdong chen*). Finally, there is also a sadhana of the one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities, entitled *Cleansing the Lower Realms: The Peaceful and Wrathful Deities* (Tib. *Shi-tro Ngensong Jongwa; Zhi khro ngan song sbyong ba*); a chöd practice, entitled *The Bellowing Laugh of the Dakinis* (Tib. *Khandro Gey Gyang; mKha' 'gro gad rgyangs*); and a Vajrasattva sadhana, entitled *Purifying the Realm of Complete Joy: A Guru Yoga on Vajrasattva* (Tib. *Ngönga Shing Jong; rDo rje sems dpa' la brten pa'i bla ma'i rnal 'byor mngon dga'i zhing sbyong*). The protector practices relate to Magön Chamdrel (Tib. *bKa' srung ma mgon lcam dral*) and the Five Medicine Sisters (Tib. *bKa' srung sman btsun mched lnga*).

ⁱⁱ The gradual approach to visualization is advocated in the Mahayoga teachings. In the Anuyoga and Atiyoga teachings, visualization takes place instantly. See Jigmé Lingpa, *Ladder to Akanishta*, in Jigmé Lingpa, Patrül Rinpoche, and Getse Mahāpaṇḍita, *Deity, Mantra, and Wisdom: Development Stage Meditation in Tibetan Buddhist Tantra* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2006), pp. 24–31 for more details on the different approaches to visualization.

ⁱⁱⁱ These texts have been translated into English and are included in Jigme Lingpa, Patrul Rinpoche, and Getse Mahāpaṇḍita, *Deity, Mantra, and Wisdom*.