

༄༅། །ཉམས་སུ་ལེན་ཚུལ་བསྟན་པའི་དོ་རྒྱུད་ཐོལ་སྤྱོད་
ཐར་པའི་ཐེམ་སྒྲུབ།

Stairway to Liberation: A Spontaneous Vajra Song Summarizing How to Practice

Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo



KHYENTSE VISION
PROJECT

nyams su len tshul bsdus pa'i rdo rje'i thol glu thar pa'i them skas

B1494

Kabum, vol. 22 (za), 625.1–626.5, Dzongsar 2014.

Translated by Lopön Sonam Jamtsho. The translation was completed under the patronage of Khyentse Foundation and the supervision of Khyentse Vision Project.

Published 2023

Version 1

Generated from KVP's reading room on 19-Nov-2023

Khyentse Vision Project: Translating the Works of
Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

STAIRWAY TO LIBERATION

NOTES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

GLOSSARY

INTRODUCTION

As one can infer from the title of this text, *A Spontaneous Vajra Song Summarizing How to Practice*, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo here presents a spectrum of the most fundamental aspects of Tibetan Buddhist practice in a condensed form. It is written in a direct and accessible manner without much literary embellishment. It presents an essential set of instructions on the path toward enlightenment, understood by Tibetan Buddhists as including the three vehicles—namely, Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna—with graduating levels of practice.

This text is a vajra song (*dorje lu*), which is one of the most inspiring literary genres of Tibet’s spiritual legacy, descending from or at least inspired by the *dohā* tradition of Indian mystics. Not being constrained by the formal rules of poetic composition, vajra songs are differentiated from formal poetic verses by their freestyle expression. They showcase such characteristics as simplicity, directness, and spiritual depth.

Among the vajra songs in the Tibetan tradition, a particularly well-known and universally loved example can be found in the *gurma* songs attributed to Milarepa (eleventh/early twelfth century), which were compiled and organized in their current form in the fifteenth century by Sangye Gyaltsen. While the precise relationship between *gurma* and the *dorje lu* is hard to delineate without a close reading, in terms of their contents most—though not all—vajra songs deal with subjects that are tantric in nature.¹

The first verse of Khyentse Wangpo’s *Vajra Song* consists of a customary obeisance to one’s guru and the author’s pledge to compose the text. The next verse presents a series of contemplations, based on the theme of the four thoughts that turn the mind to the Dharma. Being reflections on the first two noble truths, they are meant to inspire renunciation and instill commitment to the path. This is followed by going for refuge, the cultivation of bodhicitta, meditation and mantra

recitation connected with Vajrasattva as a purificatory practice, and gathering the two accumulations. These comprise the contents of what are widely known as the preliminary practices.

Khyentse Wangpo then presents the meditative visualization connected with the two stages of Vajrayāna, that is, the generation stage and the completion stage. His instructions on these are contextualized and related to the daily mundane tasks of practitioners, like sleeping, dreaming, waking, eating, and drinking. He also briefly provides instructions on how to cultivate spiritual insight during and after formal meditation sessions. A contextual and close reading suggests that some of these instructions are connected to the four intermediate states.

In the end, the author describes how the practitioner should dedicate their merit and make aspirations, including inspiring lines that draw on the mind-training tradition. The final stanza identifies this work, a spontaneous song that simply “escaped,” as being intended for beings of lesser acumen.

ཐར་པའི་ཐེམ་སྒྲུབ།

Stairway to Liberation

Aho!

Having prostrated to the Lord of the Maṇḍala,
Who does not abide in existence or peace, has attained the enlightened qualities,
And possesses the body of great indivisible union,
I will briefly teach on the ways of practice.

First, contemplate the difficulties of obtaining a precious human life,
That it is easily destroyed,
And that at that moment² one is led by karma—
In that way, meditate on the suffering that one experiences in this round.

After that, go for refuge,
Generate aspirational and engaged bodhicitta,
Practice visualization and recitation of Vajrasattva,
And exert yourself in the skillful means of accomplishing the two accumulations.³

The main practice comprises both the generation and completion stages.
Begin with visualization of the guru on your crown,
Supplicate, and receive the four empowerments.
Purify the duality of appearances and emptiness in the great freedom from grasping,
And after that dissolve the guru into your heart.
In the state of naked awareness and emptiness,
Look at the natural face of the glorious guru.

When falling asleep, the world and beings are luminous;
Focus your awareness on an A syllable at your heart,
And maintain the luminosity of the four emptinesses.
When waking, think that you are roused by the musical sound
Of bliss and emptiness of vidyādhara and dākinī.

Offer food and drinks as a feast, [626]
Rest in meditative equipoise free of fabrication,
And enjoy the post-meditative state, knowing it to be illusory.
Purify daytime appearances as great bliss,
And examine the craving for rebirth, knowing it with certainty.
Purify nocturnal appearances in great emptiness,
And examine the time of death, knowing it with certainty.
Purify dreams in great non-arising,
And examine the period of the intermediate state, knowing it with certainty.

Take these practices as the path,
And afterward connect them with the dedication
Without reference to the three perfectly pure spheres.
Make aspirations to fully liberate
All who see, hear, remember, or are aware of you.
Always remain without attachment to yourself
And be free from anger toward others.
Behave with equanimity toward both.

When happy, dedicate it for the sake of sentient beings.
When sad, take on the suffering of those with ordinary bodies.
A neutral state⁴ is a cause for meditative equipoise.
Whatever the case, the two accumulations will increase.
Thus, it is suitable to always be diligent.

In order to benefit those with little intelligence,
A few words condensed in meaning
Were taken as a vajra song.
As a result, may all beings attain supreme enlightenment.⁵

NOTES

1. For comprehensive samples of *gurma* (*mgur ma*) or *gurlu* (*mgur glu*) and *zhal dam* (*zhal gdams*) from the seventh century until the middle of the twentieth century, see Lha Lamé Jangchub et al., *zhal gdams dang mgur glu gces btus*. For a learned examination of the evolution of Tibetan *gurlu* over the centuries, see Döndrub Gyal, *bod kyi mgur glu byung 'phel gyi lo rgyus dang khyad chos bsdus par ston pa rig pa'i khye'u rnam par rtsen pa'i skyed tshal*, 316.
2. The Tibetan temporal marker *de tshé* can be understood here as referring to the moment of death.
3. Although it is not explicit, from the general context one can surmise that this refers to the practice of maṇḍala offering.
4. That is, between happiness and sadness.
5. There is no colophon for this text, and the author's name is not mentioned.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Source Texts

- Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. *nyams su len tshul bsdus pa'i rdo rje'i thol glu thar pa'i them skas*.
In *mkhyen brtse'i dbang po'i bka' 'bum*, vol. 13, 138–39. Dzongsar: rdzong sar dgon
pa'i par khang, 1919.
- Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. *nyams su len tshul bsdus pa'i rdo rje'i thol glu thar pa'i them skas*.
In *mkhyen brtse'i dbang po'i bka' 'bum*, vol. 22, 605–7. Gangtok: Gonpo Tseten,
1977–1980.
- Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. *nyams su len tshul bsdus pa'i rdo rje'i thol glu thar pa'i them skas*.
In *mkhyen brtse'i dbang po'i bka' 'bum*, vol. 22, 625–26. Dzongsar: rdzong sar blo gros
phun tshogs, 2014.

Tibetan Sources

- Lha Lamé Jangchub (lha bla ma'i byang chub) et al. *zhal gdams dang mgur glu gces btus*. bod
kyi gtsug lag zhib dpyod khang. Delhi: Institute of Tibetan Classics, 2014.
- Döndrub Gyal (don grub rgyal). *bod kyi mgur glu byung 'phel gyi lo rgyus dang khyad chos
bsdus par ston pa rig pa'i khye'u rnam par rtzen pa'i skyed tshal*. In *don grub rgyal gyi
gsung 'bum*, vol. 3. Beijing: mi rigs dpe bskrun khang, 1997.

GLOSSARY

aspirational bodhicitta

སྒྲོན་པ་སེམས་བསྐྱེད། • *smon pa sems bskyed* • bodhipraṇidhicitta

The wish to attain enlightenment to help others.

engaged bodhicitta

འབྲུག་པ་སེམས་བསྐྱེད། • *'jug pa sems bskyed* • bodhiprathāṇacitta

Actively working to become enlightened by engaging with the six perfections.

existence or peace

སྤིད་ཞི། • *srid zhi*

Synonymous with saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.

feast

རྫོགས་ཀྱི་འཁོར་ལོ། • *tshogs kyi 'khor lo* • gaṇacakra

Literally, “wheel of gathering.” By offering a banquet to the invited deities, the practitioner accumulates merit and wisdom.

four empowerments

དབང་བཞི། • *dbang bzhi*

The vase, secret, wisdom-knowledge, and word empowerments.

four emptinesses

སྟོང་པ་བཞི། • *stong pa bzhi*

The four emptinesses are the empty, the extremely empty, the great empty, and the all-empty. These are related to the experiences of tantric meditation, manipulating the subtle bodies, and when the meditators can access progressively subtler states of consciousness.

four thoughts that turn the mind

བློ་ཕྱོག་རྣམ་བཞི། • *blo ldog rnam bzhi*

A series of contemplations on one's existence, primarily understood as basic insights into suffering, impermanence, and ethics.

gurma

མགུར་མ། • *mgur ma*

A song of spiritual realization.

Lord of the Maṇḍala

འཁོར་ལོ་འི་མགོན་པོ། • *'khor lo'i mgon po* • Cakranātha

Used for a bodhisattva at the center of the maṇḍala, or as an epithet for one's tantric root guru, signifying their central place and fundamental importance in the Vajrayāna worldview.

preliminary practices

སྔོན་འགྲེའི་ཉམས་ལེན། • *sngon 'gro'i nyams len*

Meditative practice and ethical reflections comprising the foundational practices of Vajrayāna.

Sangye Gyaltsen

སངས་རྒྱལ་རྒྱལ་མཚན། • *sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan*

Also known as Tsangnyön Heruka, or the “Madman of Tsang,” the crazy yogi Sangye Gyaltsen (1452–1507) authored the widely treasured biography of Milarepa.

three spheres

འཁོར་གསུམ། • *'khor gsum*

The object of dedication, the action of dedication, and the one making the dedication.

two accumulations

ཚོགས་གཉིས། • *tshogs gnyis* • sambhāradvaya

The heaps of merit and wisdom, regarded as the key to liberating insight in Mahāyāna soteriological theory.

vajra song

རྫོེ་ཁྲུ། • *rdo rje glu*

A spontaneously arising song expressing strong emotion and often communicating and evoking realization.