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A Summary of the
Essential Instructions on the Three
Excellences

Zabtik Drölma
Profound Essence of Tārā
Revealed by Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa

Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo



KHYENTSE VISION
PROJECT

legs so gsum gyi don kbrid kyi bsdu don

B844

Kabum, vol. 15 (ba), 160.6–163.5, Dzongsar 2014.

This text was translated by Maitri Yarnell. I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Catherine Dalton for her suggestions, and especially to Lama Tenzin Zangpo for clarifying the meaning of some difficult points. I dedicate this translation to the long life and activity of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, whose kindness illuminates my life with the light of Dharma. Reviewed by Shey Rigel. Edited by Albion M. Butters. This translation was completed under the patronage of Khyentse Foundation and the supervision of Khyentse Vision Project.

First Published 2025

Version 1

Generated from KVP's reading room on 20-Apr-2026

Khyentse Vision Project: Translating the Works of
Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

This composition is an annotated structural outline of the famous mind treasure received by Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa in a direct vision of Noble Tārā. One morning at dawn, when he was staying at the Lotus Crystal Cave (Pema Shelpuk), the great treasure revealer beheld Tārā in the sky before him. Upon her uttering of the phrase “Excellent, excellent, excellent!”¹ the treasure, which was originally spoken by Padmasambhava, unfolded from the expanse of Chokgyur Lingpa’s mind.² This blessing opened his ability to transcribe the root verses of the *Profound Essence of Tārā* (Zabtik Drölma) mind treasure.³

The series of instructions from Chokgyur Lingpa’s visionary transmission is known as the *Essential Instructions on the Three Excellences*. He initially transmitted this work only to Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, who later conferred it on Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Taye. Jamgön Kongtrul in turn composed an extensive commentary on the root treasure, known as *The Essence of the Two Attainments: A Clarification of the Essential Instructions on the Three Excellences*.⁴ This has been published in English as the book *Skillful Grace: Tara Practice for Our Times*, which also features teachings on the treasure text by Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche and Adeu Rinpoche.

The outline here serves as reference material to the *Essential Instructions on the Three Excellences*, featuring numerous but very brief annotations by Khyentse Wangpo. In nearly every case, they serve to indicate the opening words of the relevant passage in the root text. This type of text could have served multiple purposes. Monica Thunder suggests that it was likely intended by Khyentse Wangpo as a guideline for the commentary on the root text that Jamgön Kongtrul would later compose.⁵ If this is indeed the case, it would support dating the present work to 1871, when Jamgön Kongtrul received teachings on the *Profound Essence of Tārā* from Khyentse Wangpo.⁶

In this translation, Khyentse Wangpo’s citations are given in parentheses alongside their corresponding subheading in the structural outline form, so as not to burden the

reader with exceedingly copious footnotes. The text in quotation marks refers to passages from the treasure text itself.

ལེགས་སྐྱོ་གསུམ་གྱི་དོན་ཁྲིད་བསྟུས་དོན།

A Summary of the *Essential Instructions on the Three Excellences*

*Namo gurubhyaḥ!*⁷

The *Essential Instructions on the Three Excellences* of the Profound Essence of Tārā mind treasure [161] has two parts: a history and the actual instructions. As for the actual instructions, there is a brief presentation (2.1), starting with “the first excellence,”⁸ followed by an extensive explanation (2.2). This includes the preliminary practices (2.2.1), starting with “those,” followed by putting the instructions into practice (2.2.2), which involves the three excellences.

The first excellence (2.2.2.1), the initial goodness, includes instructions on the preliminary vehicles of gods and humans, śrāvakas, and pratyekabuddhas. It is divided into the path of the vehicle of gods and humans shared by beings of lesser capacity (2.2.2.1.1), starting with “then, the practice,” and the path of the vehicles of śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas shared by beings of middling capacity (2.2.2.1.2), starting with “the higher realms...”

The second excellence (2.2.2.2), the intermediate goodness, has instructions on the Mahāyāna in general. This explains how to train the mind in relative bodhicitta (2.2.2.2.1), starting with “those who suffer,” and how to cultivate ultimate bodhicitta through calm abiding and special insight (2.2.2.2.2). The latter has three aspects: cultivating calm abiding (2.2.2.2.2.1), the support, starting with “in particular”; seeking special insight (2.2.2.2.2.2), the supported, starting with “their”; and practicing both of these together (2.2.2.2.2.3), starting with “indivisible...” [162]

The third excellence (2.2.2.3), the final goodness, explains how to train in Vajrayāna, the swift, uncommon path. It has three parts: the approach according to outer Kriyā and Caryā (2.2.2.3.1), starting with “phenomena”; the accomplishment according to inner Yoga Tantra (2.2.2.3.2), starting with “according to the inner”; and the application of activity through great accomplishment according to secret Anuttarayoga (2.2.2.3.3). The latter is divided into two: special preliminaries (2.2.2.3.3.1), starting with “the special secret,” and specifics on the four yogas of the main practice (2.2.2.3.3.2).⁹

Initial yoga (2.2.2.3.3.2.1) is the development stage, starting with “then, great accomplishment...”

Subsequent yoga (2.2.2.3.3.2.2) is the path of liberation through discriminative awareness, maintaining the view at the time of the cause. This is done by focusing the mind through methods (2.2.2.3.3.2.2.1), starting with “the crucial points of the body,”¹⁰ and maintaining the innate state (2.2.2.3.3.2.2.2), starting with “being familiar with that...”

Surpassing yoga¹¹ (2.2.2.3.3.2.3) is the path ascertained through skillful means. It has three parts: the preliminary training of the winds (2.2.2.3.3.2.3.1), starting with “merging”; the main practice (2.2.2.3.3.2.3.2), relying upon the swift path of the consort, starting with “the channels and winds”; and enhancing with the warmth of inner heat (2.2.2.3.3.2.3.3), starting with “enhancing...” [163]

Great yoga (2.2.2.3.3.2.4) is the completion stage of luminosity without characteristics. It has three parts: establishing the support (2.2.2.3.3.2.4.1), starting with “TAM in the heart center”; stabilizing that with the vase of the heart (2.2.2.3.3.2.4.2), starting with “breathing”; and actual equipoise in luminosity (2.2.2.3.3.2.4.3), both real and based on a model as support, starting with “self-arising...”

The final part of the instructions (2.3) provides a summary of the way in which the result is accomplished, starting with “that which indicates...”

In regard to this presentation of the four yogas, during the completion stage of Tārāyoginī practice in the New Translation tradition,¹² everything from the yoga of inner heat onward is designated as the “great yoga.”¹³ Although inner heat is called the “yoga of indestructible body,” gathering the subtle essences of the world and its inhabitants is called the “yoga of indestructible speech,” and stabilization through focusing the mind on the vital drop¹⁴ and through breathing practice is called the “yoga of indestructible mind,” they are identical to the presentation here in terms of their key points.

*This was written by the servant who delights the Lake-Born Guru, Pema Ösal Do Ngak Lingpa. Śubham.*¹⁵

NOTES

1. Extensive, systematic meditation modules on the contents of this treasure can be found as part of Tara's Triple Excellence Online Meditation Program at <https://dharmafun.org/tte/>.
2. Chokgyur Lingpa, *dgongs gter sgrol ma'i zab tig las slob ma rjes su bzung ba*.
3. See Kyabgön Phakchok Rinpoche et al., *Great Tertön*, 263. When visiting Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Taye after his revelation, Chokgyur Lingpa saw a statue of Ārya Tārā that Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo had received from a treasure guardian many years before. Regarding this statue and the text that was revealed along with it, see Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's *Root Vajra Verses from the Heart Essence of Ārya Tārā* (*rje btsun sgrol ma'i snying tig las/ rtsa ba rdo rje'i tshig rkang*), KVP D109.
4. Jamgön Kongtrul, *dgongs gter sgrol ma'i zab tig las/ legs so gsum gyi don kbrid gsal bar bkod pa grub gnyis thig le*.
5. For this hypothesis regarding the outline (*sa bcad*), as well as the wider context of the root text and its commentaries, see Thunder, "Connecting with the deity in *The Profound Essence of Tārā*," 12.
6. Thunder, "Connecting with the deity in *The Profound Essence of Tārā*," 44.
7. "Homage to the gurus!"
8. The translation in parentheses here and below is based on Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's extracts from the treasure text, not the existing English translation *Skillful Grace*.
9. It should be noted that this presentation differs from the more common Nyingma scheme of four yogas: the "outer" yogas, Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga. Needless to say, it also differs from the four yogas taught in the tradition of Mahāmudrā (*phyag chen gyi rnal 'byor bzhi*). This presentation of the four yogas resembles that given by Jamgön Kongtrül (*Elements of Tantric Practice*, 149) in his discussion of the completion stage. He calls it "common," in that it can be used for any range of creation stage practices, but he connects it specifically with Red Yamāri (*gshin rje gshed dmar*), as well as Black Yamāri and Vajrabhairava.
10. Miller ("Secrets of the Vajra Body," 93) translates *lus gnad* as "essential point of the body," being a term that is related specifically to physical posture.

11. The Tibetan term used here (*shin tu rnal 'byor*) is commonly correlated with Atiyoga. To avoid potential confusion with that classification in relation to Dzogchen, in the current work an English rendering of the technical meaning is used. The path of skillful means being discussed under this heading pertains more to Anuyoga; in fact, all four yogas discussed here may be considered Anuyoga.
12. Tārāyoginī is one of seven mother tantras discussed in Jamgön Kongtrül's presentation of completion stage in the *shes bya mtha' yas pa'i rgya mtsho*. See Kongtrül, *Elements of Tantric Practice*, 6, 187–89: *shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, 243–44: *bdun pa sgrol ma rnal 'byor ma'i rdzogs rim ni/sgrol ma 'byung bar rnal 'byor bzhi gsungs te/rnal 'byor dang po bskyed rim 'khor bcas yin/rjes su rnal 'byor sngon 'gro dngos gzhi gnyis/rnal 'byor che la mi shigs gsum dang ldan/rnal 'byor ma'i rgyud kyi rgyal po sgrol ma 'dus pa don dam pa phrin las thams cad 'byung ba las rnal 'byor bzhi'i rim pa gsungs pa'i rnal 'byor dang po ni bskyed pa'i rim pa 'khor dang bcas pa yin la/rdzogs rim gyi sger chos rgyud kyi dngos bstan sdig pa sreg pa dang/ bar chad zlog pa dang/ byin rlabs 'jug pa'i rnal 'byor ces bya ba'i bskyed rim sngon du song nas rdzogs rim dngos la rjes su rnal 'byor/ shin tu rnal 'byor rnal 'byor chen po gsum/ rjes su rnal 'byor la sngon 'gro zhi gnas kyi ting nge 'dzin bsgrub/ dngos gzhi rang bzbin dag pa'i de kho na nyid la mnyam par bzhag/ a yig la sogs pa gzungs kyi sgo dgu dang/ mi mthun phyogs gsal ba bdud gzhom pa'i rnal 'byor gyis 'bogs 'don/ shin tu rnal 'byor la sngon 'gro dngos dbyung la sogs pa rlung sbyor lnga yis lam sbyang/ dngos gzhi yi ge lnga'i las kyiis dga' bzhi'i ye shes brtan par byed/ rnal 'byor chen po la lus mi shigs pa'i rnal 'byor/ ngag mi shigs pa'i rnal 'byor/ sems mi shigs pa'i rnal 'byor gsum gyis sgo gsum rdo rjer sgrub pa ste//.*
13. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo makes this point because in the presentation directly above, which is based on the *Essential Instructions on the Three Excellences*, inner heat is located in the phase of surpassing yoga, not great yoga.
14. Adeu Rinpoche (*Skillful Grace*, 169) explains, “The key point of mind is to focus on the sphere of light comprised of the five pure essences situated in the center of the heart.”
15. “Goodness!”

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GLOSSARY

accomplishment

སྒྲུབ་པ། • *sgrub pa*

The attainment of a specified spiritual goal through practice. As a term related specifically to practice, it is the third of the four branches of approach and accomplishment, and entails absorbing accomplishments from the deity, who embodies all the sugatas of the ten directions.

Anuttarayoga

བླ་མེད་ཀྱི་རྒྱུད། • *bla med kyi rgyud* • anuttarayoga

The highest classification of Buddhist tantra according to the New Translation school of Tibet.

approach

སྟེན་པ། • *snyen pa*

This stage of approaching the deity in tantric practice is the first of the four branches of approach and accomplishment, and it involves visualizing and supplicating the deity by reciting the mantra.

breathing practice

རླུང་གི་སྦྱོར་བ། • *rlung gi sbyor ba* • *prāṇāyāma*

Literally, “breath yoga.” This refers to specific exercises of controlling the breath and moving the inner winds (*prāṇāyāma*).

calm abiding

ཞི་གནས། • *zhi gnas* • *śamatha*

A meditative state of mental stability and focus free from distraction.

Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa

མཚོག་གྱུར་བདེ་ཆེན་གླིང་པ། • *mchog gyur bde chen gling pa*

Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa (1829–1870) was a great treasure revealer and contemporary of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo and Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Taye, who also received the seven transmissions. [BDRC P564](#). [TOL 8181](#).

completion stage

རྫོགས་རིམ། • *rdzogs rim* • saṃpannakrama

Also called “perfection stage,” this is the second of the two stages of Vajrayāna practice focused on the dissolution of a visualized tantric maṇḍala and its deities, and on the yogic practices of the channels, winds, and essences.

crucial points

ལུས་གནད། • *lus gnad*

This term refers to body posture and identifying essential points related to various yogic practices (e.g., *caṇḍālī*; *tummo*). It is found in the writings of Nāropa, and thus it is particularly important in the Kagyu tradition.

cultivation

སྒོམ་པ། • *sgom pa* • bhāvanā

Cultivation, familiarization, concentration, or meditation, depending upon the context.

development stage

བསྐྱེད་རིམ། • *bskyed rim* • utpattikrama

A principal phase of tantric practice focusing on deity visualization, mantra recitation, and pure perception, preparing the ground for the completion stage.

goodness

དགེ་བ། • *dge ba*

Often translated as “virtue,” this term refers to wholesome, positive states of mind or actions that ripen in happiness.

great accomplishment

སྒྲུབ་ཆེན། • *sgrub chen*

As a term related specifically to practice, it refers to the fourth of the four branches of approach and accomplishment; it entails merging inseparably with the deity, attaining ultimate realization of primordial purity, and enacting the all-encompassing activities for the benefit of beings through elaborate ritual ceremonies.

great yoga

རྣལ་འབྱོར་ཆེན་པོ། • *rnal 'byor chen po*

Also known as “wisdom yoga,” this is the fourth part of the perfection stage in certain tantric systems. According to Jamgön Kongtrul, it has three aspects: (1) preliminary practices to bring about the dissolution of the subtle and coarse constituents in the central channel, (2) the main practice of applying the illusory body and luminous clarity as union, and (3) the supplementary practice of implementing negative conditions on the path.

initial yoga

དང་པོའི་རྣལ་འབྱོར། • *dang po'i rnal 'byor*

The first part of the perfection stage in certain tantric systems. According to Jamgön Kongtrul, it comprises three stages: self-consecration, consecrating appearances, and consecrating the union.

inner heat

གདུམ་མོ། • *gtum mo* • caṇḍālī

An advanced completion stage practice that generates psychic heat and unites bliss with emptiness.

Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Taye

འཇམ་གཞིན་ཀོང་ལྷ་བློ་བློ་མཐའ་ཡས། • *'jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas*

Jamgön Kongtrul (1813–1899) was, together with Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, largely responsible for the Rimé nonsectarian movement that would preserve an enormous amount of Buddhist lineages and teachings in Tibet. He was both a teacher and a disciple of Khyentse Wangpo, and famous for his work on the Five Treasuries. [BDRC 264](#).

[TOL 4358](#).

Lotus Crystal Cave

པདྨ་ཤེལ་ཕུག། • *pad+ma shel phug*

One of the twenty-five sacred places of East Tibet, and the ninth of the thirty-seven treasure sites, the Lotus Crystal Cave near Dzongsar Monastery is said to have been blessed by Garab Dorje, Śrī Simha, Guru Rinpoche, and Vairotsana.

method

ཐབས། • *thabs* • upāya

Skillful means employed by bodhisattvas to guide beings toward enlightenment.

preliminaries

སྒྲུབ་འགོ། • *sngon 'gro*

Preparatory practices that establish the foundation for advanced meditation.

relative bodhicitta

ཀུན་རྩོབ་བྱང་སེམས། • *kun rdzob byang sems*

The aspiration and engagement to attain awakening for the benefit of all beings within conventional reality.

self-arising

རང་བྱུང་། • *rang byung* • svayambhū

That which arises of itself, without any external cause. In Dzogchen texts, this term often refers to innate, natural awareness (*rang rik*).

special insight

ལྷག་མཐོང་། • *lhag mthong* • vipaśyanā

Penetrating insight into the nature of phenomena, cultivated in union with calm abiding.

subsequent yoga

རྗེས་སུ་རྣམ་འབྱོར། • *rjes su rnal 'byor* • anuyoga

Also known as “mantra yoga” or “subsequent yoga,” this is the second part of the perfection stage in certain tantric systems. According to Jamgön Kongtrul, it comprises the main practice of working with the subtle energies, the auxiliary practices consisting of the transference of consciousness, and the transference of consciousness to one’s master. As it emphasizes wisdom over skillful means, its view is that liberation is attained through

growing accustomed to the insight into the nondual nature of space and wisdom, and its maṇḍala is understood as contained within the vajra body.

surpassing yoga

ཤིན་ཏུ་རྣལ་འབྱོར། • *shin tu rnal 'byor* • atiyoga

Also known as “consecration yoga,” this is the third part of the perfection stage in certain tantric systems. According to Jamgön Kongtrul, it comprises practice of one’s own body as method and another’s body as wisdom.

three excellences

ལེགས་པོ་གསུམ། • *legs so gsum*

The three excellences encompass a series of instructions revealed as a mind treasure by Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa based on a vision of the Noble Lady Tārā. This treasure cycle is known as the Profound Essence of Tārā (Zabtik Drölma). Respectively, the three excellences refer to the virtuous practices of the vehicles of gods and humans, śrāvakas, and pratyekabuddhas; those of the Mahāyāna; and those of the Vajrayāna.

ultimate bodhicitta

དོན་དམ་བྱང་སེམས། • *don dam byang sems*

Direct realization of emptiness, the ultimate expression of enlightened mind.

vase of the heart

སྙིང་གི་བྲམ། • *snying gi bum*

This refers to a practice of surpassing yoga during the completion stage involving the winds of the energy body.

vital drop

ཐིག་ལེ། • *thig le* • bindu

Literally, “drop.” The bindu can refer to the sign appearing above certain seed syllables or, in more esoteric contexts, a ball of energy, sphere of light, or seminal drop.

yoga of indestructible body

ལུས་མི་ཤིགས་པའི་རྣལ་འབྱོར། • *lus mi shigs pa'i rnal 'byor*

A yoga practice cultivating the vajra body.

yoga of indestructible mind

ཡིད་མི་ཤིགས་པའི་རྣལ་འབྱོར། • *yid mi shigs pa'i rnal 'byor*

A yoga practice focusing on the vajra mind.

yoga of indestructible speech

ངག་མི་ཤིགས་པའི་རྣལ་འབྱོར། • *ngag mi shigs pa'i rnal 'byor*

A yoga practice aimed at perfecting the vajra speech aspect of awakening.