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The Self-Liberation of Saṃsāra and  
Nirvāṇa: A Spontaneous Vajra Song about  
Taking as the Path the Yogic Discipline of  
the Profound Severance of Demons

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KHYENTSE VISION  
PROJECT

*zab mo bdud kyi gcod yul dang 'brel ba'i brtul zbugs lam khyer gyi rdo rje'i thol glu 'kbor 'das rang grol*

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Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

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## INTRODUCTION

This pithy text, written in verse in the form of a vajra song, contains a set of practical instructions for severance (*chöd*), the profound application of the intent of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras. This teaching is given in the form of a “spontaneous vajra song,” a poetic form used widely throughout Tibet for conveying practical instructions and pithy insights in an applicable and inspiring manner. This form has its roots in India, in the vajra songs of the great mahāsiddhas such as Saraha, Tilopa, and Naropa. It is a succinct text delivering practical instructions. As such, there is little philosophical discussion or argumentation. Rather, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo gets straight to the issue of how to apply the teachings of Severance in the beginning, middle, and end.

The text stems from the Severance tradition’s larger body of literature, the core of which consists of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras and the compiled teachings of the eleventh-century female siddha Machik Labdrön, the founder of Severance as we know it. In composing this text, Khyentse Wangpo draws on the pith instructions contained in this literature and combines them with his own realization, as he explains in his closing lines.

The text follows a traditional structure and is divided into three parts. It opens with two introductory verses through which the author pays homage and makes the pledge to compose. This is followed by the first section, an explanation of the preparatory stages of the path, namely, the four thoughts that turn the mind to the Dharma, and the four foundational practices of refuge, bodhicitta, guru yoga, and maṇḍala offering. The second section concerns the main part of the practice, the view of Prajñāpāramitā, how to recognize and train in this, and how to sever the four “demons” into “fixation-free space.” The third and final section deals with the stages of post-equipose, principally, the practice of casting away the body aggregate as food through the four distributions, a practice that is performed in order to enhance the

main part. Khyentse Wangpo explains the various upheavals and evidence or signs of success the practitioner might experience, and then concludes with a dedication, aspiration, and colophon.

འཁོར་འདས་རང་གྲོལ།

## The Self-Liberation of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa

A HO!

Dharmakāya, Prajñāpāramitā;  
Sambhogakāya, Vajrayoginī;  
Their unity, nirmāṇakāya display—Labkyi Drönma,<sup>1</sup>  
I pay homage to you!

To bring benefit to those of great good fortune,  
I shall sing this vajra song,  
A distillation of the sacred Dharma's very essence  
Known as the Severance of Demons, the teaching you yourself taught.

### **The Preparatory Stages of the Path**

To begin with, reflect upon this body, a support that has the freedoms.  
Such a support is exceptionally hard to attain,  
But, once attained, it can ferry you to saṃsāra's farthest shore.  
Such is its value, its potential worth.  
Moreover, since the time of our death is uncertain,  
We must ensure we do not let this opportunity go to waste.  
To this end, we must contemplate how at the time of death  
We will be towed along by cause and effect, our positive and negative deeds.  
Thus, we must galvanize our minds with renunciation  
Of the aggregates that contain the mass of saṃsāra's suffering. [436]

From now until complete awakening,  
Hold in your heart the refuge  
Of the guru and the Three Jewels.  
With the wish to attain buddhahood for all others' sake,  
Rouse aspiring and applied bodhicitta.  
In particular, train in the profound practice of guru yoga  
As this is the foundation from which all excellent qualities,  
Both common and uncommon, arise.  
Thereby invoke the guru's wisdom with wholehearted faith  
And, right there as you sit, receive all four empowerments.  
Offer the guru your body, your enjoyments, and your possessions  
As a maṇḍala free from the three conceptual spheres.  
Pray that you may cut directly through hope and fear;  
That clinging to saṃsāra and nirvāṇa may be self-liberated;  
And that, in the continuity of the unmodified natural state,  
You may capture the stronghold of victory.

These are the preliminaries of the path.  
Unless they take birth within you in a genuine and lasting way,  
Experience of the main part of practice will not arise in you—  
Drop your platitudes and apply yourself, get to the vital point!

This concludes the discussion of the preparatory stages of the path, the first part of *The Self-Liberation of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa: A Spontaneous Vajra Song about Taking as the Path the Yogic Discipline of the Profound Severance of Demons*.

### **The Main Part of the Practice**

The main part is the Noble Lady,  
The primordial innate mother of all victorious ones,  
Prajñāpāramitā.  
She abides naturally in the hearts of all beings.  
However, she is veiled by the stains  
Of adventitious confusion, and so remains unseen.  
So that you may meet her, directly and immediately,  
First of all, examine in the following way:

For the crucial point of body, assume the sevenfold posture of Vairocana; [437]  
For the crucial point of speech, let your vital winds move naturally;  
For the crucial point of mind, examine and analyze  
The mind's arising, abiding, and ceasing, and its color and shape.  
When you search for mind in this way and do not find it,

And you see that mind has no established reality,  
Then, in order to draw closer to resolving the natural state,  
Let be without modifying, naturally at rest.

Then, to engage in the essential practice  
Using opening the sky door,<sup>2</sup>  
You need first to gain recognition through the instructions on the essential  
meaning,  
Then arrive at certainty through instructions on the words,  
And finally sustain the practice through the experiential instructions.

Regarding the first point, undistracted awareness:  
Hold steadfast in the state of natural clarity,  
Then relax into basic space beyond ordinary mind.  
Rest in the basic state devoid of reference points and deliberate activity;  
No modifying, no fabricating—just rest naturally.  
Be confident that the teacher’s instruction is itself  
The shared intent of both Sūtra and Tantra.

When you see that name and form, sensations,  
Perceptions, conditioned factors, and thinking  
Are all, in ultimate truth, void of concepts,  
It is the perfection of wisdom you are seeing.

This is demonstrated by the following explanation  
From the *Collection of Precious Qualities*:

What is taught throughout the infinite ocean of scriptures  
Is taught as well by the wisdom *ḍākinīs* in this way:  
When one does nothing whatsoever with the mind,  
Habitual tendencies do not arise and the stages and paths are perfected.

Through explanations such as these, with the pith instructions,  
And through the guidance of one’s teacher, certainty is gained.  
Having gained recognition in this way, [438]  
The basic space of self-awareness that is void of designation or thought—  
Primordial spontaneous presence—is seen.  
This is the teacher as confidence gained through experience.<sup>3</sup>

By cultivating the meaning realized through this approach,  
The supreme fruition is attained.  
To that end, in a solitary place free from distraction and bustle,  
Train one-pointedly in equipoise in the innate state.



In post-equipoise, view appearances as illusions.

At all times, self-awareness is the dynamic expression transcending ordinary mind.

It arises unobstructedly yet is devoid of real things.

This being so, equipoise and post-equipoise are inseparable.

They are brought to perfection in supreme unity.

At this point, the four demons—exaltation, inflation,

The tangible, and the intangible—

Will spring forth abruptly. Immediately utter PHAT,

Thereby severing them into fixation-free space.

This concludes the discussion of the stages of the main part of the practice, the second part of *The Self-Liberation of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa: A Spontaneous Vajra Song about Taking as the Path the Yogic Discipline of the Profound Severance of Demons*.

### **The Stages of Post-Equipoise**

Next, through direct subjugation,

Adverse circumstances are devoured on the path as one taste—

A forceful catalyst for the birth of experience and realization.

This is the secret enhancement conduct, to be practiced as follows.

Go to desolate valleys, temples, charnel grounds, and the like,

To places that induce terror and fear;

There, at night, when god-demons congregate,<sup>4</sup>

Summon forth all vagrant spirits of place, all spirits of body,

All earth lords, nāgas, and nyens.<sup>5</sup>

Summon forth all such beings, herd them

To a place of focus, and dissolve them into your body. [439]

Overpower them with mudrā-gaze and

Using the four modes of moving (the tiger gait of heroes, the dancing of ḍākinīs, the slithering of black snakes, the soaring of yogis).

Then comes the main part of the enhancement—subjugating through splendor

The place, the god-demons, and oneself. The visualization for these is as follows.

For the first, within the state of awareness merged with basic space,

Visualize your body expanding to pervade all directions

And remaining thus until saṃsāra is emptied,

Completely unwavering.

For the second, preceded by rousing bodhicitta,  
With a mind of compassion toward all god-demons,  
Most especially those causing harm;  
Exhale your breath so that it fills the entire surroundings;  
Then, seated in your power over them,  
Draw them in on your inhalation  
And force them all down together, beneath your practice seat.  
This done, the area is demarcated by a protection tent  
Guarded by the Three Roots and Dharma protectors of the cardinal and  
intermediate directions  
So that nothing can ever pass beyond it. Visualize this.

For the third, one's mind is by its very nature  
Utter purity—that is its basic state.  
And yet, failing to realize this, god-demons  
Act erroneously—how tiresome this is!  
Thinking in this way, utter PHAT.  
Then, within the undistracted innate state that is void of ordinary mind,  
Without projecting out or gathering in, drop everything and let be.

When you exert yourself in this way, upheavals will occur.  
Externally, you will encounter terrifying images;  
Inwardly, you will experience physical illnesses; [440]  
Secretly, a variety of thoughts  
Driven by hope and fear will arise in the mind.  
At such times, with the recognition, resolution, and conviction  
That they are all apparitions of awareness,  
Utter PHAT and thereby cut directly through appearances.  
Merge awareness with basic space, and rest at ease.

Afterward, cast away the body aggregate as food.<sup>6</sup>  
To do so, assume the sevenfold posture, the crucial point of the body,  
And stare into empty space, the crucial point of the eyes.  
Visualize mind in the form of a drop  
And, with a series of PHATS, gradually raise it up to merge with space.<sup>7</sup>  
Wherever space pervades, empty awareness pervades,  
The ineffable continuity of luminosity—  
Rest naturally in this state without rejecting or accepting.

If thoughts begin to proliferate,  
Visualize Vajrayoginī, manifestation of self-awareness.  
With the curved knife she holds in her right hand,

She slices open the head of your corpse.  
Your aggregates and elements are presented as nectar  
To all the guests of offering and charity. This is the white distribution.  
For the mixed distribution, they transform into great piles of everything desirable  
Expanding into a sky treasury of limitless abundance.  
For the red distribution, your actual flesh, blood, and bones  
Fill the three-thousandfold universe—enough to satiate all spirits, all obstructers.  
For the black distribution, all your misdeeds and downfalls  
Are amassed and given to the hordes of god-demons.  
Finally, like a rainbow dissolving into space,  
All is released into the state of awareness united with basic space.

Focus on these feasts one at a time:  
Respectively, at dawn, midday, dusk, and night.

While doing so, no matter how the four demons manifest—  
As attachment, aggression, terror, anxiety, or anything else—  
Since your body has already been donated as a feast [441]  
And your mind is beyond constructs, devoid of arising and ceasing,  
Remain free of hope and fear and cultivate certainty.

After that, free of all reference to the three conceptual spheres,  
Utter PHAT and merge awareness with basic space.  
Visualize giving and taking happiness and suffering,  
And dedicate all roots of virtue to supreme awakening.

By applying yourself wholeheartedly like this,  
Evidence of success will occur within three days,  
Or at least within seven, nine, eleven, and so forth days.  
The signs will occur in waking life, in meditation, or in dreams.  
There will be ordinary signs, such as people gathering  
To honor you and pay their respects;  
Finding your way through fearful places; riding lions and elephants;  
And light rays shining from your body.  
There will be extraordinary signs, such as the stream of afflictions cut right  
through;  
A wealth of experience and realization bursting forth;  
And the gaining of higher perceptions and magical powers.

When such signs appear, don't get tangled up in joy and conceit.  
Simply let be, with whatever occurs.

Furthermore, there are four possibilities:

There are occasions when upheavals resemble evidence of success.  
For instance, you don red clothing and partake of flesh and blood,  
You prostrate disrespectfully,  
Play music without sound, and so on.

Then there are occasions when evidence of success resembles upheavals,  
Such as when horned animals attack you;  
When you get drenched in filth, pus, and blood;  
When your limbs are cut off; and so on.

Then there are mixed experiences that resemble both.  
At the start of the night you see indications of success,  
Then later that night the opposite occurs.  
These are indefinite, mixed up displays.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, there are habits that resemble mixed experiences.  
You might have a particular affliction  
Deeply ingrained, around which thoughts arise  
Fueled by intense attachment to that affliction.

Whichever of these occurs, whether positive or negative,  
Relax in basic space, without hope or fear, neither accepting nor rejecting.

If, in spite of your efforts, you experience upheavals  
But they do not lead on to evidence of success,  
Push your location (externally), your aggregates (internally),  
And your self-clinging (secretly)—push them all to their limits:  
Take yourself to an exceptionally frightening haunted place,  
And there rouse heroic conviction in the practice.  
Consider how, in so many past lives,  
You've had such aggregates before, but squandered them meaninglessly.  
With this thought, rouse enthusiasm for giving them away to god-demons.  
Think, "If I'm unable to give them away, it's my attachment;  
And if you're unable to consume them, that's your attachment.  
Don't hesitate, therefore, don't tarry for a single moment!  
Consume them right now! Devour them without leaving a morsel behind!"  
Think, too, "May you cast upon my three gates  
Whatever adverse circumstances you can muster!"  
When this mindset really dawns in you, without artifice of any kind,  
None of the gangs of demons will be able to cause you harm.

If you exert yourself like this but still enhancement doesn't come,  
Then rouse devotion for the guru who gave you these oral instructions,  
Perceiving them as a buddha in person;  
Waken in yourself unbearable compassion  
For all beings who have been your mothers in the past;  
And, whatever adverse circumstances, whatever sufferings occur,  
Respond with the potent yogic discipline of direct subjugation.  
Combining these three together,  
Apply yourself, and great enhancement will surely come about.

At the end of the practice, when preparing to travel to another place, [442]  
Relax the magic wheel for suppression.  
When passing piles of white skulls in these desolate sites,  
Visualize them as the Great Compassionate One  
With a cascade of nectar gushing forth from his body,  
Sating all the local spirits<sup>9</sup> of the haunted place,  
And all the god-demons, and most especially those who cause harm,  
Filling them all with undefiled bliss.  
Then make dedications and aspirations, both vast and pure.

Furthermore, there are several minor sacred pledges to be observed:  
Do not wander about in bare feet;  
Avoid lighting fires at night;  
Urinate and defecate in a single place;  
Never go back to the same place twice;  
And once evidence of success has occurred, move on—  
But until such time, go nowhere else.

In summary, externally, wander continuously and without partiality  
Through haunted places and mountain retreats.  
Internally, cast away your body aggregate as food,  
And thereby swiftly bring together the two accumulations.  
Secretly, definitively ascertain that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are your mind—  
The unique unbounded drop.

The view is to recognize the Mother;  
The meditation is the natural unity of equipoise and post-equipoise;  
The conduct is to travel the path of equal taste;  
And the fruition is to capture the primordial stronghold of victory.

This concludes the discussion of the stages of post-equipoise, the enhancing conduct, the third part of *The Self-Liberation of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa: A Spontaneous*

*Vajra Song about Taking as the Path the Yogic Discipline of the Profound Severance of Demons.*

This was written at Zangri Kharmar Sangpuk,<sup>10</sup>  
A sacred place blessed by the wisdom ḍākinī Machik.  
It combines the realization that arose  
During a gathering there  
With the pith instructions of this profound path,  
Expressed as a vajra song. Through this virtue,  
May all beings attain the self-liberated state!

*For the nourishment of myself and all others who wish to practice the profound perfection of wisdom, this song was composed by the humble yogi, Joyful Servant of the Lotus. These are extraordinary pith instructions—gubhya!*

## NOTES

1. Literally, “Light of Lab” (*lab kyi sgron ma*), reading *sgrol* as *sgron*. This is an epithet of Machik Labdrön.
2. The phrase “opening the sky door” (*nam mkha’ sgo ’byed*) is distinctive to the Severance tradition, and refers most specifically to the practice of separating consciousness from the body and sending it out through the cranial aperture—a type of “transference” (*’pho ba*) practice. However, this phrase has also become a more generalized designation for a whole cycle of Severance teachings, including an enumeration of a set of ten instructions called sky-door openings. See Kongtrul, *Chöd*, 455.
3. I have translated this line following the Drima and Dzongsar 2020 editions, which both read *nyams myong yid ches slob dpon no*. The Gangtok and Dzongsar 2014 editions, however, read *yid chos* in place of *yid ches*, which would render this line as: “This is experience of mind and mental phenomena as the teacher.”
4. The Tibetan term *lha ’dre* is often translated into English as “gods and demons.” In *Machik’s Complete Explanation*, however, translator Sarah Harding translates the term as “god-demons.” She quotes Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche: “In Tibetan there is the term *lha ’dre* which is used here, it means ‘god-demons,’ it is one word actually. It is because, sometimes, when these god-demons are in a positive mood, they will help you, then they are beneficial. But when they are hurt, they will harm you in turn.” Harding, *Machik’s Complete Explanation*, 39.
5. Nyens (*gnyan*) are spirits associated with the natural environment.
6. See Harding, “Did Machik Really Teach Chöd?”
7. These lines describe the transference of consciousness taught in *Opening the Sky Door*. See Kongtrul, *Chöd*, chapter 13.
8. That is to say, such experiences cannot be categorized as either upheavals or evidence of success.

9. Local spirits (*gzhi bdag*) are spirits abiding in mountains, cliffs, and patches of earth, often a kind of earth goddess.
10. Secret Cave of the Red Fortress of Copper Mountain.



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