

Step by Step: A Summary of the Karma Kagyu Tibetan Buddhist Path as Taught in America

By Kathy Wesley. Last revised 7.30.02

The Practice Path of a Kagyu Buddhist

A student usually begins with quiet sitting meditation, called Shinay in Tibetan and Shamata in Sanskrit. This practice calms the mind and makes it workable for further practice. When the student feels ready to seriously pursue the Buddhist path, the student requests a lama (teacher) to give the Refuge vow, the first formal ceremony of the Buddhist path.

After taking Refuge, the student continues practicing Shinay and adds to his or her practice a set of daily prayers that keep the Refuge vow fresh and strong in their minds. This is a basic means of practice in the Hinayana (Individual Liberation Vehicle).

When the student feels ready to deepen his or her meditation practice, they may ask the lama (or Meditation Instructor) to teach them compassion meditation, called Tong-Len in Tibetan. This meditation increases the student's love and compassion for themselves and other beings, and opens the door to the Mahayana (Vehicle for the Liberation of All) teachings. Tong-Len also gives the student a powerful technique for working with afflictive emotions.

At any time along this path -- from their first visit to the meditation center until they take Refuge and then afterward -- students may attend sessions of Chenrezig meditation. This meditation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion (called Chenrezig in Tibetan, Kwan Yin in Chinese, and Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit) also aims to increase compassion and train students in the altruistic motivation (called Jang Chub Sem in Tibetan, or Bodhicitta in Sanskrit) that is the heart of the Mahayana path. This meditation, which employs chanting and visualization, is also the introduction for students to the Vajrayana (or Diamond Vehicle), a series of trainings that help students accomplish spiritual awakening quickly.

After taking Refuge, students can learn other mantra-based meditations, such as Green Tara, Medicine

Buddha and so forth. These meditations focus on particular enlightened qualities -- the removal of obstacles for Tara, healing for Medicine Buddha -- and help students train in those qualities.

Eventually, students who wish to undertake the deepest meditation practice of the Karma Kagyu lineage, called Mahamudra, can ask the lama for instruction in the Mahamudra Preliminaries, called Ngondro. These preliminaries, which consist of guided meditations designed to purify negativities, increase awakened qualities, and seek the blessings of the lineage, take several years to complete, and help students create a powerful daily spiritual training regimen.

After completing Ngondro, many other practices -- including lifelong mantra practices -- can be given to the student. These will be explained at the time when they are given.

Teaching Methods

Many, though not all, teachers of the Karma Kagyu rely on a training process that some call the "bee and flower" method.

In this metaphor for the teaching process, the teacher is the flower, and the student is the bee. When the bee needs nectar, it goes to the flower for nourishment. It takes away nectar, and when it is hungry again, it goes to the flower for more.

In the same way, students visit lamas, and get their instructions from that teacher. Then, they go home and practice what they are taught, returning to the teacher for clarifications and to remedy doubts about their practice.

This means the path is, in many cases, student-directed. Lamas may make practice suggestions -- and some even give practice-related "homework" to students -- but it is up to students to choose their teacher, and to decide whether to take on what has been suggested to them by their lama. If a student does not feel ready

to take on a practice suggested by the lama, it is important for the student to say so immediately, so the teacher can be advised of the student's intentions.

Teachers want nothing more than for students to enjoy their practice and deepen their commitment to dharma, so students should make use of their teachers whenever they need to.

Lineage, Empowerments, and Samayas

While many Buddhist teachers -- Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese and others -- visit America in any given year, it is important for a student to make a commitment to a particular lineage and set of teachers. Otherwise, the student's practice will lack focus, and the student will not make satisfactory progress along the path.

When you have the opportunity to take empowerments or teachings from lamas of other lineages, it is always best to ask your own lama for advice. When

you take an empowerment or a teaching from a teacher, you forge a bond (called samaya in Tibetan) with that teacher and his or her lineage. The teacher may then expect you to maintain that connection by visiting him or her often or by taking further teachings with them or visiting their monasteries, etc.

When you take a teaching or empowerment from a lineage master, you become part of that teacher's lineage -- the "next in line," so to speak, in that lineage. You then bear a responsibility to keep that lineage going.

That is why it is important to be very careful when choosing teachers and empowerments. It is not like choosing an evening's entertainment -- it is choosing a direction for your spiritual path.

