

THE LION'S DANCE:
A MEDITATION FOR THE
WHEEL OF LIFE



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A dog in the road

It all started in a cave.

The Indian saint Asanga had been hearing stories about another Buddha who was coming to this world, by the name of Maitreya: Love. He thought he would like to meet Love personally, before he made his appearance.

So he found a nice cave halfway up a mountain called "Legs of the Eagle" and settled in for a few days of mantras and meditation. Three years later absolutely nothing had happened. Not a single whisper from Love.



Asanga throws his beads down on the floor. "This is getting ridiculous. That's all I can take." He gathers his few things together and heads down the mountain.

Near the bottom he runs into an old man rubbing a block of steel with a cotton ball.

"What's that you're doing?" Asanga asks.

"Making myself a needle," replies the octogenarian.

"That's just totally impossible," Asanga says.

The old man breaks into a poem, spontaneously:

If a person has true courage,

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And gives it their best,
There's nothing they cannot do.
It may be hard,
But if you're persistent,
You can turn mountains to dust.

Asanga is immediately ashamed. He turns around and heads back up to the cave. Three years more, and not the slightest sign of the Buddha called "Love." He packs up his things one more time, and steps out of the cave.

Just outside the entrance, there is a place where little drips of water fall down on the top of a boulder. Asanga notices that they have actually cracked the boulder in half. Another message; he steps back in and picks up his meditations where he'd left off.

But another three years pass, and still no sign. This time for sure he's going to give up. Stepping out of the cave, he reaches up to steady himself against the cliffside.

There's a little ledge where mountain swallows have been making nests, flying back and forth to feed their young, for years. The brush of their feathers against the rock as they



land has worn it smooth as the belly of a frog. He curses their persistence and turns back, one more time.

A final three years, and still not a peep from Love. Disgusted and discouraged, Asanga packs up his stuff and heads down the mountain, and on towards the town.

Shuffling down that hot dusty Indian road in the afternoon, he comes across a terrible sight: A passing horse cart has hit a dog—she's lying there in the dirt, her guts spilling out where the wagon wheel has cut her body nearly in half.

Asanga kneels down in the middle of the way and tries to pick her up, take her to the side of the road. He's trying to tuck her intestines back into her body before he can lift her, but then he sees that the flies have already laid a bunch of eggs inside, and there are already white baby maggots crawling everywhere.

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"If I take the maggots out into the dry air, they die" he thinks. "If I don't take them out, the dog dies." A few minutes, and then he has an inspiration. "I could cut a hole in my thigh, and put the baby maggots there! They'd be fine!"

He runs into town to borrow a blade, but the barber doesn't trust this crazy homeless man with the 12-year beard. Like a lot of great saints

of ancient India, Asanga carries a really nice hardwood staff. He leaves the staff as security and takes a gold razor and runs back out of town, to the dog.

Here he kneels down and slices his leg open and reaches down to pick up the first baby maggot. But right away he can see that his fingers are too big; for sure he's going to break some ribs or something. He needs something smaller, something wet...

Asanga decides to lift the maggots out one by one, with his tongue; but the dog guts smell so bad and the whole idea is so necessary and so revolting, that he's got to close his eyes. And then he sticks out his tongue and starts leaning down, closer and closer...

And then his nose and his tongue hit the Indian dust, and his eyes pop open in surprise and all he sees is two golden feet. And slowly his eyes travel up and there, standing in front of him, instead of a dog, is Love himself.

And a poem comes to Asanga's lips:

Ai one father, protector of mine!
I sought you for thousands of days
Of fruitless effort.
How could this majestic cloud,
Filled with an ocean of rain,
Refuse a man while he died of thirst?

And Love answers, indignant:

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The king of gods
May send down the rain;
But seeds not yet ready
Will never open and bloom.
Buddhas may arrive in your world,
But those without good karma
Will never taste their sweetness.

"But where have you been all this time?" rants Asanga.

"Are you kidding?" cries Love back. "I was there, in the cave, at your side, from the very first day, until the last! Tell me if I'm right—you used to clear your throat, and turn to the left and spit on the floor! You even hit me a few times!"

"So why didn't you say something?" pouts the disciple.

"Love; Love; Love! That was your mantra; twelve years of mantra! But there wasn't enough love in your own heart to see me! Only now, here, on the road, when I showed myself to you as this dying dog!"

"I can't believe it!"

"Don't believe me, huh? Okay, well now; just let me climb up on your shoulders, and let's walk into town—and you see how many people see Love, when he's right in front of them!"

So Asanga takes Love up piggyback, and they walk into town. By this time Asanga has finally realized what a magnificent thing has happened, and he's yelling "Love! Love! I've got Love! Right here on my shoulders! Look!"

Of course nobody sees anything on his shoulders at all—nothing but that crazy homeless man running up and down the street, screaming his head off. Too many years in that cave!

Well, there *was* the one old lady. She had spent a lifetime being kind to everyone around her, and after Asanga ran by her house she slowly got out of her rocking chair, and went into the house, and met her daughter in the kitchen.

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"Strange," she says.

"What's that?" replies the daughter, as she stirs the rice for dinner.

"A man," says the mother, "a crazy man. Running down the street with a dog on his shoulders, and dog guts spilling out all over the place."

Love's secretary

When Asanga got tired and slowed to a walk and let Love down off his shoulders, Love gave him a big smile and said, "So then! What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"



"Oh yeah!" wheezes Asanga, taking a seat. "It was that danged Perfection of Wisdom!"

"Ah, Perfection of Wisdom," nods Love. "Learning how to see emptiness. Got stuck on that, did you?"

"Exactly," agrees Asanga. "So like...would you mind helping me out on it?"

"My pleasure," says Love, looking around. "But why don't

we sit someplace more comfortable. Wanna come over to my Buddha Paradise?"

"For sure!" says Asanga.

"Alright then," says Love. "Here, just a grab a corner of my white robe here, and hold on tight!"

Asanga grabs tight, and they take off. Straight to the heaven called Happiness.

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In happiness they sit down on some big comfortable cushions and Love hands Asanga a bamboo pen and some ink and says, "Okay, let's give it a go. But I want you to write down everything I tell you to, and then when you get back home you can share it with everybody. Sound good?"

And so it was, that Asanga became Love's secretary. He took dictation for five great works of poetry, which we still have, and we call them "Love's Five." The greatest of these is called "The Jewel of Realizations."

Partway through the exercise, Asanga sees emptiness directly; and so we nowadays we call him "Arya Asanga," because the Sanskrit word "arya" means any person who has seen ultimate truth, straight on.

It all happened in a single day, and then Asanga yawned and Love says, "Maybe we should call it a day," and Asanga nodded, and he grabbed the robe and Love took him and dropped him back at home.

Love forgot to mention to his sleepy disciple that a minute in heaven takes about fifty years human time—so of course by the time Asanga got back to town, there wasn't a single person left alive that he still knew. But he did know that he should share the wisdom he had learned, and so he went deep into the Forest of Magadha with a few close friends, and began to share. And the Lion's Dance is one of the things they enjoyed together, 17 centuries ago.

Getting ready for the Wheel

Here is a piece of Love's poem, with Asanga taking dictation:

Nothing more to clarify,
Nothing more to establish,
To look pure to the pure,
And see pure—
This is what makes us free.

This is the path of seeing:
To embrace,
In a moment of mastery,

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That giving and the rest,
Each and every one of them,
Is inside each the other.

We go then into
The deepness of meditation:
The Dance of the Lion;
And it leads us into exploring
How each thing happens
When another thing happens—
Follow the spin,
Then spin it back.

Go up in
The nine meditations,
Married with stopping;
And then make your way
Back down.
Bridge with the mind
In the realm of desire—
Anything but meditation.

Leap across the top,
Meditating deep
Skip one, then two,
Three four and five,
Six seven and eight:
Here, then someplace different—
Up until the stopping.

The key here is the “Dance of the Lion.” We use it to prepare our mind for exploring the Wheel of Life.

The future Buddha, Love, is describing a person who has just come out of the direct perception of emptiness—“the pure”—and who really wants to save the world. There are six skills that people need to develop, if they really do want to help everyone else in the world. The first is giving to others whatever they need: material, emotional, or spiritual. The second is to learn a code of ethics and to keep it strong and happy: never

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hurt another living thing.

The third is patience, even in the worst situations, or with the most difficult people imaginable. The fourth is simply to enjoy, deeply, doing anything that helps someone else. The fifth is to meditate, and the sixth is to use that meditation to see emptiness.

And so when Love talks about “each inside the other here,” what he’s describing is a beautiful state of mind that follows upon emptiness—a state of mind where we see that the best giving is done by a person who refuses to hurt others; who refuses to get angry; who loves getting out to help others; and who’s learned to meditate on emptiness.

And then Love’s poem reaches the Dance of the Lion. Here’s the “Quick Start” instruction sheet that he gives you, as soon as you pull this meditation out of the box.

Quick Start instructions for the Dance of the Lion

You will find some extra explanation of the steps in italics; you can skip these parts after the first few times you do the meditation.

1

As Buddha once said, “All meditations begin by turning your cellphone off!”

2

Sit down on a meditation cushion, or a chair that you like, and move yourself around until you feel really comfortable. Clear your throat and, if you need to, blow your nose. Get all that noise-making out of the way!

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3

Sit up very straight, park your hands on your thighs, touch the thumb and first finger together (this is called Chin Mudra) if you like. From here on, keep the hands loose and relaxed, and don't move anything at all. Be as still as a statue made of stone—when the body is still, it helps the mind be still.

4

Relax your forehead, and be sure it doesn't tighten up again when you start concentrating in your meditation. Pay special attention to keeping your eyelids and the corners of your mouth relaxed; a small Mona Lisa smile is perfect. If you pull in your lower abdomen and keep it a little taut, it will help your lower back, and your focus.

5

Now bring your mind to your breath. Take 10 slow, long exhales, and see if you can ride on the air going out and returning back in. Use this time to relax into the meditation more, and drop your busy thoughts of the day.

6

Every room that you ever meditate in will have some background noises going on. In the Lion's Dance meditation, we use these little noises, instead of allowing them to become distractions. It might be the sound of a refrigerator or heater or air conditioner nearby; it might be the sound of traffic outside, or of other family members in your home. Notice the sound, and examine the details of it as well.



Obvious sounds like this, that we hear as we start to meditate, are located in a place called the Desire Realm. Our entire world is divided into three parts, and the Desire Realm is the lowest of the three. This is the only realm that most of us ever experience on a regular basis.

The Desire Realm is filled with very obvious, physical objects and experiences. Like the taste of a good coffee; the touch of water on our body in the shower; or the

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sound of a garbage truck outside our window.

People like us were born into the Desire Realm because—in our past lives—we did a mix of very basic good things (like the karma that created this convenient human body we have) and very basic bad things (like the karma that will make this convenient human body get old and die).

As far as learning to meditate, we first need to notice some details about our typical state of mind here in the Desire Realm. The mind can operate at two levels, called “noticing” and “examining.”

These two states of mind were described quite nicely by Asanga's brother, whose name was Vasubandhu, also 17 centuries ago. Imagine you're walking through grocery store, pushing a cart of groceries, trying to find out where they keep the toilet paper, or the laundry soap. The store sound system has been playing background music, and suddenly you notice one of your old favorite songs.

You're still pushing the cart, but you start to really listen. This is the “noticing” state of mind.

You have a particular part inside the song that you really like, because it was playing the first time you ever kissed your future spouse—so it means a lot to you. When the song reaches that part, you stop pushing the cart and stand and close your eyes, and listen more carefully, maybe with a silly smile on your face. This mind state is called “examining.” It's like your mind is drilling one level down, deeper, into the details of the song.

The four Form Realm Meditations

7

Then switch your attention from the outside background sounds to the sound of your own heartbeat. It will feel like you're looking down at your chest from above—from about where your eyes are—and then inside, at your heart.

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Very consciously now flip your mind between the outside sound and the sound of your heart. (If you have trouble “hearing” your heartbeat, just hook into the feeling of it



beating; that's okay.) See how quiet and peaceful the heartbeat is, compared for example to the sound of the traffic outside.

Make a conscious decision that you would like to stay in the quiet place of the heart, rather than in the noisy place outside. Push away the outside sound, and choose to go into the inside sound—a more quiet place.

We are trying to move here from the Desire Realm to what is called the “Form Realm.” Now the actual Form Realm is a place which is the second part of this world—the next layer up. Those of us who spend our lives in the Desire

Realm normally never see the Form Realm directly. It's part of our world, but it's a subtle part of our world, and our senses are not normally tuned fine enough to see it.

The reason this next level up is called the realm of “form” is that the beings who live there have gorgeous and powerful physical bodies, or forms; and the physical form of the world they live in is also exquisite, full of parks and fountains and grand buildings. When you read descriptions of the Form Realm and the people who live there, it might remind you of the gods of ancient pantheons, like Norse or Greek gods such as Thor—the god of thunder and lightning—or Poseidon, god of the sea. And in fact these probably were real beings, fantastically powerful beings, who lived in the Form Realm.

As you also know from ancient mythology, these beings had a lot of the same troubles that we have: war, unhappiness, jealousy. They are still caught up in the Wheel of Life, and they still suffer, pretty much as much as we do!

Anyway, it's an interesting fact that the way you get to be reborn in the Form Realm is that—during your days here, in the Desire Realm—you devote a lot of time to getting good at deep meditation. Your thoughts in the meditation are sweet, and when you're meditating deeply you don't have the time or opportunity to do the normal, constant, petty bad deeds that all the rest of us do inside our minds, and in our day-to-day talking.

And so, almost by default, you are avoiding most of negative karma that most of us accumulate

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every hour of the day. Because you reach the end of your life with a higher percentage of good karma than most people, you are reborn into the Form Realm.

Because the deep meditations we're describing in this section take you to the Form Realm, they are sometimes called "Form Realm Meditations"; not because you are in the Form Realm when you do them, but because they help you collect the good karma to be reborn in the Form Realm after you die at the end of this present life.

But there's a warning statement posted on the cigarette package of Form Realm Meditation! Like cigarettes, or the sugar in donuts or cookies, these very quiet states of mind can be very addicting. It's nice to be so quiet, it's nice when our normal worries aren't running around in our mind.

To understand this addiction, you have to understand the goal of meditation. Meditation isn't for the purpose of just getting quiet, or feeling peaceful for a while. That isn't enough of a goal. The problem is that—even during the half hour we spend in a meditation—our body is continuing its steady decline towards death. Even as we meditate, our lifetime is burning down, like a candle.

We can continue to do these super-quiet Form Realm meditations for as long as we live, but inevitably there will come a day when we have to stop: when our body stops working, when our mind stops working. By themselves, these meditations just keep us trapped in the same Wheel of Life, with the same pain, the same bad ending.

So why practice these meditations, or any meditation at all? The real goal of meditation is to calm the mind down to the point where we can understand the secret of life: that everything we ever see around us, and everyone we ever meet in our life, is popping out of karmic seeds in our mind. Those seeds are planted when we are nice to someone else, or when we're not nice. When our spouse yells at us in the kitchen, they are actually popping out of a mental seed that we planted last week, when we heard the sound of our own voice as we yelled at our kids.

Stated in a negative way, there is no yelling spouse in our kitchen who isn't coming from our mental seeds. And so there's actually no such thing as a yelling spouse who isn't coming from our seeds! The fact that no such thing exists is what we call "emptiness"—and this is all the word means!

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Emptiness is very simple. There's a choice. Either there's a yelling spouse in my kitchen who is coming from me, from my mental seeds, or there's a yelling spouse in my kitchen who is not my fault. And the fact is that there never was, and never will be, a yelling spouse in my life who is not my fault. Because every time my spouse yells at me, it's because I planted the seed for it when



I yelled at someone else earlier! The fact that there is no yelling spouse who is not my fault is, simply, what we call "emptiness."

You can immediately figure out, from this description, how unbelievably helpful it is to see the emptiness of my yelling

spouse. If we manage to do this, then we immediately take responsibility for cleaning up our own world—for making it into a heaven as good as the one where Love lives! (Because Love used emptiness to stop his yelling spouse a long time ago!)

Now to get to that immense mental quiet where we can see this emptiness directly, it's crucial to practice the ability to put your mind into different mental states at will. And that's why we're about to take a trip through four different Form Realm Meditations!

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Park now for a few minutes in the very quiet place you've reached, by pushing away the Desire Realm state of mind: the awareness of the outside noise. Stay watching the beating of your heart. If you have trouble focusing on the heartbeat, then go back to the noise of your refrigerator (or whatever sound you chose at the beginning); compare it one more time to the sound of your heart beating; and then choose again to go to the quieter place. You are now in the first Form Realm Meditation.

The Lion's Dance meditation that Love taught Asanga moves up through eight classical states of mind in order to drill down into the object. We will go through four mental states of the Form Realm, and four of the Formless Realm—which we'll get to in a minute.

We move up through these mind states by looking ahead each time to the next one, which is a quieter place than the place we're in now. For example, we just moved our mind from the Desire Realm to the Form Realm (technically, to the cause of the Form Realm) by comparing the sound

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of the refrigerator to the sound of our heartbeat; and we made a conscious decision to go to the quieter place. This will be repeated at each of the eight levels: we drop the mental state we're in now, so we can drill deeper into the next mental state, above it. In each case, this depends on a conscious comparison of the two.

And so in this first Form Realm state of mind, say the ancients, five different things are going on mentally. It's good to know what they are: it's good to get familiar with the geography of our own mind.

First of all, we still have a leftover from that Desire Realm focus on the refrigerator noise: we are still noticing the refrigerator noise, so that we can compare it to the sound of our heart beating.

Secondly, we also still have the mental state of examining: we are looking ahead to the heartbeat, and we are diving into it. These two mental states help us make the comparison, and the choice to go quieter.

Thirdly, we feel a sense of mental peace, a sort of happiness that comes from going to a quieter place.

Fourth, we feel a sort of physical well-being. This comes because the Form Realm quiet also helps our body become more and more aligned in the meditation: We find for example a perfectly upright posture, where we are neither leaning right nor left, front nor back. The feeling is as if our spine is free of gravity: it is totally upright, equal and level. It helps a lot to reach this alignment if we are doing even just an easy, stretching practice of yoga every day.

Fifth, our mind is obviously in a state that we call "single-pointed." This is pretty much the defining quality of all meditation: we are quietly focusing on a single object; in this case, the beat of our own heart.

Really getting into the first Form Realm Meditation can take months of practice, and typically an hour of time on your meditation cushion every day. But with this and all the steps to follow, it's extremely helpful to go through the entire set of the meditations—the entire Dance of the Lion presented here—from the first day, in about 30 to 40 minutes.

Just try to imagine, from the description given, what each one feels like, as well as you can. This will plant a seed for the deeper versions to come to you later. Half an hour a day imagining these states of mind gives birth to the real thing, in time.

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The traditional sources (which we've listed at the end of the Dance) say that you can get into this first Form Realm Meditation at three different levels of intensity. Each intensity level creates different karmic seeds, which themselves create three different locations in the Form Realm after you die. At the first Form Realm level, all three are related to a very powerful inhabitant of this realm whose name is "Pure One."

But this being, and people like us who might be reborn in his neighborhood if we stop at this meditation, are still stuck in the Wheel of Life: we will still go through the inevitable aging and pain and death. The first Form Realm Meditation is therefore not a goal in itself, but only a tool to reach the deeper meditation on how the world works, which will come towards the end of the Lion's Dance. This final part of the Dance, which is known as Stopping Meditation, is what gets us out of the Wheel and into a perfect world.

To understand this point, you can think of some people you might know who were born into a very wealthy family. Because of their parents, they start out incredibly rich, but they never really learn



how to make money on their own: they often fail to find any purpose or passion in their life, and many by the time they reach their middle age manage to squander all the money their parents have left them. And then they are among the most miserable people in the world—with very little financial support, and no experience in how to work.

People who park at the first Form Realm Meditation or just beyond—people who never get to the Stopping Meditation at the end of the Lion's Dance—are just like these sad, wealthy children. The good karma of the meditation throws them into the Form Realm itself; in this case, into the palatial surroundings of this worldly being known as the Pure One. Here they live in exquisite circumstances for a temporary period, burning up the debit card of their past meditations.

When this debit card runs out, they have no experience in how to re-charge it—they don't know how to work. This leads inevitably to a miserable death, and years of misery afterwards.

So remember: in the Lion's Dance we are moving up through many meditations, like rungs of a ladder. The point is not to stop and stand on the ladder. We are trying to get to the top, to the

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meditation where we find out how the world works, and how we can make it perfect.

9

Now let's go to the second Form Realm Meditation. Up to now, it felt like we were above the heart, looking down at it and observing the sound or feel of the heartbeat. Now let's observe the heartbeat from *inside* the heartbeat.

Drop the feeling that you are outside the heart, either noticing it or looking into it more deeply. Now just *enter* the heartbeat and *become* it. This should feel like you are one big heart, and your sides are thumping as they pump in and out. You should also feel *deeper* into the heartbeat, as if you've drilled down deeper into it.

Don't forget to compare: that's how we move higher, deeper, into each different level. Compare how it feels to stand outside the heartbeat just watching it—as an observer—and then how it feels to be the heartbeat, living inside of it. Go back and forth on this comparison a few times until you have it clear, and then consciously choose the quieter place: being the heartbeat.

At this point, the ancients say, there are four main things going on mentally. First of all, we have



gone beyond either noticing or examining anything. By the time we reach this level, the old noticing and examining—which were helpful at the time—now become a distraction of their own. In fact, at this juncture they are classically called “junk at the bottom of the pool,” like the dead leaves and dirt you see at the bottom of a swimming pool that hasn't been cleaned for a while.

We drop even examining the heartbeat as an observer, and just drill down into it and stay there. This mental space is given the name of “crystal-clear,” like pure mountain water compared to bottom-of-the-pool water. Who wouldn't want to move up to crystal water?

Secondly, the feeling of mental peace—happiness to be in this even quieter place—is still going on.

Thirdly, the satisfying feeling of our perfect physical alignment is also still continuing.

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Fourth, we are of course still focused, comfortably, on a single point. We aren't losing the heartbeat. If we slip and start thinking about what's for lunch, we bring our mind back to the heartbeat. If you have trouble coming quickly back that deep, then drop out to observing the heart and work your way back inside it.

If you really have trouble, then go all the way back to the refrigerator noise and work your way back up. But if you can jump straight back into the heart from lunch, that's best.

By the way, the heart is a sensitive part of the psychic anatomy—the world of inner channels and chakras, of inner winds passing through them. Some people will find that if they focus on the heart too long, it brings up what the ancients call a “wind disturbance.” This is marked by a feeling of constriction in the chest; shortness of breath; emotions of anxiety; or shaking of the fingers, among other symptoms.

If this happens to you during the Dance of the Lion meditation, there's an easy traditional “fix.” Drop the heartbeat to the level of your navel, simultaneously pushing it back slowly towards the spine, until it's about half an inch (one centimeter) in front of the front side of the bones of the spine. Don't go lower, or you may find yourself getting constipated as winds tie up around the area of the anus! Keep the heartbeat down at the level of the navel during all the parts of the Lion Dance meditation which follow below, and then bring it back up just before you come out of the Dance.



Remember that we don't want to get stuck here on the ladder at the second Form Realm Meditation. As in the first Form Realm, we

can do this meditation at three different levels of intensity, and if we stop there it will throw us into one of three different locations in the Form Realm after we die. These are called the Levels of Light—temporary rich-kid neighborhoods, followed by the worst slum you can imagine.

10

From here we move up to the third Form Realm Meditation. Each time we move up, we need to discuss *what we dropped from the last level, to rise to the new one*. In this case we're dropping the mental sensation of peace—specifically, the sense of satisfaction that comes

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from being in a quieter place than we were just before. This is because this sense of satisfaction becomes itself a “discussion in the mind” at this point, and thus a distraction of its own: what was good at the second Form Realm Meditation is a problem for reaching and staying at the third.

So how are we supposed to feel? We still have the physical sense of great bodily alignment, but as for our emotional feelings we just drop into neutral. You can compare it to the feeling you have when you're very exhausted, or just passed out even—the mental feeling is sort of a flatline, like the flatline of a heart monitor after a person has just died. You've felt this kind of neutral mind in the past, when you were very very deeply absorbed in something, and kind of forgot yourself.

We are still *in* the heartbeat, but we have gone beyond the pleasure of being there.

The classic texts list five mental components at this third Form Realm Meditation:

First is the neutral mental feeling or emotion: an almost unaware depth of concentration.

Second is a special mental function we can call the Smoke Alarm. Ancient Asian psychology describes 51 (or sometimes 46) different functions that exist within the human mind.

Two of them are especially useful for meditation. The first of these is the Smoke Alarm (literally called, in ancient times, “Awaring”). If we do start to think of lunch while we're parked at the third Form Realm Meditation, our mind is especially adept at detecting that we've gone off our single point: off the single object, the beating of our heart.



Third is what we can call the Hook & Line. This is the other very useful mental function for meditation; it is literally known as “Pulling”. Once we do see that our mind has gone off the heartbeat and wandered over to “What's for lunch?”—then the Smoke Alarm goes off. This triggers the Hook & Line, which immediately starts looking for

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our original object (the heartbeat); hooks it; and drags it back in front of our attention. In the third Form Realm Meditation, this mental function is also highly developed and effective.

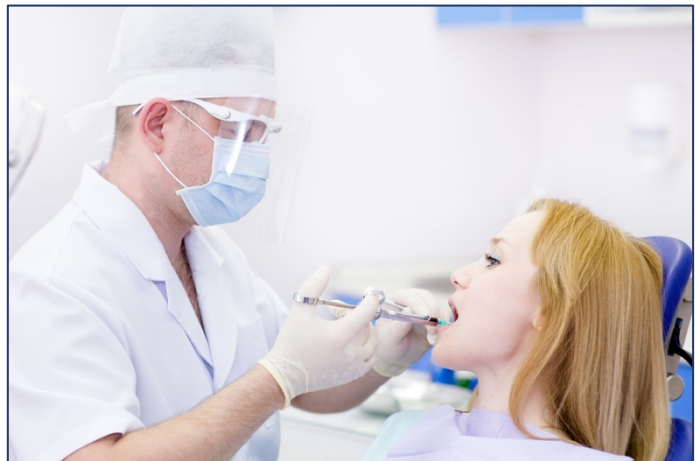
Fourth, we are still continuing with the pleasant feeling of great physical alignment in our meditation posture.

Fifth, we are obviously continuing with single-pointedness.

Again, we can do the third Form Realm Meditation at three different levels of intensity, and if we stop and park inside here it will throw us into one of three different sad, wealthy places after we die. These are called the Levels of Goodness, but they are only temporary, and full of the same pain of life we already know about here!

11

Now it's time to drill down to the fourth Form Realm Meditation. Here we can focus first on the pleasant physical alignment of our body, and then compare it to a deeper physical quiet: a place where we no longer even feel the body. You know what it feels like in your mouth when the dentist gives you a shot to make you unaware of the pain of the dentist drill, to anesthetize you—the drug in the syringe removes all your capacity to feel the area around your mouth.



For this meditation level, just imagine that your whole body has had the shot, and you can no longer even sense the delightful feeling of a body which is well-suited physically for meditating. Your emotional feeling, since the third Form Realm level, is already flatline neutral; and now your physical sensations are too.

This happens naturally when we are in very deep concentration, say as we are absorbed in reading a good book in bed; only an hour later do we realize the elbow we used to prop our head up has fallen completely asleep.

Aside from the physical flatline, take the opportunity at this step to *really* focus on the

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fact that your mind is *totally* single-pointed. By this point you should have a distinct feeling that your mind is like a laser, pinpointing a single, defined space within the beating heart which is “me.”

The ancient texts list four different components featured in the fourth Form Realm Meditation. First of all, our Hook & Line capacity is by this time perfected: pulling our mind back to the heartbeat from any object of distraction is smooth as silk.

The neutral feeling of our emotions is continuing from Form Level 3; and now a neutral physical feeling accompanies it.

Finally, we have that intensely noticeable focus on a single point.

Whereas each of the first three Form Realm Meditations can be practiced at three different levels of intensity, the fourth can be done at eight. The first three though are similar to those of the first three meditations—and like them, they result in a rebirth at three highly refined, but painful, levels of existence. The remaining five are practiced by those who have seen emptiness, to reach high types of rebirth—before they escape the Wheel altogether.

The four Formless Realm Meditations

12

With this, we have finished the four Form Realm Meditations—those are all the ones there are, which after we die could lead us to a Form Realm rebirth. Now it's time to go on to the Formless Realm Meditations.

The Formless Realm is just what it sounds like. Here in the Desire Realm, and in the Form Realm as well, we talk about our body and mind. If our daily meditations here in the Desire Realm are especially deep—if they go beyond almost any picture of form in our mind—then after we die, we pass into the Formless Realm.

Here in the Formless Realm, we have no gross physical body at all: we are very nearly a completely mental being. When we die here in the Desire Realm and go to a rebirth either here or in the Form Realm, there is a process of travelling to the location of our next life; and this travelling is done in an amazing spirit body known as a *bardo* or *inbetween* being.

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If we are headed though for the Formless Realm, we simply enter that realm wherever it is that we happened to die in the Desire Realm. And obviously it's difficult (but not impossible) for Desire Realm people to even catch a glimpse of the Formless Realm, because—well—there's no form to it!

So now that we've mastered the four Form Realm Meditations, it's time to graduate to the four Formless Realm Meditations, which are much deeper. When we're able to put our mind through these eight levels any time we want to, then we have truly mastered the art of meditation, and it will be much easier for us to see emptiness directly.

Again, that's crucial because it is only by seeing emptiness directly that we can escape the inevitable pain of the Wheel of Life. We'll talk more about this escape later! Basically it's the ability to turn our body into the immortal form of an Angel, who can help all beings at the same time, and do so forever, and be together with everyone we ever loved, for all time.

13

Remember that—in the fourth Form Realm level—our mind has been focused with perfect concentration on a single point within our heart; with no distraction at all by any emotion or bodily sensation (even those which are quite pleasant).

14

Now the four Form Realm Meditations we've talked about so far have formal names that are not very exciting: "Concentration Level #1," "Concentration Level #2," and so on. The Formless Realm Meditations though have enticing names—the first being "Endless Space." Here's how we make the transition from the fourth Form Realm to the first Formless Realm.

Again, this depends upon a comparison. We have been focusing on the extreme single-point feeling at fourth Form Realm. Now imagine that this single point is lying in the middle of a huge, cosmic ocean, resting on the surface of perfectly calm and endless water.

Then comes a trigger that feels like someone has dropped a pebble in the ocean at that exact point. Your attention begins to spread out from that point, like a ripple or small wave travelling out from the center towards the edges.

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Except that there are no edges. Follow this wave of thought as it expands further and further, passing through the universe away from the center, past stars and planets and



even whole galaxies. Feel the motion on a single horizontal plane; at the beginning, you may find it easier to just feel the wave go to the left and to the right from the room in which you're meditating, out into endless space on either side. Later you can add all the points of the compass.

So we've gone from a single point, to all points, in the universe. And our mind is continuing to expand, farther and farther, unlimited, for

as long as we stay at this first Formless Realm level.

At this point we are learning to drop all conception of anything physical at all.

If we do this first Formless Realm Meditation on a very regular basis, then after we die the force of it throws us ahead into a life of pure mind, with no gross physical body. The extreme quiet is as addicting as sugar donuts here in the Desire Realm—almost like a complete anesthetizing of the body and the thoughts.

Because of this, it's very easy to get stuck here: something like needing to get to the hospital quick to visit your dying mother; finding a very fast sports car that can take you there; and then getting so wrapped up in looking over every exquisite detail of the car that you forget you were supposed to get in and drive it to the hospital, fast.

If we do get stuck, then the karma we create is to move into the Formless Realm in the few minutes after we die here in the Desire Realm. The level we move into then is called the same name: Endless Space. We just pop into a purely mental life, wherever we happened to be at the moment we died. And then it's a long, pleasant, numb existence followed eventually and inevitably by a trip to realms of terror, since we burn up all our good karma by staying in the numbness.

Learn to say: "This is nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here. I have bigger goals in mind. The world is on fire; they need me to learn how better worlds are created—by seeds in my

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own mind. I will practice this meditation, but only to sharpen my meditation skills, so in the end I can use them to see the way the world really works: coming from me, by how I treat others."

15

Now it's time to move to the second Formless Realm Meditation. This one is called "Endless Awareness." By this point, we feel that we want to go deeper, into even more absolute silence and peace. We drop the mental image of the endless stretch of the space of the universe, which has been providing us with reference points, or a roadmap, for the sensation of an expanding consciousness. Because even these reference points have now, in themselves, become a distraction.



And so we drop the image of space, and replace it simply with an awareness that expands out like a sphere of knowing that has no edges: constantly stretching further and further. There is no physical form here, simply invisible mind, but coupled with a sensation that our awareness is expanding endlessly outwards. In doing so, our mind is passing through and gathering into itself the minds of every other living creature in the entire universe.

As with the first Formless Realm, the place after death created by this meditation is given the same name: Endless Awareness. By itself—if we go no further—it represents an absolutely quiet, focused, and deadly addiction.

16

With infinite consciousness, we begin to get the feeling that there is nowhere else ever to go: our mind has become equal to the extent of everywhere there is. If we want an even more absolute silence than that, then all we can do is to drop any mental object at all.

And so we let go of the infinite awareness, and we purposely focus on nothing at all. The

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mind drops into an infinite blackness, nothing more at all. In fact, this third level of the Formless Realm is itself called “Nothing At All.”

Stay here, in the absolute nothingness.



This third Formless Realm Meditation is famous for being one of the most addicting mental sugar donuts of all. After all, it is perfectly quiet here, perfectly peaceful: so very, very far away from the sound of the refrigerator that we first started out with, way back in the Desire Realm.

It's very important for a master meditator to remain very mindful and cautious of this exquisite mental trap. For many centuries in the history of the East, countless meditators have reached this state of Mental Nothing At All and become entranced and lost here, like sailors drawn to deadly rocks by the alluring song of the Sirens.

There was even a fairly large school of ancient thinkers who believed that—by thinking of nothing—they had discovered emptiness: the key to escaping the pain of the Wheel.

Of course, by now we know that this is not the meaning of emptiness at all. If something is real emptiness, then when we see it, it should set us free from our troubles. Focusing on nothing at all doesn't at all free us from our problems at all: during the hours that we waste doing it, our body is getting older and older, closer to death.



In fact, the karmic result in this life of focusing on meditations like this is simply that we become

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more and more forgetful: an absent-minded professor who can't remember where they put their car keys, or their cell phone. The karmic result in the next life is simply mind-numbing nothingness, itself also known as Nothing At All, until we die and fall.



Again, emptiness just means that there's nothing that's not coming from my seeds—the seeds that I plant every day as I interact with others, in a kind or an unkind way. There's no spouse in my life who ever yells at me, unless I have been yelling at others. A yelling spouse who just decided by themselves to yell at me never existed—the universe is empty of such a spouse.

Now understanding that will get you a sweeter spouse, not a trip to mindlessness! It seems like this wrong idea—of trying to meditate about nothing, of letting your thoughts float through your mind and just go nowhere—is spreading in the West too, as we learn about how to meditate. In fact, somewhere in these last eight meditations—good tools, but lousy goals in themselves—you will recognize many of the meditations being taught at present in yoga studios and meditation salons throughout the modern world. It's important to recognize

these highly addictive sugar donuts for what they are: taste good now, mental diabetes later!

17

Now you might think there's nowhere to go after nothing at all, but there is! You see, at that third Formless Realm level, we are *deciding* not to think about anything at all: we are letting go of everything.

But as all of us know, it can take a lot of effort to let everything go!

As we move from the third to the fourth Formless Realm level, the comparison we draw is between this subtle effort *not* to think of anything; and a deeper, quieter space where we *let go of deciding* whether to think of something or not.

We decide not to decide, which leads to a deeper silence than deciding on nothing. In fact, this fourth Formless Realm Meditation is itself called "Neither Thinking of Nothing

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Nor Not Thinking of Nothing."

This meditation is the only one of the Formless Meditations where the place you reach after you die has a different name than the meditation. That place is called "Peak of Existence," because it is absolutely the most subtle and peaceful space you can reach within the constant war of the Wheel of Life.

And still it leads to inevitable pain and death. We need to go higher! We need to get out of this Wheel!

We've now reached the point where we will transform the "Eight Donuts" into "Eight Wondrous Steps on the Ladder to a Better World." If instead we stop here, almost to the top of the ladder, we get into four different problems. These are described by Gyaltsab Je, the premier disciple of Je Tsongkapa, who lived 600 years ago in Tibet and was perhaps the premier meditation teacher of all time. Here's what Gyaltsab Je says:

We can call all eight of these meditations, if practiced only for themselves, "meditations that encourage negativity." First of all, they encourage an unhealthy desire for the sweet taste of only a temporary quiet inside our mind. Second, they encourage weird thinking—like the idea that you can say that time had a beginning, since you've gone deep to the ends of the universe. Third, people who get good at these meditations tend to think, subtly, that they are better than other people; since they believe they have gone someplace unimaginably deep and mysterious. But



most dangerous, we can start to mistake these meditations for the ones that break us free from the Wheel of pain, aging, and death.

The Stopping Meditation

18

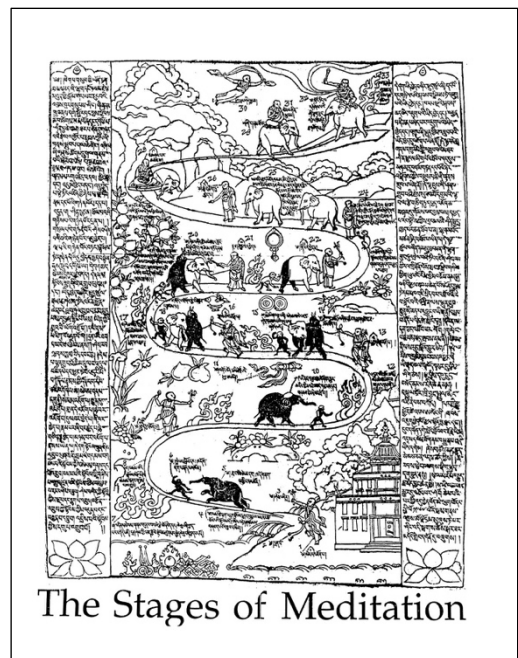
And so remember, all eight of the meditations we've gone through so far—four for the Form Realm, and four for the Formless Realm—are simply tools for sharpening our meditation skills: mastering them like building a very powerful electron microscope.

But the microscope is not the end in itself, only a tool. The most important thing is what you use it for, and that's true of these eight meditations as well. For over 2,000 years they have been called the "Eight Freedoms," but only in the sense that by doing our comparison and by choosing to go deeper at each level, we are freeing ourselves from the limitations and distractions of the previous level.

The eight, in turn, are always counted as part of a bigger group, known as the 9 Deeps. The ninth meditation here is the one we're about to learn: Stopping Meditation. The 9 Deeps are all of the Lion's Dance we're going to learn here, but be aware that there is an extended version of the Dance with four further trips up and down the scale of inner focus.

By the way, there is an ancient outline called the 9 Steps of Meditation; the most famous version of this comes through the Indian master Kamalashila, from the 8th century. (It is seen in a traditional poster, at right.) These 9 Steps are not the same as the 9 Deeps; we will examine later where the two sets of instructions intersect. Of course their goal is the same, with different techniques along the way.

Now we are ready to go on to the ninth meditation, which is the one that frees us. Let's look first at why it's given this name, "Stopping Meditation."



19

When we say that Stopping Meditation is the peak of the Dance of the Lion, what is it that we "stop" at that point? First of all, it's not the idea that we are *stopping* meditating.

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Rather, the meditation itself stops something else.

It's a very interesting point that *what* we stop depends on *why* we're doing the meditation!

So far, we've been talking about the pain that all of us experience here in the Wheel of Life: the troubles we face every day; the inevitable deterioration of our body and mind; and our descent into death itself. This is some kind of minimum motivation for dancing the Lion's Dance: to see if we can defeat the Lord of Death.

Of course we can use every form of meditation to improve our daily life, and we should. If we own a pleasant, clean, modest house in which to do our meditation, it can really help us reach our goals. We will also need groceries, and we need a reliable way to get to the grocery store. All these cost money, and meditating every day upon the real issues of where life is coming from can make our living situation a lot more comfortable and conducive for inner practice.

Of course, even while we ourselves are aging and racing towards the day of our death, those around us—our family, everyone in our community—are speeding at the same time towards their own inevitable end, with lots of serious pain and trouble all the way there.

Here's where we get into question of motivation during the Stopping Meditation. Suppose a person sits down and starts through their Dance of the Lion with the hope that they can reach some sort of personal inner peace. This motivation actually controls where the meditator goes after they finish the fourth Formless Realm level—the one that we just finished here.

When this person moves up into the Stopping Meditation, it stops two parts of the mind that are part of most of the problems we ever have in life. These two parts are our feelings, and our capacity of discrimination: the fact that we can tell one thing from another.

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How these two cause us trouble is this. Our boss at work hires two new people, and introduces us to them at a morning meeting. One of the two says complimentary things about us that make us feel good. The other offers us a few words of criticism that feel bad to us.



Because of these two feelings, we begin to separate the two people in our mind. The first person we call “nice,” and the second person we call “not nice.” This first impression, where we divide or discriminate these two people from each other, might last for years—

and it is based upon our capacity to feel, good or bad, about what they’ve said to us.

Shutting down the capacity to feel, and shutting down the tendency to discriminate, is one of the sugar-donut goals in life; one that we may for example seek on a regular basis by using alcohol to dull the two within us. The lower form of Stopping Meditation is just this same thing: it functions to stop—inside of us, and only temporarily—our capacity of feeling and our capacity of discrimination.

Just as with a person addicted to alcohol, we can mistake this temporary peace for a lasting peace, and continue to follow this kind of meditation even for years. It certainly *feels* as though it is taking us to some special place. But again, the hours that we spend in this seemingly special place are themselves being automatically subtracted from the length of our life—and the practice of this meditation inevitably dead-ends as our body and our strength fail us in our later years, and we can’t even sit in meditation comfortably anymore.

20

Now the fascinating thing is that—if we upgrade our motivation for doing the Stopping Meditation at the top of the Lion’s Dance—then the meditation *actually stops something else!* This all goes back to just before the beginning: just before we started listening to the sound of the refrigerator to start our trip into the depths of meditation.

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A well-trained meditator, who clearly understands the actual purpose of meditation, is looking at the eight Form & Formless Realm Meditations as ways of sharpening their meditation skills, so that they can turn this powerful microscope upon the *real* meditation



object during the ninth meditation, Stopping Meditation.

This kind of person is super sensitive to the fact that the whole world around them is dying too—not just themselves. What they're hoping for is some kind of meditation that frees they themselves from the aging process and death; and which at the same time helps free *everybody else* from the same two sufferings.

When we approach the Stopping Meditation with this kind of concern for others within our heart, then the meditation actually helps us *stop our tendency to believe that the world is coming from its own side*, and not from us—from the karmic seeds we plant during our interaction with others.

That is to say, for a person with this motivation, the Stopping Meditation becomes a meditation on emptiness—and more likely a *direct* perception of emptiness, if we have done the eight Form & Formless Realm Meditations carefully first, to get there. Love's idea here is that the emptiness itself is a stopping too: it is cancelling a yelling spouse that "wasn't my fault."

A person who sees emptiness directly has taken their first step off the Wheel of Life. Remember how we started this whole discussion with the story of Asanga, and the poem he brought back for us from the Coming Buddha? The whole point is that the Dance of the Lion has to be married to discovering how the Wheel of Life spins, and how we can spin it back.

21

So let's continue the Dance, and get into the Stopping Meditation. The way we start this is to invite a Teacher to come and meditate with us.

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The Teacher here can be any teacher who has been important in your life. For most of us,



our first and perhaps our most important teachers have been our Mother and Father. Our spouse or partner can also be a major teacher. And we've all had some particularly great teachers during our school years who influenced us strongly.

Someone taught you how to do the work that you have chosen for your career, and they are an important teacher too. Perhaps the teacher that

comes to mind first is a spiritual teacher of some kind in your life—such as a priest, rabbi, lama or imam. The Teacher here could also be an historical one, like Jesus, Mohammad, or Buddha.

Or the Teacher you invite could be a very special one that you haven't met yet; someone whom you've always dreamed of meeting—the perfect teacher for you.

22

Invite this teacher to sit with you as you continue the Lion's Dance into the Stopping Meditation; their presence will give you more power to see deeper.

When you do bring someone like this into a meditation, be sure to make them *alive*. It's not that we are inviting a photograph or even a video to come sit with us, to lend us strength. See their eyes on your face, filled with love; feel the warmth coming off of their body, as they sit knee-to-knee with you in meditation; perhaps there is a subtle fragrance in the air around them.

23

This person has played a major role in your life; their influence has made a big difference in your happiness and success for years. According to the idea that things happen when other things happen (which is the Secret of the Wheel of Life), their appearance in your life was no accident. It came from seeds that you planted, by being good to others.

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A huge goal of meditation is to reach such a deep level of quiet that you can actually observe these seeds as they open up in your mind; travel out into the outside world; and create the people and things around us—including this Teacher who has helped make your life so special.

Having passed already through the eight Form & Formless Meditations, we are in a perfect place of deep silence to try to observe these seeds with our mind's eye, and watch them open. If we succeed, we take a great leap forward towards learning to *use* these seeds for a wonderful life: to spin the Wheel of Pain backwards into a Wheel of Happiness.



24

As with the Form & Formless Realm Meditations, we shouldn't expect to see the real thing the first time we try, or even the hundredth time. But as with these meditations, the best seed to plant for the real thing is to imagine, clearly, what it might be like to reach it. The principle is the same as with the runner who constantly visualizes themselves winning an Olympic gold medal, months before the actual race: the visualization helps the reality come true.

25

So put your mental eyes back on the loving eyes of the Teacher sitting in front of you—get that clear in your mind first. Then step back inside your head to the deep, very middle of your mind. Imagine that you are looking down into the mind, and that there is a small seed there.

This seed is perhaps the shape of a rice grain, a little wider in the middle, with ends that are not as pointy as rice. It always helps in meditation if you can picture things as being shiny, or luminous—giving off their own light. It keeps the mind from getting drowsy.

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And so for the seed, you may want to make it a shining silver color.

26

Now imagine the seed cracking open, and then through this crack between the seed's two halves emerges an image made of light. This is the image of the Teacher sitting in front of you. The image flies out of the mind and out towards the parts of your Teacher: their arms and legs, their face, their eyes.

The image settles down onto these parts like a bird settling on a branch; the picture unifies these parts into one solid whole: your Teacher.

Run through the seed splitting open; the luminous image emerging, and then settling, and the finished Teacher making their appearance. Then repeat the process, five or six times: five or six seeds opening into your Teacher.



27

Remember how Love, in his poem, talked about "spinning the Wheel, and spinning it back." We spin the Wheel of Pain back into the Wheel of Happiness by learning *how the seeds for our Teacher—and our life and happiness—got planted in the first place*, and then working to repeat the process, endlessly. To keep re-investing the seeds, we first need to review some of the laws of karma.

28

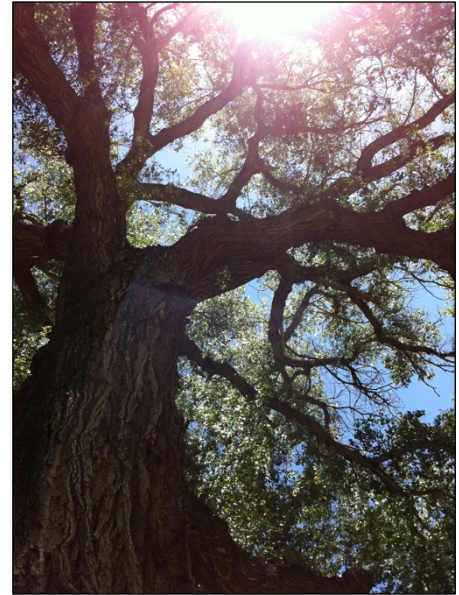
The first Law of Karma says that the seed for anything came from *sharing* something—something of the same general type. What our life Teacher has granted us is knowledge and wisdom; and so when we planted the seed for them, we must have shared, with someone else, knowledge and wisdom.

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29

The second Law of Karma says that the seed for anything was *a lot smaller* than what grew out of the seed—as in nature, where the seed for a tree weighing tons was only a few grams itself.

With these two laws in mind, we're going to take a little trip to find the events that first planted the seeds in our mind to meet this great Teacher in our life. What good thing did we do, for someone else, to plant this Teacher?



30

The beautiful trick here is to very strongly *remember* what it is that plants a seed—what it is that turns the seed-recorder on in our mind! And this is seeing ourselves do something, or hearing ourselves say something, or even think something.

Which is to say, I must have *done* something in the past, that I was aware of, that planted the silver seed which is even right now opening up into the image of this beautiful Teacher in my life.

Our next step in the Lion's Dance is to *find* this event.

31

Again, we're going to start by using our *imagination*. There will come a day when we can use our meditation eyes to actually *see* the day we planted our Teacher, many lifetimes ago, but for now we're just going to let our imagination run wild and come up with an imaginary event, long ago, that planted our Teacher seed.

The principle here is solid. Remember that *everything* in our life, outside of us and inside of us, is coming from mental seeds—and those are coming from things we did to others, in the past. And so when we close our eyes and just fantasize about what kindness we might have done—perhaps hundreds of years ago—to plant our Teacher, *the images that come to us at random are not random at all*: every least one of them is also coming from the

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pattern of how we have lived our life, and lives.

And so the images that come into our mind when we just freely fantasize about what we might have done to plant our Teacher really *did* have something to with planting them. If we keep us this step of the Dance of the Lion, then one day the imagining will become real: we will actually, directly experience that joyful event in one of our

past lives when we planted the Teacher who has guided us in this present life.

32

So let your imagination go wild! You will get little flashes of pictures, little clues, about that crucial past-life moment each time you meditate; and over weeks and months of effort, you will start to build up a narrative, an increasingly clearer story, constructed of all these clues. Keep going!

33

Near the end of your meditation period, you will get a sense when the past-life details are slowing down. That's a sign to come back to the present. Gently bring your mind back to the face and eyes of the Teacher, and connect steadily with them.

This is the point where we can try to go from thinking about the Wheel of Life—about where our life has come from—into purposely thinking about emptiness. The first of these is a positive thing: we were trying to locate a specific past-life event. The second is negative: the understanding that there is *nothing* that *doesn't* come from a previous event. Which is to say, there is nothing that *doesn't* come from seeds.

And that's emptiness.

34

So come back now to the Teacher's eyes, caring for you so much, and flowing themselves from the seeds that were planted during the story of your past lives that you were just

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exploring. Then imagine those eyes just existing out there, without any seeds from you. Finally, come back to eyes that are flowing from the seeds within your mind.

Alternate back and forth a few times between these two Teachers; try to get a feel for the difference between them. The Teacher that comes from seeds makes sense: Everything we ever see, everyone we ever meet, is perfect justice. We can only experience what we have shared with others, good or bad. In a world where the Teacher comes from how I have treated others, there is a logic to the universe.

And then there's the Teacher who just happened to appear in my life, with no special cause, no special logic. Just happened. Something wonderful happened to make my life better, but just by accident—the Teacher could just as well been a someone who hated me and tried to hurt me, because there is no logic to the universe.

Try to get a feeling for how wrong this feels.

35

Now try something a little more difficult. Focus on the Teacher who just happened by accident—the one that we know doesn't really make sense, the one that we know isn't actually there.

The fact that this “apparently real but really unreal” Teacher is *not* there is itself a kind of space: a gap in the things that are. See if you can connect with that space, and then squeeze into it mentally, and stay there for a few minutes.

This is the biggest quiet of all—way more quiet than the last of the 8 levels, trying not to think or to think, or any of the lower levels.

See if you can feel the difference between this quiet and those other quiets. The others are just a temporary slowing down of the mind, as it races downhill over the snow

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towards death. Sure, maybe you can hold up the sleigh for a few minutes or hours, but then when you come out of those meditations, it will tip and start racing down again. There's no future down there, just falling apart, then dying.

The quiet of the empty space though is different—the place where there are no longer any illusions, no Teacher telling you everything is just random, just an accident. This space is truth. And truth, even in the silence of what was never there, has an infinite power.



Every minute that you can stay in this space actively pushes you out of the Wheel of Pain, into the sea of freedom.

Sources for the Dance

Here are the sources for the Dance of the Lion. The main poem here, again, is by the future Buddha, whose name is Love, or Maitreya in Sanskrit. This book is from 350AD and is called *The Jewel of Realizations*.

The Sanskrit name for “Lion's Dance” here is *Sinha Vijirimbhita*, which can also refer to the way that a lion shakes his mane as he roars in power. This is traditionally explained as meaning that by the time we reach the real Stopping Meditation we become fearless—no more fear of wrong ideas about how reality works, since now we understand the the truth of it: we saw the seeds opening.

The present Buddha, Gautama—who lived 2,500 years ago—describes the Dance and carefully lists each of its 9 Deeps in the tenth part of his *Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Lines*, and we have followed that. He covers additional details on the extended version of the Dance in his *Perfection of Wisdom in 20,000 lines*, as well as in the *Perfection in 18,000 lines*. A comparison of these versions is very enlightening.

We have also utilized Gautama Buddha's *Meditation on the Seal of Wisdom*, and a quoted, parallel sutra called *The Dance of the Elephant*.

The Lion's Dance *A meditation for the Wheel of Life*

Details on the four Form Realm Meditations, and the different components present in each one, came from the excellent presentation of Tsonawa Sherab Sangpo, a Tibetan master of vowed morality (*vinaya*) who lived 800 years ago.

Details of the Formless Realm Meditations are from Gyaltsab Je Darma Rinchen (1364-



1432), commenting upon the explanation of Love's great poem by his teacher Je Tsongkapa (seen here). And of course Je Tsongkapa himself was enamored of the Dance, describing its details in multiple commentaries upon the poem and emptiness.

Gyaltsab Je's brother disciple was Kedrup Je Gelek Pel Sangpo (1385-1438), who wrote a long and exquisite discussion of the Lion's Dance section of the poem in his *Great Presentation of the Interlude on Emptiness: A Classical Commentary*

which Opens the Eyes of the Fortunate, Clarifying Perfectly the Profound Concept of Emptiness, the Suchness of All Things.

The classic presentation of the levels of the Form & Formless Realms where we are reborn if we make the mistake of stopping our meditation there is found in the great *Treasure House of Wisdom (Abhidharma Kosha)* written by Asanga's famous half-brother, Vasubandhu (350AD). Here we have utilized the solid commentary to it by Gyalwa Gendun Drup, the First Dalai Lama (1391-1474).

We are also relying heavily on an excellent and very detailed commentary on how the Dance of the Lion gets us off the Wheel of Life, written by Ngawang Tashi of the Clan of Sey (1638-1738). We have as well spent a lot of time with Sera Jetsun Chukyi Gyeltsen (1469-1546), a textbook writer from the famed Sera Monastery of Tibet who wrote volumes on Love's poem, and was so intrigued by Stopping Meditation that he wrote a separate book about it.

It would take too much space to list where we found each of the details of the Dance, but we should credit here the other authors whose works we consulted:

❖ Jamyang Shepay Dorje (1648-1721), the masterful textbook writer

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from Tibet's Drepung Monastery, and beloved teacher of
Ngawang Tashi above

- ❖ Gelong Sherab Wangpo (1500-1586), an important commentator for the writings of Je Tsongkapa on emptiness
- ❖ Geshe Drolungpa Lodru Jungne (c. 1050), author of the famed *Great Book on the Steps of the Teachings*
- ❖ Konchok Tenpay Drunme (1762-1823), commentator on the Wheel
- ❖ Chujey Ngawang Pelden (b. 1806), a brilliant Mongol scholar of Love's great poem
- ❖ Choney Lama Drakpa Shedrup (1675-1748), perhaps the most "western" and accessible of all commentators on Love's verses
- ❖ Gungtang Lodru Gyatso (1851-1930), writing on Love's verses from Amdo in northeast Tibet
- ❖ Kedrup Tenpa Dargye (1493-1568), the unequaled commentator on the verses from Sera Mey Tibetan Monastery
- ❖ Lobsang Chukyi Gyeltsen (1565-1662), the famed first Panchen Lama, and writer on the verses

The best source for the story of Master Asanga's time in the cave, and the dog on his shoulders, comes from *Biographies of the Masters of the Teachings on the Steps of the Path*, a massive and authoritative account by the Tibetan Tsechok Ling Yeshe Gyeltsen (1713-1793). We added some details from other authors.

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Over the Top

Parts 3 & 4 of the Lion's Dance



Diamond Mountain
Retreat Center
April, 2018

Over the Top

Parts 3 & 4 of the Lion's Dance

Why do we call it “Over the Top”?

The famous meditation known as the Lion's Dance—taught by both our own Buddha and by the coming Buddha, Maitreya—includes five different parts. In this session at Diamond Mountain Retreat Center in April, 2018, we will cover the third and fourth parts, for the first time.

Parts 3 to 5 of the Lion's Dance together have their own technical name in the special meditation terminology of Buddhism. They are called “Over-The-Top Meditation” — which is *Vyatikrantaka Samapatti* in the Sanskrit, and *Tugel Gyi Nyompar Jukpa* (*Thod-rgal gyi snyoms-par 'jug-pa*) in the corresponding Tibetan.

The point is that we will purposely be climbing up a ladder of deeper and deeper focus. At the top, we'll drop into an incredibly important Emptiness Meditation. And then we'll go “over the top” and back down the ladder to the beginning.

The whole thing is like a pole vaulter going up; crossing the bar; and dropping back down on the other side. We'll go up and down a number of different ways, as an exercise to sharpen our focus deeper and deeper. Thus the 5 different parts to the Lion's Dance.

The text message that wasn't

To really understand the process of these 5 parts to the Dance, a little story is very useful. You come home from work a little earlier than usual, and as you open the front door, you see your wife or husband standing in the living room. They are looking down at a text message on their phone with a big silly smile plastered on their face.

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As you walk in, they get a panicked look and quickly hide the phone behind their back. You say, "What were you looking at, honey?" and they answer, "Oh, just nothing."

Immediately a worry comes into your mind that maybe they were texting someone they met today—maybe at lunch at work, or on the way home. Maybe they even have a secret girlfriend or boyfriend!

You go on with your evening, but you can't get the suspicion out of your mind—it's really eating you up. Later on, your partner goes into the bathroom to take a shower, and they leave their phone on the table outside. You know it's not right but you can't help yourself, and you check their messages around the time when you came home.

And there you see that your partner has received a message from an online store letting them know that the secret present they ordered for you, for your birthday next week, will be delivered on time.

And so actually my partner was smiling about the surprise gift they had chosen, for me! When they come out of the shower you give them a specially strong hug—they don't know why, but you both enjoy it deeply. A happy ending.

Keep this little allegory in mind as we go through the new parts of the Lion's Dance.

The first 4 parts of the Dance

Here is a summary of the four parts of the Lion's Dance we'll be doing during this session.

Lion's Dance Part 1

Continue each numbered section for 10 or 20 breaths, depending on time available for your meditation today.

◆ The World Of Desire

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- 1) Take your meditation posture. Remember to turn off your cellphone. If you have a lot of time today, do your meditation preliminaries first. For this you can use the "Jorchu Meditation Song" from the Three Treasures prayer book.
- 2) Next, close your eyes and go immediately to a sound in the room, such as that of an air conditioner or heater; a refrigerator; children in another room, or traffic outside. Technically, this is known as the "World Of Desire."
- 3) Glue your mind to the sound. Here and in the 8 levels to follow, we are practicing *focus*, not *content*. Can you keep your mind deep & contented inside the sound, for 10 or 20 breaths?

◆ The Eight Levels of Balanced Meditation

- 4) The next step in Part 1 of the Dance is moving into what we call the "Eight Levels of Balanced Meditation." You can picture the whole Lion's Dance like a hotel. The lobby downstairs is the "World Of Desire." Then we take an elevator up through 8 different floors to get to the "Meditation On Stopping" at the 9th floor. (Here we are numbering the floors as they do in Europe: the next floor above the lobby is #1, and so on.) This is our goal; the eight floors between, and the lobby, are just ways of bringing our mind into deeper, more silent focus.
- 5) The first of the eight is called "Level One of the World Of Beauty." With your eyes closed, "look down" at your heart, and hear it beating in your chest. If the room and your meditation are not quiet enough to hear it beat, even in your ears, then try to feel the beating physically. Stay in focus on that—deeper than the refrigerator or similar sound.
- 6) Second level of the World Of Beauty: Drill down even deeper with your concentration. Pretend you are sitting inside the chamber of your heart, and it is beating around you, and you have no awareness of the world beyond the walls of the beating heart.
- 7) Third level of the World Of Beauty: Stay in the heart chamber but send the beating to a deeper level, as if it were several meters away from you, and increasingly smaller and smaller.
- 8) Fourth level of the World Of Beauty: Imagine a *very* tiny crystal of sugar, or a diamond crystal, deep down inside the silent darkness at the middle of your heart. Drill your focus

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deeper, and then walk yourself and your mind inside the crystal, and close the door behind you. Your focus now is a very strong, stable, single point.

9) Now we drill deeper, into the four levels of what is called "The World Beyond The Physical." The first of these is known as "The Endless Sky." Break out of the tiny crystal and let your mind spread left and right, as wide as the ocean. Once you have the ocean clear, with a perfectly still surface, then drop a pebble in the middle of the sea and mentally follow a ripple as it spreads left and right. The ripple keeps going beyond the horizon—it never stops. Keep following the ripple, farther & farther away.

10) Next is "The Endless Mind." Drop the ocean and imagine your own awareness at the center of everything in the universe. Now, as if you were turning on a light bulb, "turn on" your awareness. Pure awareness bursts out from the center of your mind like light, and travels further and further, to the very corners of the universe and beyond—never stopping. Inevitably there must be people doing this same meditation on other planets; imagine that your own awareness, as it passes their world, touches and mixes with theirs on the way.

11) The third level here is "Nothing At All." As if you were turning *off* a light, shut down all the processes of your mind. No feeling, no awareness, no this or that. If a thought comes up, block it actively. Stay in the nothing. (There is a famous mistake of stopping here and thinking it is useful: that this is emptiness. It is surely not, and there is no good karmic result you can get at all by stopping here. We are simply doing mental meditation exercises to sharpen our focus: the **useful content** is coming later.)

12) Now the fourth level, called "Neither Thinking Nor Not Thinking." With every one of these eight levels (4+4) we are drilling deeper & deeper in our focus, going to a more and more silent place. In the last level, "Nothing At All," we were actively blocking random thoughts and feelings. But that in itself is a bit of mental "noise"; so now we just let go and allow random thoughts to float through the mind: we observe, but we do not block. A deeper kind of quiet. But again, *don't stop here*. It's a deeper concentration, like a more powerful microscope, but so far *there's nothing useful that the microscope is looking at*. We are just sharpening our concentration tools.

13) We have finished the "Eight Levels of Balanced Meditation," and hopefully we have reached a place where we are completely free of the extremes of mental sleepiness and mental busyness. Now that our focus is perfectly deep and silent, we have to put this

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focus on something *useful*, which is technically called “The Meditation On Stopping.” The great books of Buddhism define the “stopping” here as emptiness itself.

◆ **The Meditation On Stopping, or Emptiness**

14) Bring to mind one of the important teachers in your life. Our mother and father are our first great teachers; or perhaps there was another family member who was especially influential in your growth; or a school teacher, a sports coach, a spiritual guide such as a priest or rabbi, your spouse or partner, or the person who taught you your profession. Choose one of these teachers and bring them to mind. For tomorrow's meditation session, it could be the same teacher, or a different one.

15) Try to remember the first time that you met this person. Get a feeling for this wonderful accident: after all, we didn't choose our parents, it just happened that we were born to them. Many of us met our life-partner for example on the street, or in a bus, or at a dinner or party, just randomly. Think about how you got to the point of meeting, and how they got there: maybe they came in a car, or walked down the sidewalk, or took a plane. Think about what they, and you, went through to grow up, to have this meeting.

16) Now guess what! This idea of “I just met them” is completely, totally wrong! *A teacher that you “just met” is exactly the same as the text message from the secret girlfriend or boyfriend!* That is, you *thought* something was going on, but it wasn't—it was *nothing at all!* Everything was just a huge mis-perception! In the same way, a teacher that you “just met” doesn't exist at all. And they didn't *come to the meeting* in a car or a plane or a bus. They came to the meeting *from the karmic seeds in your own mind*. And those seeds were planted by some very, very good things that you did in the past—even in a past life. Try to pause here and **stop** the idea that you met them by accident: **stop** the picture of a teacher who just showed up in your life. This is real Stopping Meditation.

◆ **Meditation on the Wheel of Life**

17) In his instructions on the Lion's Dance, the future Buddha—Lord Maitreya—advises us to go into a meditation on the Wheel of Life after the Stopping Meditation. (Another expression for “Wheel of Life” here would be “Dependent Origination”: both are references to the way that our life is coming out of causes which we planted earlier.)

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18) Here's how we go to the Wheel of Life. Think about the one or two things that you like best about the teacher in front of you: maybe they are particularly patient, or gentle. Which means that, in the past, *you* must have been particularly patient or gentle *yourself*, to plant the seeds for those perceptions.

19) Once you've chosen a few of your teacher's special qualities, then go looking for what you did to plant them. Here we are going to peek into our past lives; even though we may not have the ability to see the events of those past lives directly, pretend at this point that you can. First try to bring a *country* to mind where you might have been living. Go for the first country that comes to mind—after all, there are seeds in your mind even for what you choose to imagine, and so there is some truth to what you select. And then choose a time in history: it could be an hour ago, or hundreds of years ago.

20) Now imagine who you were in that time and country; what kind of town or city that you lived in; what you did for a living; who might have been in your family. And then imagine some actual scenes from the past life when you might have planted the qualities you see in your teacher today. If your teacher is particularly patient, for example, then you can fantasize about several incidents say when you were living in a village in India, and you were calm and forgiving when someone did something to hurt you or your family. Imagine that this planted the seeds that are opening now, into your patient teacher.

20) Once you've got the past incident pinpointed, come back to the space within the very center of your mind in this life. Imagine a small chamber there; and in the chamber is a shape very similar to a bird's nest. Laying in the bird's nest are five silver eggs: these are the seeds you planted in that past life. They are glistening, and you can feel that they are about to open.

21) Now imagine that a crack appears on the side of one of the eggs. It opens wider, and then out comes a tiny, luminous image of your perfectly patient teacher. This image emerges from the egg; travels forward to the back of your forehead; and then passes out through the forehead and flies towards the teacher sitting in front of you. It feels like a hologram of your teacher, headed towards the teacher.

22) Imagine that the hologram settles over your teacher like a coat—and then you see the patience of your teacher shining even brighter. Now go back to the second of the five seeds, and repeat the process. Continue until the last seed has opened and settled. Finally,

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sit for a few more moments, enjoying the beautiful qualities of your teacher, and strongly aware of why you are seeing them: because you yourself have been patient, and planted the seeds.

Lion's Dance Part 2

23) In the second main part of the Lion's Dance, we return back down the elevator to the first level of the World Of Beauty (but not all the way down to the World Of Desire). The purpose of this entire section is only to strengthen our meditation focus skills: the content is not so important, and of course it is of very little importance compared to Emptiness & Seeds. Keep this fact in mind and avoid getting attached to these lower steps as something spiritually important, beyond exercising your ability to focus.

24) Begin with the fourth level of the World Beyond The Physical, which is Neither Thinking Nor Not Thinking. Thoughts passing through the mind without getting attached to them, or trying to block them. Just staying as silent as you can while you watch. You might want to devote only half the breaths to the descent than you did to the ascent: so if you were staying at each level for 10 or 20 breaths on the way up, now 5 or 10 breaths on the way down.

25) Next we descend to the third level of this World: a little "louder" than the level we were just at. We try to turn off the mind, and work to block distracting thoughts or feelings.

26) Back to the second level: our awareness as a light, returning back to the center from which it flew when we turned the light on.

27) Back to the first level: ripples returning to the center from an endless horizon, atop a perfectly peaceful sea.

28) Now down through the four levels of the World Of Beauty. At the fourth, starting with the mind within the tiny crystal, and then exiting the door of the crystal to the larger space within the heart at a distance.

29) Third level of the World Of Beauty: deep inside the center of the heart, tiny, watching the heart beat from a distance.

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30) Second level: silent within the chamber of the heart, feeling it beat around us.

31) First level of the World Of Beauty: watching the heart beat from the outside, from “above” as we look down. Again, note that—this time—we do not continue down as far as the World Of Desire (the sound of the refrigerator or air conditioner). And now we are ready for the third part of the Dance.

Lion's Dance Part 3

32) Next we do a simple ascent through the eight levels of the World Of Beauty and the World Beyond The Physical. It's as if we're trying to get more familiar with a “simple ascent” before we add some more complexity to push our abilities of focus even higher, with what we call a “staggered ascent.”

33) World Of Beauty level 1: Heartbeat.

34) World Of Beauty level 2: Heartbeat from within the chamber of the heart.

35) World Of Beauty level 3: Heartbeat at a distance within the chamber.

36) World Of Beauty level 4: Within the tiny crystal.

37) World Beyond The Physical, level 1: Ocean ripples to beyond the horizon.

38) World Beyond The Physical, level 2: Light of awareness out beyond the stars.

39) World Beyond The Physical, level 3: Turn off mind, fight thoughts.

40) World Beyond The Physical, level 4: Turn off mind, don't fight thoughts.

41) Now for Level 9 (this is where we “get off” the elevator, as if there were a restaurant on the ninth floor of the hotel, serving a delicious breakfast). Choose a life teacher, and think of the “normal” causes of why I met them.

42) Reject a teacher who just showed up in my life from normal causes (remember the non-reality of any text message from a secret boyfriend or girlfriend). This is Meditation On Stopping, or Emptiness Meditation.

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43) Choose a beautiful quality of our teacher.

44) Imaginary trip to my past life to discover what I did to plant the silver seeds to see this wonderful quality. Country, occupation, family, actions. This is a Wheel Of Life Meditation, or we can also say a Dependent Origination Meditation.

45) Back to the teacher in front of me, watching those silver seeds open into holograms that fly out and "coat" my teacher, making them who they are.

46) A moment's reflection that this is how my teacher *really* came to me.

Lion's Dance Part 4

47) Now we're ready for the fourth part of the Dance. Without going level by level back down to the first level of the World Of Beauty, we just skip to it and start climbing up again.

48) World Of Beauty, level 1: Heartbeat.

49) Now we insert a Stopping Meditation (Emptiness Meditation). Imagine normal reasons for meeting the same teacher as in Part 3 above. Cancel a teacher that could come from these normal reasons: it's as unreal and non-existent as a text message from a non-existent secret girlfriend or boyfriend. Think of one lovely quality of teacher. Imaginary exploration of past life to find seeds for seeing this quality. Watching silver seeds open into this quality (Wheel Of Life Meditation, also called Dependent Origination Meditation). Brief reflection on the fact that this is really how the quality and the teacher appeared in my life.

50) Immediately jump back into World Of Beauty, level 2: Heartbeat from within the chamber of the heart.

51) Immediately jump back to a briefer version of Stopping Meditation just described.

52) Jump back to World Of Beauty, level 3: Heartbeat at a distance within the chamber.

53) Jump back to brief Stopping Meditation.

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- 54) Jump back to World Of Beauty, level 4: Within the tiny crystal.
- 55) Jump back to brief Stopping Meditation.
- 56) Jump to World Beyond The Physical, level 1: Ocean ripples beyond the horizon.
- 57) Jump to brief Stopping Meditation.
- 58) Jump to World Beyond The Physical, level 2: Light of awareness out beyond the stars.
- 59) Jump to brief Stopping Meditation.
- 60) Jump to World Beyond The Physical, level 3: Turn off mind, fight thoughts.
- 61) Jump to brief Stopping Meditation.
- 62) Jump to World Beyond The Physical, level 4: Turn off mind, don't fight thoughts.
- 63) Conclude with a more leisurely Stopping Meditation, and Wheel Of Life Meditation. You might even go exploring for the seeds of a different quality of your teacher, to plant seeds for tomorrow's session—when you will focus the Dance on that quality.
- 64) To conclude the entire Dance session, three long exhales, imagining that each one is golden light, sharing the exquisite seeds of the whole meditation session with your family, friends, community, country, and planet—to make a perfect world of perfectly happy people.

Note on multiple sessions

A meditation in 64 steps can sound pretty intimidating, and it is! And we're not even finished with the entire Lion's Dance: there's a Part 5 which we will learn at our next retreat. The 4 parts of the Dance as we see them here in this presentation are going to require a meditation session of an hour or more.

That's fine, and—as a life goal—one hour of good strong meditation is perfect for our ultimate spiritual aim, which is to see emptiness directly. If though you cannot meditate

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this long during any one particular session, you are welcome to go as far as you can through the 64 steps; take a break for as long as you need; and then continue with the rest of the steps.

And you can do this as many times as you feel you need. Be aware though that your meditation goal is a single solid hour: this is what you need to see emptiness directly, and truly be of help to yourself and the entire world.

Good luck! Work hard! Take on this responsibility, for the sake of others.

Fifth & Final

The Conclusion of the Complete Dance of the Lion

The fifth and final section of the Lion's Dance can be presented quite easily, without need of much explanation. Remember that, technically speaking, the third through the fifth parts are given their own separate name: "Over the Top."



From step #63 above, continue as follows:

64) Now step down to Level 4 of the World Beyond The Physical, purposely turning off the mind, and refusing to wrestle with any random thoughts, images, or feelings as they may arise and float through the mind. If you observe any of these, simply decline to engage with them.

65) From there, show off your meditation prowess—and make it even more muscular—by jumping out to the Desire Realm sound you were focusing on at the very beginning, whether it be an air conditioner or heater; a refrigerator; children in another room, traffic outside, or anything similar which is available at the moment. Stay here for 10 or for 20 breaths.

66) Now jump back into Level 3 of the World Beyond The Physical: turning off the mind, but actively confronting and repelling any of these random thoughts, images, or feelings, in order to keep the mind turned off. This is a "noisier" place than when you just let them float, without any engagement. Stay for the same number of breaths as before. We will continue with the same number of breaths you choose here, in each of the concluding steps.

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67) Jump back to the Desire Realm sound. Again, you are building up your mental and meditational strength with this and the remaining steps below. Remember, it's not that these are "real" meditations which have any very beneficial object. They are simply methods of increasing your meditation strength, as we come out of our ultimately beneficial meditations on Stopping and the Wheel of Life.

68) Jump back to Level 2 of the World Beyond The Physical: this time we will focus on the empty blue sky above the vast sea of a darker blue.

69) Jump back to the Desire Realm sound.

70) Jump back to Level 1 of the World Beyond The Physical: deep blue, infinite ocean.

71) Back to Desire Realm sound.

72) Back to Level 4 of the World of Beauty: deep, single-pointed silence inside the spacious and sun-filled sugar crystal.

72) To Desire Realm sound.

73) Level 3 of the World of Beauty: inner room in the sunshiny penthouse of the heart, the beating outside walls just audible in the distance.

74) Desire Realm sound.

75) Level 2 of the World of Beauty: inside the beating heart.

76) Desire Realm sound.

77) Level 1 of the World of Beauty: back inside our body, observing the heart beating from our usual perspective, which for many of us will feel like "looking down" at the heart from the head.

78) Don't return yet though to the room in which you are meditating. First focus once more on your teacher, sitting in front of you, gazing on you with affection as you yourself have your eyes closed in meditation.

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Feel a hope that your teacher will stay with you, all day long, for the rest of the day, guiding and supporting you. In your heart, request them to do so.

They agree happily, and slowly begin to rise up into the air, off their cushion. As they rise, they begin to shrink in size, until they are about as big as your hand. They come over your head and then turn around in mid-air; now, they are facing the same direction that you are.

Their body settles softly upon the top of your head, lightly, with a noticeable warmth seeping down into you.

You ask your teacher if they could come into your heart, and stay there during the coming day, for help and inspiration. Again they joyfully agree, and shrink to the size of your thumbnail. This thumbnail-sized teacher then begins to sink into your body, from the top of your head.

Imagine that they descend down the central channel, moving slowly like warm honey, to your heart. And then they take up residence there, bright and happy, always there to turn to when you need help or encouragement.

With this, you have finally completed all five stages of an entire Lion's Dance!