

THREE PRECISE KNOWINGS from TIMELESS TREASURES

Third Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche

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Please understand that words alone are of no use. Only by understanding and integrating the genuine meaning of the words of the Buddhadharma into your life will your mind find peace.

The crux of Buddhist practice is developing what are called the three prajnas. Prajna is a Sanskrit term, which translates as something like transcendent knowledge, superior knowledge, or precise knowledge. It simply refers to knowing in a way that is clear-cut, accurate, and refined: precise knowing. Each of the three core Buddhist practice activities of listening to, contemplating, and meditating on the Dharma generate one corresponding prajna, or precise knowing.

Listening refers, of course, to hearing the teachings, but also to reading, discussing, or otherwise learning the literal sense of Buddhadharma. You can think of it as the prajna that comes from listening is knowing the literal sense of the terms presented in the teachings: a correct intellectual understanding of the content of a particular topic.

Next comes contemplating the meaning of the teachings received. We dissect the understanding gained in the first step, using valid reasoning. In essence, we are digesting the prajna that comes from listening, extracting the nutrients. Contemplation yields a second prajna, the knowing gained from contemplation. This is also an intellectual understanding, but of a deeper and more sustained character than the first.

Lastly, the practitioner cultivates familiarity with the genuine meaning of the words of the teaching through meditation. This is the process of infusing the mind with the knowing gained through contemplation. It is accomplished in formal meditation sessions, by alternately bringing to mind certainty about the topic under contemplation, then remaining in steady meditative equipoise with that certainty as the object of meditation.

This produces the prajna gained from meditation. The remainder of the path consists of strengthening and expanding the prajna that comes of meditation to its full strength.

This third prajna is experiential knowing rather than intellectual understanding. Developing it is the aim of practice, the faculty that illuminates the true nature just as it is. It relies, however, on first developing the prajna gained from contemplation, which in turn depends on the prajna that comes of listening.

LISTEN • CONTEMPLATE • MEDITATE

Note that this is a single process with three overlapping phases within it. While it is a valuable and important first step, listening to and understanding the teachings on a literal level alone is not sufficient. If the prajna that comes from contemplating what one has understood through listening does not arise, subsequently the prajna that arises from meditating on the deeper meaning gained through contemplation will be absent, and we remain unable to integrate the teachings.

The measure of completion of this process is qualitative rather than quantitative—you cannot gauge success through the number of hours or days or years invested. Rather, success is established along the lines of a popular Tibetan principle of practice:

The sign of correct listening and contemplating is that mind becomes peaceful and calm. The sign of correct meditation is that emotional affliction diminishes.

The sequence of listening, contemplating, and meditating is repeated with every Dharma teaching you encounter. Once we follow the sequence through to developing the prajna acquired through meditation, we then carefully nurture that precise knowing, cultivating it to greater and greater intensity through repeated practice.

Prajna—precise knowledge or knowing—becomes an integral part of our daily lives through the combined process of listening, contemplating, and meditating. First we listen to the Buddha's teachings. From that, we develop the prajna gained from listening.

Understanding the content of the teachings through listening or reading gives rise to the prajna and frees you from the obscuration of ignorance. Precise knowledge of the meaning of the words, obtained through contemplation, overcomes the thick darkness of doubt, the state of being equivocal about the subject matter of the teachings received. The prajna coming from meditation gives direct access to the true nature of things.

The teachings are very vast and profound. This threefold organic process of development progresses from learning the correct view presented in the teachings, to deeply understanding it with increasing subtlety. Each new level of prajna builds on the previous one. Once you attain some measure of understanding through listening and contemplating, you cultivate familiarity with that view through meditation.

By repeating the process again and again with each aspect of the Dharma, rather than restricting it to a one-time event, meditation progressively instills a vivid experience of the certainty generated through contemplation that accords with the words of the Buddha. The integrative force generated by the prajna gained from meditation steadily informs your conduct more and more over time. Eventually, your actions become automatically align with the view integrated through meditation.

Incorporating the Dharma in your life means just that—living with correct view, meditation, and conduct in harmony.

ASPIRE TO THE THREE PRAJNAS

Rangjung Dorje, the third Karmapa, includes in his Aspiration Prayer of Mahamudra this brief but rich statement on the roles of listening, contemplating, and meditating.

*Listening to scriptures and reasonings dispels the obscurations of ignorance,
Contemplating the pith instructions conquers the darkness of doubt,
Meditation's light illuminates the true nature just as it is — May the
brilliance of the three prajnas flourish!*

Consider using this as a basis for building your own practice of setting the intention accurately to integrate the Buddha's teachings.

STUDY VERSUS MEDITATION

There are two different approaches to integrating the teachings of Dharma.

The first approach is study-focused, with emphasis on listening and contemplating. You listen to the teachings and contemplate the meaning thus gained, using valid reasoning, for an extended period of time— even over the course of many years. In this study-focused approach, the aim is to gain an accurate understanding of the correct view. This correct understanding then forms the basis for developing confidence.

By contemplating through valid reasoning the meaning of teachings you received, as applied to your own personal circumstances, you come to experience both the Dharma's objective validity and its subjective relevance. Over time, the initial manifestation of confidence increases. Then you engage in meditation on the subject matter studied.

Meditation, in Tibetan *gom* (Tib. *sgom*), simply means to cultivate familiarity with something, such that you become habituated to it. Certainty comes about through meditation practice—in other words, by cultivating familiarity with the knowledge acquired and refined through study, you develop conviction in the underlying subject matter.

By contrast, the second approach begins with deep confidence and faith in the Buddhadharmā. This does not mean, however, that it does away with any knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. Actually, even in this faith-based approach, you need a rudimentary understanding of the core subject matter. The difference lies in emphasis, as compared to the study approach.

Here, the focus is not on extensive study, but on meditation, to gradually experience the correct view presented by the Buddha in practice. In short, it is possible to develop correct Buddhist view through either intensive study combined with meditation or mainly meditation alongside a fundamental understanding of Dharma.

The important thing to remember is that both approaches incorporate all three elements of listening, contemplating, and meditating, differing only in the emphasis accorded to each, depending on the temperament of the practitioner. Neither study nor meditation alone is sufficient, as Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye describes in this vivid analogy:

*Meditating without view Is like a blind person wandering across a vast plain.
Study without meditation Is like scaling the face of a cliff without arms.*

Please be aware of these two possibilities in your practice. Consider carefully what these two approaches have in common, and which best suits your temperament. This is what is relevant in evaluating which method to apply—in and of themselves, each is equally beneficial. Yet, both approaches require active participation, and both stress meditation as indispensable.