

# Three Aa Practice

Extract taken from 'The Happy Twins: Dzogchen and Mahamudra'<sup>1</sup>

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## Three Aa Guru Yoga Practice

Guru yoga practice is also about trust. In this practice we imagine in the space in front of us – about two arms' length distance – a white syllable Aa. You can imagine it in the Tibetan form ཨཱ or as a capital A. This represents emptiness. It is the ground of everything. Coming out of it is five-coloured light: white, red, blue, green and yellow, which represent the manifestation of all the potential of samsara and nirvana: the five poisons, the five wisdoms and the five elements. This is the potential of the ground. This is the heart of Samantabhadra. This is the heart of the primordial buddha.

We then recite the sound of Aa three times, and as we recite this sound we release ourselves from our memories, our plans, our thoughts and our fixations. Aa is just dissolving everything back into its source, just as we go 'Aa' in ma-ma, pa-pa and ka-ka when we start to build up language. All language establishes itself and emanates from the sound of Aa, which is the most basic sound of the breath going through the voice-box. All language elaboration is a play on Aa. Aa is all words in all languages, in all sentences, in fairytale books, in comedy books, in pornography books. It is everything and every kind of communication. When we recite Aa, all its multiple forms of words and associations dissolve back into their ground of the sound of Aa, which is empty. All is Aa, and Aa is emptiness.

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<sup>1</sup> Two texts were studied on this retreat. The Mirror of Luminous Revelation (from Nuden Dorje Drophan Lingpa) and The Mahamudra Middle Way of the Ganges (from Tilopa).

We do this three times, and at the end of the third Aa, the Aa in front of us just dissolves, so we have this inner space and the outer space. We just sit sky to sky. In this open sky, clouds and rainbows arise – different thoughts, feelings, sensations. Just let them be there. The sky is not affected by the cloud, the rain, the storm, or the sunshine, it just passes through. We are just sitting and everything is passing through. Whatever arises comes and goes.

The function of the guru yoga is to bring into our awareness the unborn, uncreated givenness of the integrity of all the forms that emerge. There is no duality between manifestation and the ground, and there is no duality in the field of manifestation into subject and object. The guru is everything because the guru realises or awakens to the ground.

In order to do that we have to trust, and when we open, we open. Of course we have many residual thoughts and long-established beliefs of retraction, of pulling back, of centring things in ourselves. Whenever this occurs, don't act to try to change it, because as soon as you act you pump your energy into the situation.

Contact is energy exchange. If I push the wall behind me I am putting the energy of my hand into the wall, and because the wall is strong it doesn't fall over. A piece of wood would fall over. The contact and energy flows out, so in the same way, in your mind, when you lock on to a thought and say you like and want to keep it, or you don't like it and you want to get rid of it, that involvement is putting prana or life energy into the manifestation, and that energy then seems to give it more separated existence. That is why the meditation instruction is not to go after past thoughts, not to wait expectantly for future thoughts, and not to selectively adopt anything which arises and make it part of yourself.

Don't reject or abandon or push away anything which arises. Your mind is like a public space; it's not a private garden. It is like infinite wild moorland, or like the sky, or like the ocean; everything can come and go. You are not the owner, and you are not the boss, so relax – it's all just happening. The more you experience that the more you start to find this intrinsic freedom, the freedom which is there in the ground.

Remember the image of the mirror? Whatever arises in the mirror is free to arise, the mirror doesn't mind; it's not fussy and nor is it marked. This is our litmus test, our touchstone. In meditation practice, when you start to feel affected by what is going on, this is a sign that you have slipped into your ego formation and so you need to come back into the openness.

If you are practising this Three Aa practice at home, if you get very lost after a few minutes you can just say another Aa. These practices are for you, they are not some formal ritual thing you have to do in the right way. You are working with the circumstances of your existence. If you are getting very lost you just keep doing Aa, so you really feel relaxed and sit like that for a while; maybe you have some space for two or three minutes and then it's gone. That's okay; you can just do Aa again.

Be clear that the Aa is not an antidote to our habit of being fixated; it is a practice to help us simply slip out of the paradigm of fixation. For example, let's say you are in this room and you are looking around at the other people. You like some people and not others therefore you have some

bias. You might think, 'I shouldn't feel like that. I should practise equanimity.' So now you are consciously trying to think, 'I like you, I like you and I like you...' It is very busy. Or, you just become aware that 'I am in a space; there are walls and ceilings and floor, and in the space there are some shapes.' The more you focus on the space there is just shapes in space. You haven't altered the people but because you have opened up your field of attention, the particularity of these forms which you are meeting doesn't strike you so much. It is not an antidote; it is just giving yourself space which allows the manifesting forms not to be invested.

When the energy of investment is opened in space then it's like a beautiful calm summer's day. You are looking out and there is a blue sky and you can see far into the distance, and there isn't the slightest breeze. And then the wind blows and you see a tree moving, so you look at the tree because that movement has caught your attention, and that is what happens in the meditation. Calm, clear and open, and then up puffs the wind of your attachment and aversion and you are caught up in stuff. Always relax in space – the unborn open ground, the base, the fundament for all dzogchen practice.

If you are practising it on your own, it's very useful to do the Three Aa and sit for five minutes then take a little break, and then do it again and come back for another little five minute break and carry on like this.

The reason for this is that the goal is to awaken to the presence of the ground as the ground of your own manifestation. This is the function of the practice. If you find you are not in touch with this then, as the one who is doing the meditation, you are not doing dzogchen. You are striving and you are doing your best, but you have left the world that we are concerned with and you are back in your familiar world. Therefore, don't struggle and don't make effort.

There is no progress to make. The ground is here. We are not going from samsara to nirvana. We are not going from darkness to light. We are not going anywhere else; we are finding out how to relax and open and be where we are.

The very structure of the practice is minimal effort with optimal awakening. That is why it is very important not to think about your practice. There is no need to review whether you are making any progress, or to compare and contrast. 'Oh, yesterday my meditation was good but today it's bad so why is that?' Don't compare and contrast with other people either. Other people are other people and they have their luck.

When we meet together like this we try to have a very flat organisation with minimal hierarchy. We don't want any inside/outside groupings. We don't want any particular kind of specialness, because as soon as you have that then you have some kind of aspiration. 'I want to get ahead' or 'I want to be closer to the people who seem to be the important ones.' Many dharma groups function on that basis. From the point of view of dzogchen this is not helpful because the focus that you need to attend to is you. What other people are doing on the level of the practice is totally irrelevant. If you are ahead of them or behind them, so what? It doesn't matter. What matters is where are you? Because if you are looking at how they are doing you are not attending to yourself, and you are not present with yourself.

You are not a thing and if you want to find that you are not a thing, don't make other people things. Otherwise, how is 'this thing' in comparison to 'that thing'? Then you are back in duality. Again and again, we have to dismantle many of the assumptions that we learned in school about how to work out how we are getting on, where is our place in the class, what kind of marks have we got. It is a very dualistic structure and is not at all our concern. We say, "May all beings be happy just as they are and good luck to you all."

My focus of attention is my mind. When I find my mind, you are in my mind as the 'you for me'. 'You for you' has nothing to do with me because I can never get there, because if 'you for me' were a real thing then you would be other than me. The 'you for me' is my experience of you arising in the non-dual luminosity of our presence; both arise together as forms shifting and turning.

Namkhai Norbu used to say, "Don't enter into judgement." In order to judge you have to have a thing which can be judged, a set of criteria for judgement, and someone who is willing to be the judge. If you have these three operating you are not doing anything called dzogchen; you are just establishing hierarchies of phenomena. You are on the outside looking in.

Remember, don't keep the mind inside and the world outside. We are not looking at something other; we are opening to the co-emergence, the integrity, the wholeness, the dzog-pa, the completion of this moment.

## Breath and body

Everything is already within the mind, but your body may be showing you that when you make this sound of Aa there is not much generosity in your breath. Some people are very much trapped in upper chest breathing, and when they make the sound of Aa the sound dries up very quickly.

You want to let the breath arise from the hara – two and a half fingers below the navel – coming up through the diaphragm and filling the whole space. In that way you have an expansive feeling, which is inclusive. Everything is always included, but conceptualisation makes inclusion and exclusion, and so does the limitation of our breathing. Yesterday we touched on bringing the prana in the body towards the central channel. We can observe in our own body when we block our breath. If the diaphragm is tight, we breathe in a little bit and it blocks and so we can't have a deep open breath. If that is your situation then you can do some yoga breathing exercises, which are also useful.

From the dzogchen point of view, that is a much easier way to approach it because it bypasses the danger of getting trapped in technique. When you have technique you have agency and mastery; the better you become at something the more you feel 'I am the one who is doing it'. But that goes exactly against what we are trying to do here.

We want to experience movement by staying open and allowing it to flow through us. The breath and the movement of the body can flow without our inserting the thought that, 'I am the one that makes this happen. Your body is part of the world so don't hold it apart as your private domain.