

10 Sublimation—Tapping and Channeling Flow

In general, all systems of optimal integral process perfection stage involve the preliminary process of controlling the vital energies flowing through the two side channels, (called) luscious and succulent, and redirecting them into the central channel, (called) released. This is indispensable. There are numerous means for accomplishing this, based on the traditions of the Indian great adepts, who drew from the various tantric systems ... When these energies enter the central channel the four blisses are induced, and one cultivates meditation on the basis of these in such a way as to give rise to the innate wisdom of the great seal.

(Tsong Khapa, *A Book of Three Inspirations*¹)

Ascending the Diamond Ladder: The Gradual Path of Process Practice

Once we've opened our minds to our full altruistic potential with the arts of role-modeling imagery and narrative self-creation, we're ready to enter the final stage of process practice: the work of intuitive realization based on tapping and harnessing blissful openness. In some ways, this art is easier for us as moderns to conceive than the complex imagery of the creation stage. This is because of its intimate relationship with the contemplative map of the central nervous system, and its focus on non-conceptual flow states of intense bliss and clarity. In other ways, the work of this stage on the gradual path—traditionally seen as the *real* work of process practice—is even harder for us to wrap our minds around than the virtual simulations of the creation stage, since it involves transforming bliss states and their neural wetware from isolated peak experiences into the mind/body fabric of a whole new way of life.

Surprising or not, our mixed reception of the perfection stage and its blissful art is not unique to us as moderns, but seems to have been shared by our predecessors in ancient India and renaissance Tibet. In his overview of the perfection stage in the *Illuminating Lamp*, Tsong Khapa first relates why the founders of the “noble tradition” of process teaching and practice—Nagarjuna and Aryadeva—took such pains to explain the need for both the constructive and deconstructive arts on the process path, comparing their gradual stages to the rungs on a ladder.² To expand on this he cites the *Vajra Angel*:

In order to realize the core yoga
One should practice the artificial
Meditation and recitation.
Once one realizes the core yoga,
Since it is realized by going out
Beyond the artificial yoga,
One should not practice any artifice.
For example, one takes a boat
And goes across the water,
And then leaves it, once beyond.
Artifices are like that:
Such rites as *mandalas* and so on,
Which are made with the artificial mind,
Since they clear up one's (habitual) outer actions,
Are recommended for beginners.
All those accomplishments are present here (in the creation stage),
But not in the knowledge reality of the Victor.³

This passage highlights the fact that the gradual path applies not just to the phases of self-healing and social

engagement, but to process practice as well. Short of priming the mind and nervous system by freeing them from the grip of traumatic reactivity, it would be impossible for an ordinary person to harness sensual enjoyment without reinforcing the reactive life of obsession, addiction and compulsion. In positive terms, however artificial, the reconstructive arts of the creation stage are unavoidable if we are to develop the vision and self-confidence we need to successfully practice the perfection stage art of sublimation. This is the source of the common metaphors of the creation stage as a boat to the perfection stage, and of all the steps on the gradual path leading up to the state of a master altruist as the rungs on a ladder. Yet, given the goal oriented nature of the human mind, it seems to have been as common a misconception in Tsong Khapa's day as it is in ours, that the preliminary nature of renunciation, compassion, role-modeling and self-creation means that they are not truly necessary at all. This leads to the prime misconception of perfection stage practice as a short-cut which lets us dispense with the hard work of gradual preparation and training. Of course, such misconceptions are easy enough if we take literally the provocative, iconoclastic pronouncements of this stage, such as this passage Tsong Khapa quotes from the *Esoteric Accomplishment*:

Do not salute deities,
Made of wood, stone, or clay;
Worship the body itself!
Venerate it as a mentor and bow to it!
Don't make shrines, etc. from earth and stone,
Do not delight in books,
And don't make hand gestures in *mandalas*, and so on,
Even in your dreams!⁴

Or this poetic song of realization he quotes from the arrow-maker turned process adept Saraha:

Eating and drinking, enjoying sexual union,
Again and again fill the circle!
By such teaching as this,
You will achieve transcendence in this world;
Here we have triumphed,
Hitting the world of ignorance on the head!⁵

How exactly should we hear transgressive pronouncements like these? Right behind the iconoclastic advice, "Do not salute deities made of wood, stone, or clay," the quote urges us to do something that sounds shockingly modern: "worship the body itself!" But once we're on the next line, we see that the body we're encouraged to worship is not the ordinary body-image in our traumatized minds, or the gross anatomy underlying it, but rather the body purified and reborn in the image of our mentor-archetype, through the arts of the coarse and subtle creation stage. So, without being bound by initiation to re-envision our mind/body process in the image of our ideal role-model, without revising our compulsive history into a creative life of heroic altruism, and without learning to import our mentor's image, affirmation, and affect into our mind/body systems and elements, we could hardly be expected to grasp, let alone follow the imperative of that passage, "Venerate (the body) it(self) as a mentor and bow to it!" On the other hand, once we have been so prepared, how do we make the transition from the artificial practices of the creation stage to the natural practice of the perfection stage? To explore this bridge, let's return to the provocative and richly symbolic words of the great adept, Saraha.

Eating Breath Energy and Drinking Bliss Nectar: The Middle Way of Sublimation

Saraha's passage seems to address the simple facts of life, "Eating and drinking, enjoying sexual union, again and again fill the circle." If we take this circle to be the inner circle of life systems and elements personified as subpersonalities, he seems to be saying something that may be familiar by now: by following a middle way of enjoying objects of desire without indulging compulsions, we can care for our bodies and nurture the animal spirits of love and compassion. Yet in the next lines, we begin to lose our bearings, as the poet-adept alludes to the self-transcendent process of sublimation, "By such teaching as this, you will achieve transcendence in this world." Is sublimation the teaching he means? Reading on, the last couplet seems to confirm this, describing the ultimate triumph over self-deception that comes of harnessing sublimated bliss energy to the profound

intuitive realization of emptiness, “Here we have triumphed, hitting the world of ignorance on its head!” Yet if we continue to read beyond the stanza cited above, the next stanza doesn’t bring clarity, but goes on in deeply allusive terms:

Where energy and mind no longer move,
And sun and moon no longer function,
Ignorant ones, in that place the mind will be relieved!
There arrow maker has herein taught all personal instructions.⁶

So, having started out in seemingly familiar terrain, here we find ourselves in the realm of an altered state and peak experience that seem hard to even imagine, described in a symbolic code that seems undecipherable. It is here that we must turn to Tsong Khapa as our guide. His explanation of this verse brings us back to the concise formula of sublimation we cited as our opening passage, taken from another of his works on perfection stage practice. Here are Tsong Khapa’s comments on Saraha’s realization song:

Thus, he says that, by relying on the art of penetrating the vital points in the outer and inner body, injecting the sun and moon wind-energies into the (central) released channel and dissolving them, burning the furor (fire) and melting the enlightenment spirit, and filling the body and uniting bliss and void, you eradicate ignorance and encompass all personal instructions.

From these comments, we see that statements like Saraha’s help us transition into perfection stage practice by addressing not just the body as purged by initiation and revised by self-creation, but what process science calls the “subtle body”: the central nervous system as discovered and mastered on the perfection stage. When he describes the place “where energy and mind no longer move” and “sun and moon no longer function,” Saraha is in fact indicating not just a discrete altered state but a specific location on the process map of the nervous system. That location is central to process practice since it is seen as the source of the blissful chemistry which fuels the realization by which “the mind will be relieved” of the compulsive instincts that anchor and block enlightenment. So reaching that place means completing the first leg of the journey of the perfection stage: accessing the neurobiology of blissful flow that powers sublimation.

Channeling Breath-Energy: The Neuropsychology of Sublimation

In this chapter, we’ll explore how the art of sublimation is taught to those preparing for perfection stage practice, as well as how the process approach to the nervous system may be best understood in light of modern neuroscience and neuropsychology. To begin with, you may have noticed that the terms Tsong Khapa chose to unpack Saraha’s allusive lines dovetail neatly with those of the opening passage we quoted from his *Book of Three Inspirations*. Along with Saraha’s, these two passages introduce the idea that the art of sublimation depends on learning how control of the breath yields control of neural energy. They then suggest that balancing natural polarities of neural energy allows for direct access to core energies within the central nervous system. They further claim that controlling core neural energies allows for control of the neurochemistry of bliss and the induction of bliss states. And finally, they conclude that harnessing such bliss states as a platform for process insight mediation supports the most complete and profound realization of intuitive wisdom, freeing the mind from the grips of its most ingrained conditioning and instinctive patterns.

In short, from the standpoint of our beginning practice on the creation stage, they point beyond the external (coarse creation stage) vision of our outer body, speech and gestures as mirroring our mentor-archetype’s; beyond the internal (subtle creation stage) vision of our mind/body processes, inner dialogue and affective tone as mirroring our mentor-archetype’s; towards a direct (perfection stage) experience of our own nervous system as the natural source of a mentor-archetype’s altruistic spirit and mastery. Of course, the first thing that is patently clear for most moderns encountering such teachings is that this approach to “worshiping the body” seems far less like the hedonism we’re so used to than a daunting experiment to be undertaken by serious contemplatives or professional neuroscientists. Is this complex and rigorous approach to exploring and mastering our own nervous systems really necessary? More to the point, is it really accessible or appropriate for a general audience of non-professionals?

Sublimation: The Gateway to Natural Self-Regulation and Change

As for the first question, I opened this chapter with Tsong Khapa’s quote because it makes clear that

mastering the art of sublimation is an indispensable necessity for anyone ready, willing and able to transition their process practice from the initial phase of perceptual restructuring to the final work of intuitive realization. It's notable that he makes this general statement in the context of *A Book of Three Inspirations*, a work which sets out to explain a particular system of perfection stage practice. That system is based mainly on the mother class of optimal integral process, such as the *Supreme Bliss Wheel* teachings handed down from the great Nalanda abbot Naropa⁷ to Marpa the translator and his main student, Milarepa,⁸ renowned as the first Tibetan to reach full enlightenment. In describing this system, known as the six practices of Naropa, Tsong Khapa puts the emphasis on the first—the practice known as inner heat, psychic heat, inner fire or furor fire—which I refer to with the modern psychological term “sublimation,” drawn from the Western alchemical tradition. His case for emphasizing this art is that the control of neural energies it entails is necessary to lay the foundation for all perfection stage practices:

In this tradition the expression, “the inner heat, the foundation,” is well known. This is because in the perfection stage *yogas* one uses the inner heat technology from the very beginning in order to collect the subtle life-sustaining energies into the central channel, and thereby arouse the innate great ecstasy. This is the actual basis upon which all practices rely, and upon which later completion stage *yogas* are founded. The inner heat doctrine establishes this basis.⁹



Figure 10.1 Naropa, Master of the Art of Sublimation

Given this rationale, the art of sublimation is not incidental or optional for anyone who wants to progress beyond “the artificial” phase of process practice, based on the restructuring arts of role-modeling imagery and narrative self-creation, coarse and subtle. In other words, this art is the gateway to the “core yoga” of process practice: the art of blissful openness which is as natural as it is life-transforming.

As for the second question, whether this art is truly accessible and appropriate for lay students, a good place to begin is by consulting the teaching guidelines we surveyed in chapter 9. Even a quick glance at the commitments, pledges and pitfalls of process ethics makes it clear that the answer is not a black or white yes or no, but highly nuanced. In principle, the *Wheel of Time* system makes clear that offering explicit teaching about sublimation came to be seen as a public service that is appropriate for any curious citizen of planet earth, and should be accessible to all.¹⁰ Yet that doesn’t mean the same applies to teaching any individual or group how to actually practice sublimation. In practice, all process traditions find their own way to strike the delicate balance of openly introducing the idea of sublimation while selectively teaching the insights and skills that make up the art.

Generally, this strategy of selective preparation begins even with introductory process practices of the kind we’ve focused on in part 3. For instance, the active process of the *Healing Mother*, as well as the closely related practice of her male counterpart, *Sublime Care*, both teach an advanced breath-control practice that serves to prepare students for the practice of sublimation in optimal integral process systems. Likewise, two of our meditative experiments—with the active process of the *Healing Mentor* and the self-corrective process of the *Heroic Altruist*—include the simulated flow of bliss-nectar, filling the body from above and below, which serves to prepare students for the rush of bliss chemistry released when we bring neural energies into the central channel through inner fire practice on the perfection stage. In a real sense, then, all that changes as we transition into the perfection stage is that these rudimentary insights and skills are assembled into a coherent practice with explicit goals and clear links to the neural map and neural feedback techniques of the perfection stage.

When I introduce this final phase of the gradual path to novices, I follow this selective tradition. Observing the open-source method of the *Wheel of Time*, I introduce the idea of sublimation—of learning to tap and harness blissful states—as indispensable to the final phase of process practice, with its aim of fostering natural healing by using bliss states to realize intuitive openness. At the same time, following the tradition of the introductory process practices like the *Healing Mother* and *Healing Mentor*, I teach only the most rudimentary skills of advanced breath control and simulated flow, in order to “plant the seeds” for later perfection stage practice, as my Tibetan colleagues say. Of course, when working with optimal integral process initiates, I often help practitioners explore perfection stage arts like inner fire when they’ve already received instruction and feel ready to practice. In this chapter, we’ll begin by exploring the advanced insights and breath-control skills associated with the exercise commonly called vase breathing, a key preparatory practice for sublimation. We’ll do this in the traditional way, in the context of the sevenfold role-modeling process of the *Healing Mother*.

Meditative Exercise 10.1: Enhancing Clarity and Calm with Vase Breathing

*Imagine yourself in a safe healing environment, on top of the world,
Feeling freely connected to all living beings,
Facing a gathering of the healing mentors, teachers,
Texts, and communities that most open your heart and mind.
Sitting comfortably with hands placed,
Balance your energies with nine alternate nostril breaths,
Then by fully expelling all the air from your lungs one or two times.
Now read the following performance script,
Based on the active process of the Healing Mother,
Pausing after each section for as long as you like
To hold its imagery, try the recommended breath practice,
Focus on your experience, or seal in its meaning.*

1. Invoking and Admiring the Healing Mother

“Suddenly everything melts into pure, blissful openness!
 In the vast space before me, your perfect reality
 Reflects a giant rainbow lotus of pure release,
 In the midst of which your clear light translucency
 Dawns like the moon’s reflection in water, constant
 And present as sheer unconditional love.
 Bubbling up from the moon beams a shaft of diamond light,
 A 3-D exclamation point, like a beacon of healing speech,
 Beaming a rainbow aura of five pure energies,
 And resonating with the pure affirmation—
 MAY ALL BE SAFE, WELL, AND FREE!
 Suddenly amidst the rainbow orb of that aura
 You assume the moonlight form of the *Healing Mother*,
 Sitting in meditation on your moon-cushion and lotus.
 Lit from within at your crown, throat, heart, navel, and pelvis
 By five gem-toned exclamation points on moon discs
 At the vital points along your central channel,
 Your translucent form glows with a rainbow aura
 Of unconditional openness and healing art,
 Embodying the love that is the mother of us all,
 With all the marks and signs of perfect maturity.
 Smiling in rapt attentiveness, with five extra,
 Intuitive eyes in your mid-brow, palms, and soles,
 You make every gesture a consummate art.
 At ease in the rainbow silks of five freedoms, you wear
 The six transcendent virtues as ornaments.
 Your right hand, palm held out over your knee,
 Offers protection and freedom from trauma,
 Your left hand, palm facing out at your heart, holds the stem
 Of three lotuses blossoming over your shoulder—
 The arts of well-being, compassion and genius!”

1a. *Inviting Your Mentor’s Spirit to Ground Your Vision*

“Glowing serenely as a living moon, radiating
 A rainbow aura of indivisible intuition and love,
 Your heart-seed beams lights to invite your spirit and the genius
 Of all healing beings to merge into you as one,
 As the muses of enlightenment consecrate you,
 Pouring nectars of blissful openness through your crown,
 Filling you and overflowing as a long-life Buddha crown.”

1b. *Taking Refuge in Your Role-Model’s Example*

“Confident in the presence of your blissful openness,
 I take refuge in your non-dual wisdom and art.
 To free and heal all sensitive beings I now conceive
 The altruistic spirit of enlightenment,
 And resolve to develop myself and all beings quickly,
 Until we gain the enlightenment to heal our world!”

2. *Welcoming the Healing Mother into Your World*

“In the aura of your healing truth, all things have the taste
 Of blissful openness, pervading the mind and all the senses!
 Welcoming you gratefully into my world, I offer
 A sun-shower of sense delights—scented waters,
 Incense, flowers, lights, music, and delicacies—
 Converging toward you from everywhere, horizon and sky!
 Fully and freely I share with you all my resources,
 Virtues, and every aspect of my intimate life,
 Plus this precious earth, with its oceans, continents,

Wonders, forests, waters, and infinite web of life!”

3. *Fully Disclosing Your Faults, Limits, and Blocks*

“Regretting all the demon-like instincts and habits I’ve indulged,
All the patterns that limit and block me from your way of being
From the depths of my heart I admit every one of them now,
And firmly resolve from here on to avoid and unlearn them all.”

4. *Enjoying the Qualities of Transcendent Healing*

“Though all things are empty of any non-relative being,
With gratitude I enjoy all the myriad forms
Of happiness you experience and share with all life,
And all the transcendent virtues that serve as their cause.”

4a. *Enhancing Enjoyment with the Four Boundless Moods*

“May all beings have real happiness and its causes!
May we all be freed from all suffering and its causes!
May we all enjoy and savor all excellent things!
May we all know unwavering equanimity!” (Repeat 3X)

5. *Requesting Help on the Stage of Intuitive Realization*

“From the bottom of my heart I ask you, *Healing Mother*,
Please share with me your healing purity, genius, and art!
Thrilled to be asked, the *Healing Mother* emits rainbow light
From the moon and sapphire exclamation point at her heart,
Filling galaxies to the furthest reaches of space,
Drawing the boundless renunciation, compassion, and wisdom
Of all geniuses of all five kinds throughout space and time
Back to melt into her heart, then beaming them all to me
As a rainbow wave that engulfs and fills my body with light,
Transforming my mind into a heart-moon of lucid awareness,
My speech into a blue exclamation point of affirmative thought,
And my body into the milk-white body of a *Healing Mother*.”

5a. *Requesting the Mother’s Purification and Protection*

“Knowing that the gross transformation of my body-speech-mind
Is a mere simulation, from the depths of my heart I ask you,
Healing Mother, please share with me the subtle
Intuitive essence of your five-fold purity, genius and art!
Happily, you emit gem-toned lights from the five points
Of your subtle body to purify and transform
All five core systems of my subtle body-mind.
As your rainbow beam of five gem-toned healing lights
Reaches the five gem-toned exclamation points
At the crown, throat, heart, navel, and pelvic complexes
Within my central channel, it purifies my five,
Energies and intuitions, until they radiate
Five gem-toned lights that tune my inner life to yours,
Beaming from my pores and setting up a rainbow shield
Of five gem-toned laser lights and laser lotuses,
That disintegrate and transform any triggering input
From the outside world. Safe within the firewall of your
Pure intuition and art, I release stress and trauma,
And fully immerse myself in your healing genius.”

5b. *Enhancing Stress-Protective Imagery with Vase Breathing*

“Safe, well, and free in the circle of your healing genius,
And inspired by your living example I ask for help
Tapping into the healing genius of my own body-mind,
By mastering the arts of vase breathing and inner fire.”

*In a comfortable cross-legged posture, once again
 Clear and balance your energies with nine alternate nostril breaths,
 And firmly and fully expel any stale air from your lungs.
 Now imagine the Healing Mother, with you inside your laser shield,
 Beams rainbow lights from her heart-seed everywhere,
 Drawing into herself the warmth, inspiration, and blessings Of all the enlightened.
 Focused on her, slowly take in a full
 And deep abdominal breath, feeling the air, saturated with
 Her rainbow energy-light, filling you up like a person-shaped
 Bubble of blissful openness, especially gathering in your abdomen
 Until it fills like a balloon. Then nod your head and swallow,
 Pressing your breath down toward the sun-gold exclamation
 Point four fingers below your navel as gently as you would
 Massage a balloon in your hands. Now, very gently tone the
 Muscles of your pelvic floor Stimulating warm, sensual energy,
 And draw that energy up to meet the in-breath at the point
 Below your navel, very gently mixing the energies from above
 And below, Holding and pressing them together from above and
 Below as you would massage a balloon between your two hands.
 Imagine the navel point glowing with the Mother's rainbow
 Energy-light, purifying the core of your body-mind of reactive
 Instincts and habits, and transmuting the five toxins into
 Rainbow lights and nectars.
 Well before any distress, relax your nod and pelvic floor,
 Slowly and gently releasing the breath out your nostrils
 And seeing it beam rainbow lights out through your shield
 To the five types of compulsive beings everywhere,
 Transforming them all into Healing Mothers and the earth into a
 Sphere of long life and pure health (3, 7, or 21X)!*

5c. *Optional Vase-Breath Recitation Practice*

*Envision the Mother's affirmation ringing the moon-disc
 And sun-gold exclamation point below the navel,
 Made of 3-D sun-gold light, facing out, with each word
 Placed equidistant at eight points like spokes:
 MAY ALL LIFE BE SAFE, WELL, AND FREE!*

*Now as you draw a vase breath, nod, swallow, and press down,
 Then tone the pelvic floor, draw any energy up, see the energies
 From above and below meet at the affirmation ring and point,
 And mentally recite the affirmation while holding the breath
 As long as you can. As you recite, imagine the ring and point
 Glowing with the Mother's rainbow energy light, taking
 Care to release your nod and pelvic tone well before any distress,
 Exhaling slowly and gently while continuing to recite, releasing
 The breath out your nostrils and seeing it beam rainbow lights
 Out through your shield to the five types of compulsive beings
 Everywhere, Transforming them all into Healing Mothers and
 The earth into a sphere of long life and pure health! You can
 Practice this during 1, 3, or 7 breaths, but avoid counting the
 Number of affirmations you recite so as not to push your limits.*

5d. *Closing the Vase Breathing Session*

*"One with the dignity of the Mother's healing genius,
 I look with your care at the world all around—
 Find the Healing Mother in all living beings;
 See all things enfolded in your healing art;
 And hear all sounds echoing your affirmation!"*

6. *Requesting Constancy Until Enlightenment*

“Knowing that this practice is mere simulation,
I ask you please to be my constant protector, companion,
And guide, from now until I integrate your mastery,
And my five systems embody your fivefold genius!
Moved by affection for me, you my mentor melt
From your crown and toes to the moon and exclamation point
At her heart, which in turn melt into the point’s single dot,
Like a tear-drop for joy, coalescing all your intuitions and energies.
Glowing with rainbow light, your heart-drop comes to my crown
And melts like bliss-nectar down my central channel,
To my heart, merging your healing essence with mine, beaming
Light and warmth up and down to all my five vital points,
Until they fill me as flames fill a beacon and nectars
Fill a vase, rippling out in all my intentions and actions,
Out through my shield until all those around me become
Healing Mothers, returning a wave of joy to my heart!”

*Now pause to absorb and drink in the warmth and moisture of
That joy, as long and deeply as you can, and then prepare to close
The session:*

“Suddenly the world outside, my healing space and body
All return to their normal appearance, the six shells outside
And the five moons and points inside all melt into my heart,
Then the exclamation point melts into the dot of my heart-drop.”

7. *Dedicating Insight and Energy to Mastering Sublimation*

“Any intuition and energy I’ve gained through this practice,
I dedicate to integrating my mentor’s intuitive essence
In this lifetime, as quickly as possible! And so, by mastering
The arts of role-modeling, vase breathing and inner fire,
May I purify my five compulsions, embody the five intuitions,
And transform my mind/body systems into the *Mother’s*.”

Vase Breathing in Context: Mapping the Perfection Stage

With this brief introductory taste of basic vase breathing, we’re ready to put it in the context of perfection stage practice and unpack its use and significance. To do this, we must survey the process approach to the nervous system and its regulation, linking these as best we can with the findings of contemporary neuroscience and stress research. The references we’ve been unpacking thus far each exemplify the traditional way in which the stage for vase-breathing is set, by making reference to the *yogic* model of the nervous system. As we’ve seen, that model revolves around the central channel said to run vertically from crown to pelvis along the neural axis, punctuated by a series of neural complexes literally called wheels (*chakras*). Before we describe that model and its role in vase-breathing in any detail, it helps to contextualize it within the larger map of the contemplative journey of the optimal integral process.

Let’s first take a step back to part 3, where we traced that journey from the gateway of initiation through the first leg of the journey, the phase of transforming our familiar perception of self and world on the creation stage. That leg of the journey led us from our encounter with a congenial mentor-archetype to a full revision of our self-image through the art of role-modeling imagery. From there, we moved to the next step: putting our new heroic self-image in motion in the time-dimension, by transforming our ordinary life history through the process of narrative self-creation. With our vision of our external body, social self, and life-world transformed in the image of our mentor-archetype’s, we embarked on the next leg of the journey.

In the subtle creation stage, our journey led inward, to revise our ordinary sense of the inner world of our body, speech and mind, in the image of our mentor-archetype’s extraordinary inner world and life. There we began to envision our body as manned by a new inner circle of enlightened agencies, symbolized by miniature images of our mentor-archetype’s body and/ or speech. We did so not haphazardly, but following a specific architecture in which each image stands as a signpost for our pending encounter with the “subtle body” of the nervous system. In some of the meditative experiments of part 3, we placed miniature images of our mentor’s affirmative speech at key points in our body that lined up with key points in the vertical axis of our central

nervous system. As we ended our journey in part 3, we stood on the threshold of the next leg of the journey: a direct encounter with the nervous system or “subtle body” at our core, which supports all levels, states and functions of our consciousness.¹¹ Once we’ve reached this threshold, the first leg of the journey through the perfection stage is marked by three successive gateways, representing three milestones of conscious self-regulation. Between these three gateways lie the first two sub-stages of the perfection stage, collectively known as the ordinary perfection stage. Beyond them lie three more gateways, framing the three final sub-stages, collectively known as the great perfection stage.¹²

Freedom of Body, Speech, and Mind: The “Ordinary” Perfection Stage

As you might imagine, the “ordinary” perfection stage is anything but ordinary. The gateway that separates it from the subtle creation stage is a realization known as freedom of body. It refers to the freedom won on the creation stage from our ordinary mental image and concept of our human body, outside and in. Once we’re able to consistently free our minds from their habitual identification with our reified bodily self-image, as aided and measured by our ability to identify with the extraordinary body-image of our congenial mentor-archetype, we’ve passed through the gateway of freedom of body.

At this point we’ve entered the first perfection sub-stage, named after the gateway that marks the end of that stage: freedom of speech. As you might guess, this gateway is reached when we’re consistently able to free our symbolic minds and neural energies from their habitual identification with reified, traumatic habits of thought and speech, along with the stress-reactive patterns of neural energy they rationalize. This realization, aided and measured by our ability to fuse our thought, speech, and energy with the affirmative thought, speech and neural energy of our congenial mentor-archetype, marks our passage through the gateway of freedom of speech.

From here we enter the second perfection sub-stage, also named for the gateway that marks the end of the stage: freedom of mind. Once we’re consistently able to free our stream of consciousness from its habitual involvement with stress-emotions and instinctive compulsions, and immerse it fully and constantly in the flow of blissful openness, we’ve passed through the gateway of freedom of mind, and completed the journey of the ordinary perfection stage.

Inspiration, Translucency, and Communion: The Great Perfection Stage

At the end of the first leg on our journey of intuitive realization, we’ve reached the real source of lasting freedom and happiness, the place in which we can merge our most primal bliss with the selfless transparency of the objective clear light. From here on, the course of our odyssey shifts from journeying inwards to learning how to return to the world we came from. This final leg of our journey—the great perfection stage—covers three sub-stages on which we learn to develop a pure virtual body and translucent mind out of the blissful openness tapped in the ordinary perfection stage, then finally marry these together to build a new life of altruistic mastery able to transform our world.

Given this sweeping overview of the journey to come in part 4, we’re now in a position to locate the art of sublimation and the exercise of vase breathing on that map. In particular, the technique of inner fire, enhanced by the art of diamond recitation, are the main tools we need to progress on the first perfection sub-stage, which leads to true, inner freedom of speech. And this part of our journey will be our main focus in the rest of this chapter. In chapter 11, we’ll turn to the next sub-stage and the next phase of sublimation, in which inner fire and diamond recitation, enhanced by real or imaginary intimacy, lead to true, inner freedom of mind. And, in chapter 12, we’ll explore the last three sub-stages of the path, in which the arts of inspiration, translucency and communion, enhanced by great seal practice, lead to the final gem-like fruition of altruistic mastery.

Tapping the Subtle Body and Mind: The Triune Model of Process Science

Now for the work of this chapter, unpacking the vase-breathing exercise which prepares us for the inner fire of sublimation, we return to Tsong Khapa’s *Book of Three Inspirations*. As I said, this work explores the perfection stage based on the Tibetan Kagyu tradition traced back to Naropa, based mainly on the mother process of the *Supreme Bliss Wheel*.¹³ Because this tradition is often seen as definitive when it comes to the technical know-how of sublimation practice, this work is prized for providing invaluable nuts and bolts, step-by-step instruction on the art of inner fire. Not surprisingly, our great Tibetan guide begins his instructions by

referencing the same passage from the *Diamond Pavilion Process* with which we opened part 3.

If you recall, that passage insists that process practice offers the quickest, most effective path to altruism because it conjoins two elements in one mind/ body technology: the wisdom of emptiness familiar from the engaged insight path and the art of role-modeling which is distinctive to the process path. In particular, when it comes to the art of role-modeling, it alludes to both stages in the process technique of “adopting ... the teacher’s form”: using role-modeling imagery to simulate that form on the creation stage and using the “blissful art” of sublimation to actually reproduce that form on the perfection stage. So, in the context of unpacking the latter art in this key work, Tsong Khapa sets out to explain how the blissful art depends on mastering the subtle material structure and function of the nervous system, in order to transform our stress-reactive body into a master altruist’s body of blissful openness.¹⁴

First of all, as in the models of current neuroscience, in this model the gross anatomy of the nervous system is described in terms of a subtle material microstructure which involves four structural-functional elements: neural pathways called channels, neural complexes called wheels, neural secretions called drops and neural energies called winds. In addition, the nervous system is also seen as basically plastic, constantly changing in response to mind/body factors like intentions and actions, as well as body-mind causes like diet and lifestyle.

On the other hand, the actual map of the nervous system is strikingly different from our modern maps, more closely resembling the map the nervous system we know from *Hatha* yoga.¹⁵ Yet while all Indic process traditions share this yogic model, the system of core neural channels and complexes we’re familiar with is only part of the full triune model used in Buddhist process psychology, psychiatry and medicine.¹⁶ In that model, the nervous system involves three nested levels of microstructure and function supporting three continuous levels of consciousness, not just the one level mapped by the familiar *chakra* map. Also, its complex structure and function varies across a whole spectrum of possible body-mind states, ranging from the defended, fragmented state of an ordinary, reactive body-mind to the completely disarmed and consciously regulated state of an extraordinary, fully integrated body-mind.

In the Buddhist process model, the three nested levels of neuropsychological structure and function are called the gross, subtle, and extremely subtle body-mind. These are akin to the three sheaths or layers of the body-mind mapped by classical yoga psychology: the outermost, physical layer sustained by food and fivefold sense consciousness; the internal, mental layer sustained by the pure neural energy and the sixth sense of mind; and the innermost layer sustained by the subtlest bliss energy inseparable from pure open-mindedness.¹⁷

According to the Buddhist model,¹⁸ the gross level is supported by branching networks of neural pathways that radiate out from the central neural complexes at the mid-brow, crown, throat, heart, navel, pelvis, and sexual organ, pervading the whole body out to the periphery. Some of the networks—from the crown and heart—are said to curve downwards like the spokes of an umbrella, while others—from the throat and navel—are said to curve upwards like the spokes of an inverted umbrella, the two kinds interweaving where they touch to form two main neural circuits. This outermost layer of neural structure supports gross sensory-motor functions like gathering input from the five senses, as well as executing the movement of the limbs, trunk, neck, and head.

The subtle level of the nervous system¹⁹ is supported by three main channels running together vertically along the neural axis, from the mid-brow and crown to the pelvis and sexual organ. While the central channel runs directly up and down the mid-line from the mid-brow up to the crown and from there down to the tip of the sexual organ, the two side channels run up from each nostril alongside it, winding around the central channel at each of the complexes, knotting off the central channel and constricting the flow of energies and drops in all three channels. The two side channels separate from the central channel below the navel, the right rejoining it at the sexual organ, the left branching off to the anus. The right and left channels, called luscious and succulent,²⁰ are seen as maintaining reciprocal, regulative functions based on polar energies and drops, described as solar or subjective versus lunar or objective, respectively. The central channel, called released,²¹ is seen as maintaining core, vital functions, based on primal energies and drops, also described as masculine and feminine. Together, the three channels and seven main complexes of the subtle body-mind support discursive thinking and symbolic processing by the mind as a sixth sense, as well as the intentional actions of mind like complex emotions.

The extremely subtle body-mind²² is supported at a molecular level of structure-function only accessible within the central channel, where the subtlest bliss energies are inseparable from the so-called indestructible

drop and clear light mind, usually located at the core of the central channel nested deep within the heart complex. The extremely subtle mind-energy-drop is seen as sustaining the functions of primal homeostasis, reinforcement and reward, as well as interfacing with the genetic material derived from the parents' germ cells. This innermost layer of the body-mind is said to support primal, non-conceptual awareness and intuition as well as the unconscious instincts and appetites that normally drive the unconscious mind.

The Subtle Body in Action: Explaining Transitions in Mind/ Body State

After describing this model, ²³ Tsong Khapa reviews the way it explains alterations in mind/body state based on shifts in the distribution of neural energies and drops through these channels and complexes. In particular, he describes how such shifts support state-changes that naturally occur in daily rhythms like the wake-sleep cycle. As our mind/body state shifts from waking to dream or deep sleep, for instance, the energies and drops based in the crown complex shift towards energies and drops based in the throat and heart complex, respectively. Likewise, state-changes in the course of sexual intimacy are explained based on shifts from energies and drops based in the upper complexes to energies and drops based in the navel, pelvis, or sexual organ (the latter two called the “secret” and “tip of the secret” or “jewel” complexes, respectively). Also crucial is that these changes from more differentiated, complex states to more undifferentiated, primal states involve a progressive shift in neural energies and drops inwards, from the gross body-mind into the subtle and subtlest body-mind. In describing this neural explanatory model, he references the elegant, fourfold system of the *Wheel of Time*:

The subject is also discussed in the system of the *Kalachakra Tantra*, wherein it is said that the *chakras* at the forehead and navel are associated with the waking state; the *chakras* at the throat and secret place are associated with the dream state; the *chakras* at the heart and jewel are associated with deep sleep; and the *chakras* at the navel and tip of the secret place (or jewel) are associated with the fourth occasion (i.e., sexual ecstasy).²⁴

In contrast to these normal physiological changes in mind/body state, the changes we cultivate through process practice involve using techniques like breath-control to consciously regulate shifts in energies and drops, in order to access deeper levels of neural function and profound bliss states, which can serve as platforms on the process path.²⁵ This is how the process model of the nervous system helps unpack the passages we've quoted, in which the art of inner fire is said to involve controlling the energies within the side channels so we can use them to tap into the bliss-states supported by the extremely subtle energies and drops in the central channel.

Can the Triune Process Model and the Triune Brain Model Be Linked?

Before we apply this model to explain the traditional teachings of vase-breathing and inner fire, it helps to draw some correlations and distinctions between this process map of the nervous system and our modern one, so that, as scientifically educated moderns, we can more easily relate to the ideas and terms used in those teachings. As we've seen, there are clearly some family resemblances linking these very different maps: (1) the basic assumption that mental processes invariably depend on neural structures and functions; (2) the description of those structures and functions using similar explanatory elements: channels and pathways, complexes and nuclei, winds and energies, drops and neurotransmitters; and (3) the view that these structures and functions are plastic and naturally change based on shifts in mental factors like attention, intention, and action, as well as physical factors like diet, lifestyle, illness, and health. At the same time, the process and modern models seem so divergent in their view of the basic structure of the nervous system—a basically top-down, spine-centered view versus a bottom-up, brain-centered view—as to be wholly incompatible.

Of course, this divergence is only natural given the distinct sources, aims and uses of the different maps. The contemplative map based on first-and-second person meditative experience is meant to guide mind/body self-regulation from the inside out. While the brain-based map built on third-person and impersonal observation, gross anatomy, and mechanical experiment, is meant to guide medical and surgical manipulation of the nervous system from the outside in.²⁶ I believe it's possible to correct for this divergence and bridge the seemingly insurmountable gulf between them by considering the unique nature and structure of neural tissue.

First consider that the process map tends to locate neural structure and function where the embodied mind tends to *feel* them, while the modern map locates them where the outside observer can most easily

measure them. Next, view this difference in terms of the microstructure of neural tissue: the process map tends to locate neural function at the terminal end of neurons, where their axons end in sensory or motor synapses; while the modern map charts neural function from the proximal end of neurons, where their cell bodies connect with other neurons through dendritic networks, forming the “grey matter” of structures like nuclei or cortex. Now consider this: while the distance between where we feel neural functions occur and where modern brain science maps them may seem large relative to the gross anatomy of the human body, on the cellular level it’s usually no more than the length of one or two nerve cells. In other words, even if we think in the most reductive terms, it may be that the gap between these two maps of the nervous system is no greater than the distance from one end of a given nerve cell to the other.

Of course, some might object here that this sort of thinking is culturally insensitive and unfairly reduces a Buddhist map of mind/body states to a Western map of neural structure and function. In one sense, this objection is both unavoidable and absolutely valid. Viewing the subtle body in terms of nerve cells is certainly foreign to the process map, and assumes the explanatory models and methods of our culturally relative sciences. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that the process map is intent on explaining mental processes in the naturalistic terms of “subtle” structural and functional elements within the body that support them. Nor can there be any doubt about the use to which that map is put: to help people gain control over their mental states by understanding and manipulating the psychophysical causality of bodily structures and functions, which we would be hard pressed *not* to relate to our concept of a nervous system. The family resemblance between the process map and our modern map becomes more striking when we compare the kinds of structure and function attributed to each model.

The Subtle Body and Central Nervous System: Two Maps, One Terrain?

If we grant for now that these two culturally distinct models map the same general terrain with divergent aims and means, it may be useful to make some tentative links between aspects of the two models. First, the subtle body map seems analogous to our neural map in terms of the functions it seeks to explain. For instance, its five primary and five secondary wind-energies are said to control the things we see as governed by the nervous system: inspiration, expiration, digestion, excretion, core vital functions like heart rate and mental processing, as well as the function of the five senses. Second, the two side channels of the subtle nervous system are also said to control vital rhythms and functions we see as governed by the central nervous system, including wake-sleep cycles, rhythms of digestion, assimilation and excretion, and cycles of sexual-reproductive function. Finally, at the extremely subtle level within the central channel, the subtle body controls functions we think of as core neural functions, including: vital homeostasis, states of consciousness, levels of activation, instinctive appetites and impulses, as well as consummation and internal reward. Flowing within these channels are masculine, feminine, and mixed drops which modulate levels of consciousness, modes of activation, and degrees of sensual arousal and satisfaction.

Considering the array of functions attributed to the subtle body, it seems quite clear that this model is meant to explain many if not most of the same functions as our neural model. Given this, it seems plausible to align the major structural-functional aspects of the process triune model with the modern model of the triune brain as an organ which integrates three systems of natural intelligence—based in the primate cortex, limbic cortex, and reptilian core brain—with the basic life support system of the brainstem. Assuming the traditional process concept of the gross body-mind, for instance, we may tentatively align it in a very general way with the sensory, motor, and associative regions of the primate neocortex. The subtle body-mind, with its regulation of cognition, emotion, and autonomic rhythms, would seem to generally line up more with the prefrontal cortex and mammalian limbic cortex. And the extremely subtle body-mind, with its regulation of consciousness, instinctive seeking and primal reward, may be very generally aligned with the “reptilian” forebrain, midbrain, and brainstem. A disclaimer: this tentative alignment aims not at some sort of localized cross-mapping, but simply to show that, for general heuristic purposes, the process model has the range and flexibility to encompass the whole spectrum of neural structure and function mapped in the triune brain model.

The Process Model Applied: Mapping the Arts of Vase Breathing and Inner Fire

With this overview of the procedural and neuropsychological context for teaching the art of inner fire, we’re ready to look more closely and practically at Saraha’s allusive instructions, as unpacked by Tsong Khapa:

Thus, he says that, by relying on the art of penetrating the vital points in the outer and inner body,

injecting the sun and moon wind-energies into the (central) released channel and dissolving them, burning the furor (fire) and melting the enlightenment spirit, and filling the body and uniting bliss and void, you eradicate ignorance and encompass all personal instructions.²⁷

Given this brief outline, perhaps the best way to explore the art of sublimation in this tradition is to review each of his four main points systematically. The four are: (1) tapping into the vital points of the central nervous system; (2) balancing the polar energies of the side channels and infusing them into the central channel; (3) kindling the inner fire of sublimation and causing the release, flow, and spread of bliss chemistry throughout the body-mind; (4) sealing the state of orgasmic bliss with the visceral intuition of emptiness.

1. Tapping into the Vital Points of the Central Nervous System

If you recall, the threshold through which we entered the first perfection sub-stage was marked by placing seed-syllables representing the mentor-archetype's affirmative speech at key points along the spinal axis where the central channel is mapped. These syllables now serve as signposts indicating the vital points—such as the crown, heart, navel, or sexual organ—at which it is said to be easiest to gain control over the energies of the central nervous system. By focusing our attention as single-mindedly as possible on syllables visualized at those points, we can begin to prime neural feedbacks that induce shifts in our neural energy, chemistry and state of consciousness.²⁸ But before we jump to this step, there are a number of exercises—physical and mental—said to help prepare our minds and nervous systems for success in this work.²⁹ So let's review these exercises under six headings, culminating in the art of vase-breathing. They are: (1) preliminaries; (2) visualizing the body as an empty, person-shaped bubble or shell; (3) breath-capacity exercises; (4) visualizing the channels of the central nervous system; (5) visualizing syllables within the channels; (6) the vase-breathing exercise.

Preliminaries: Role-Modeling the Arts of Perfection

In this context, the preliminaries typically include the first five steps in the sevenfold role-modeling practice we've explored in part 3. They are done in the format of the *Heroic Altruist* practice, with the mentor-archetype of our choice envisioned in miniature, facing forward just above our crown. The format may also be expanded by stacking figures in the historical lineage of mentors who have handed the practice down to our personal mentor, envisioned one above the other in the same form. The key steps include: admiring the mentor-archetype as embodying all refuge; conceiving the spirit of enlightenment in the process-oriented mode of a *Heroic Altruist*; and asking our role-model/lineage for blessing and guidance on the path. When this has begun to stir positive energy, the mentor dissolves through our crown and into our hearts as in the other role-modeling practices, dissolving our ordinary form into clear light until we re-emerge in stages or all at once in his/her image.

Visualizing the Body as an Empty, Person-Shaped Bubble

This second preparatory step should also be familiar. We envision ourselves in the outward form of our chosen archetype, while inside we see our bodies as hollow bubbles of pure energy and awareness. Ideally, we've already dissolved our ordinary body-image and self-sense into clear light, and re-created them in the image of our mentor-archetype. So at this point, we should feel that we're not made of gross physical tissues and organs, but rather of pure, luminous energy and awareness. Any positive imagery we associate with ourselves, such as a sun or moon-cushion, seed-syllable or archetypal physical form, we should try to see as mere reflections or manifestations of clear-light awareness, serving as transparent symbols for our enlightened mind, speech and body. Of course, if we plan to enhance our sublimation practice with imaginary or real intimacy, we need to envision ourselves in the androgynous mother-father form of our archetype, as in the six session practice of the *Master Altruist*.

Process Yoga: The Six Breath-Capacity Exercises of Naropa

Although the Indian process traditions preserved in Tibet date to well before the codification of the wide range of physical postures most of us are familiar with through *Hatha Yoga*, it does involve a smaller set of postures and breath-exercises meant to support the perfection stage art of sublimation. In particular, Tsong

Khapa highlights a series of practices called the six exercises of Naropa, all meant to relax, balance, tone, and strengthen the parts of our body and nervous system involved in enhancing what we now call our pulmonary function. If we're doing these to prepare for the perfection stage, there are two initial steps we should take to clear our minds and energies. First, following the preliminaries, we should take care to envision our bodies as empty person-shaped bubbles made of clear light, appearing in the form of our chosen genius archetype. All the six exercises that follow should be practiced while maintaining this exceptional image of our bodies. Next, to clear our energies for the exercises, we should use the technique currently taught as alternate nostril breathing, known to balance and integrate both sides of our central nervous system.

We're now ready to move on to the first of the six exercises, the vase breathing practice we tried in our first meditative experiment, actually a streamlined version of the technique to be practiced in full later on. Once again sitting with back straight and legs crossed, this time we place thumbs inside our fists. We begin by breathing in through both nostrils as slowly and deeply as possible, imagining that the air fills the abdomen like a balloon, and when we're full, swallowing some saliva and sensing it move to a point just below the navel. At the same time, we gently tone the muscles of the pelvic floor as if holding in urine or doing a Kegel exercise. Now, with the air-filled abdomen very gently compressed like a balloon from above and below, we focus our minds deep inside the belly at the navel, holding the breath for as long as we can without force or straining, thinking of our body as a translucent vase of pure energy and awareness, then gently releasing the air out our nostrils. We can repeat the exercise two or six times. The remaining five exercises are all done together with this vase-breathing technique.

The second of the six is called the revolving wheel. Sitting cross legged in the full lotus posture this time, with feet placed up on the opposite thighs, we reach our hands across our bodies to hold the big toe of the left foot with the left hand and the right with the right. Straightening up the spine in its natural curvature, be sure to open the shoulders and upper chest. Now, after taking a vase breath and holding it, we rotate the trunk clockwise three times, then rotate it counterclockwise three times. Taking another vase breath if need be, next we stretch our whole trunk over as far as possible to the right, then after returning gently to center, reverse the movement as far as possible to the left. Finally, with a third vase breath, we arch the abdomen backwards, return to center and then arch it forwards, as if we were doing a seated version of the cat pose (from *Hatha Yoga*). Optionally, we can repeat the whole exercise two or six times.

The third exercise called the binding hook is also done in a seated posture, preferably the lotus, while holding a vase breath. Once again we place the thumb inside our fists, join them at the heart and extend them fully together straight out in front of the heart. Now we stretch both arms together as far as possible to the left, and as if drawing in a hook, slide the right fist back along the left arm and chest, placing it over the right breast. Then we draw back the left fist, placing over the left breast, and finally, firmly tuck both elbows into the sides of the ribs like folded wings. Now we reverse the whole movement, extending the fists from the heart, stretching them right, drawing in the left first, then the right fist, and tucking the elbows in. Optionally, again, we can repeat the whole exercise two or six times.

The fourth exercise called diamond binding begins from a kneeling posture. With spine straight, we bend the ring and middle fingers of both hands into the palm, locking them down with the thumbs while extending the index and pinky fingers out like two horns. With our hands at our sides in the binding gesture, palms facing up, we take and hold a vase breath, then stretch hands out to our sides as far as possible and raise them gradually until they join, pointing up over our heads. Now we turn the hands so their backs touch and palms face out to both sides, and reverse the movement by gradually stretching and lowering them until they touch the ground. Again, we should feel free to repeat the exercise two or six times.

The fifth exercise, the expelling breath-lock, begins by kneeling, bending forward and planting both hands on the ground, as in the cat pose. After raising the head and straightening the spine, we take and hold a vase breath. Now bow the head between the arms and forcefully push all the air from our lungs making a "hah" sound, and hold the breath out for as long as you comfortably can. After raising the head again, we gently draw a full breath in through the nostrils, stand up and shake out our legs and feet, three times each. Again, we may choose to repeat the whole exercise two or six times.

The sixth and last exercise is simply shaking the head and body all over, gently flexing all our joints, and massaging both our hands as if washing them. Of course, this general relaxation and toning could also be achieved by doing a cycle of restorative yoga postures. As in *Hatha Yoga* practice, all such physical preparation and training should be done on an empty stomach, gently and mindfully, while focusing on the breath. Unlike conventional yoga, they should be done as much as possible in conjunction with the exercise of holding vase-breaths, to train ourselves to maintain a baseline of deep, abdominal breathing and a firm yet gentle control of the breath at all times. Of course, the Tibetan masters emphasize over and over again that we must be ever-mindful to practice all these exercises—especially vase breathing—with unwavering patience and gentleness.

While this is generally emphasized in most yoga practice, it is absolutely indispensable here, so as not to interfere with the progressive deepening of relaxation we need to tap into the blissful energy and chemistry of the central nervous system.

The Six Exercises: A Total Work-Out for Breath, Body, and Mind

In sum, it seems fairly obvious that these exercises are meant to relax, tone, expand, and strengthen the physical and neural structures supporting our breath capacity. In his commentary on inner fire, Tsong Khapa makes a point of presenting these exercises in detail, despite his explicit mention of the fact that many of the Tibetan traditions he calls “later” have omitted emphasizing or even teaching them as preparations.³⁰ Though not described in the Indian source texts and commentaries of the process tradition, like those translated into Tibetan, he says, they were clearly taught as part of the oral transmission of process practices into Tibet. His logic in emphasizing these physical exercises is that they prime the body and nervous system, and reduce the risk of mind/body stresses and strains that may occur when we dive into perfection stage arts like inner fire without basic training.³¹

For our purposes, his emphasis on these exercises underscores the fact that perfection stage practice assumes a gradual preparation of the body and nervous system that is not just mental but clearly involves the athletic enhancement of respiratory function and neurophysiological tone. In this sense, these six exercises of Naropa bear a general family resemblance to intensive systems of respiratory training from the Hindu yoga tradition, such as those taught in the context of *Kundalini Yoga* or *Sudarshan Kriya Yoga*.³² This is noteworthy since it suggests the potential efficacy of these exercises in generally enhancing mental and physical health, as the recent studies by Dick Brown and Patricia Gerbarg clearly suggest.³³ We’ll return to this later when we turn our attention to comparing Buddhist and Western views of the neurophysiology of vase-breathing and sublimation. For now, though, given this background on physical preparations for vase-breathing, we can turn to the three final preparations of mind and energy.

2. Balancing the Nervous System: Visualizing the Channels and Complexes

As in training through physical exercises, so in preparing the mind for vase-breathing we orient ourselves with role-modeling imagery. We then check to be sure our sitting posture is stable—ideally in the lotus posture—so it can support a straight spine, open chest, and slight head nod, as our up-turned palms rest, left over right, on our lap. Next, we prime our energy, say, by alternate nostril breathing, one or more simple vase breaths, and/or an expelling breath-lock. At this point, we follow the sevenfold mentor-bonding process up to the fifth step. Now, however, beyond simply asking for general blessings and guidance on the perfection stage path, we specifically ask our mentor, lineage, and male and female muses for support in the work of making our neural energy more positive and our nervous system more plastic. As we imagine receiving their blessing and guidance in the form of rainbow lights, a miniature duplicate of our role-model comes to our crown, melts into rainbow blissnectar, and flows through our crown to our heart, energizing and opening up all the channels of our nervous system.

At this point, in order to prepare for full vase-breathing and inner fire practice, we imagine withdrawing energies and drops from the peripheral channels of the coarse body-mind into the three channels of our subtle body-mind. To support these practices, we envision the three channels in a simplified and truncated form.³⁴ Specifically, we see the central channel as bluish in color, starting four finger breadths below the navel, just in front of where our lumbar spine would be, and running vertically up the spinal axis to the complex at the crown, where it curves down again towards the mid-brow, like the curved handle of an umbrella. Alongside it are the smaller side channels, the right red and left white, inserted into the bottom opening of the central channel below the navel and curving around and up to rejoin it at the navel, from where they run up on either side to the crown, and then diverge to end at the nostrils.

Connected with the channels, we envision the four main complexes where smaller channels branch out in a truncated way, seeing each as a lotus flower of various colors and with various numbers of petals symbolizing branch channels. The “emanation” complex at the navel, said to have a triangular shaped hub, is red, with sixty-four branch petals curving slightly upwards. The “truth” complex at the heart is envisioned as white, with a circular hub and eight branch petals, curving slightly downward. The “enjoyment” or “beatific” complex at the throat is envisioned as red, with a circular hub and sixteen branch petals, curving slightly upward. And the “great bliss” complex at the crown is rainbow colored, with a triangular hub and thirty-two branch petals curving slightly downward. The complexes are to be conceived as two complementary pairs, with the navel

and throat complexes embodying feminine energy or wisdom and the heart and crown embodying masculine energy or art.

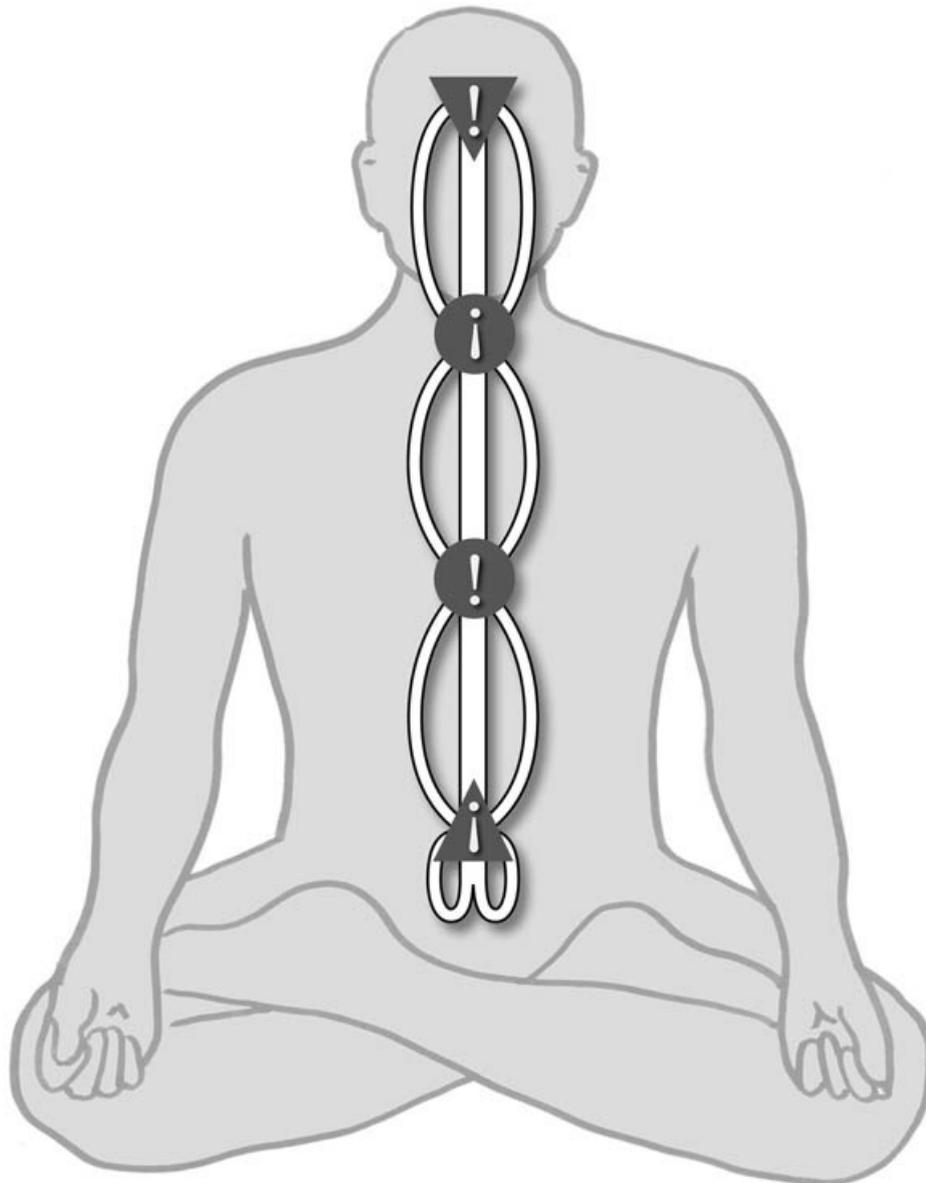


Figure 10.2 The Neural Network of Sublimation

Given this setup, we begin by focusing our visualization on the point below the navel where the three channels join, and then envision the complexes in succession, starting with the navel and moving up. Eventually, the complexes should appear clearly, along with their distinct petals. If clarity doesn't come based on the complexes, we can simply envision the three channels, again starting below the navel where they converge. This detailed imagery is meant to orient us specifically to begin the work of tapping and channeling core neural energies.

From a neuropsychological point of view, there are several lines of research which would suggest that focusing repeatedly, vividly, and stably on these visualized structures along the neuraxis is likely to prime neural network connections with afferent feedbacks in the locations involved, which may increase central neural plasticity³⁵ and alter local chemistry³⁶ and metabolism.³⁷ So, while the appearance and configuration of the channels and complexes are mentally constructed rather than naturally occurring, they nonetheless may facilitate the development of real structures and capacities within the nervous system. Interestingly, this seeming paradox has long been recognized within the process tradition, in which the specific forms of the

structures visualized are recognized as artificial constructs, yet still useful to guide practice and prepare our minds to tap and master innate structures, energies and chemistry within the nervous system. However intently or lightly we practice this preparation, eventually it leads us to the next step in setting up the full practice of vase-breathing and inner fire.

3. *Kindling the Inner Fire: Visualizing Syllables Within the Channels*

If visualizing the channels and complexes in detail picks up where we left off with envisioning the central channel in the subtle creation stage, this next preparation does the same with our initial vision of seed-syllables at key points along the neural axis, reviewed in our first meditative experiment 10.1. In describing the practice, Tsong Khapa advises a middle way between the most elaborate and most bare bones array of syllables.³⁸ Specifically, he suggests we visualize four, one in the hub of each of the complexes we've envisioned, but advises us to use the most abbreviated forms of the syllables we can.

Beginning with the navel, this means envisioning a version of the syllable AH which looks like a simple vertical brush stroke, slightly wider at the bottom, made of ruby red light.³⁹ The best visual analogue in the Roman alphabet is an upside down exclamation point, understood as an abbreviation for the exclamation AH! This stroke should be visualized four fingers below the navel, standing on a moon-cushion within the central channel in the hub of the navel complex. Then, at the level of the nipples, he suggests we envision a sapphire blue syllable HUM standing on its head, also on a moon cushion within the central channel in the hub of the heart complex. Next, at the level of the Adam's apple, we envision a ruby red syllable OM, standing upright on a moon cushion within the central channel in the hub of the throat complex. Finally, at the crown, we envision a diamond white syllable HAM, standing on its head on a moon cushion within the central channel in the hub of the crown complex.

For ease of visualization in Roman script, I suggest people abbreviate these syllables further, either to two letter transcriptions—UM, OM, AM—or, simpler, to vowels alone—U, O, A—or simpler still, to four exclamation points. This would approximate the Sanskrit and Tibetan, which allows these syllables to be written in a vertical format, condensing them into a complex character one space wide akin to single strokes, so that they all fit neatly within the straw-sized central channel and line up nicely along the vertical axis in a way that suits the visualizations to follow. All four syllables are to be envisioned as small as possible, ideally the size of a mustard seed.

A final subtlety is that all the syllables use an element of the Sanskrit alphabet to make the visualization more suggestive. In particular, certain nasal sounds like “n” and “m” are sometimes written by placing a dot above the letter preceding the sound. Since the visualization of seed-syllables in inner fire is meant to convey the image of a flame melting wax or snow, these dots are enhanced to give the letters the appearance of a flaming fire or melting drop. This is done by adding a crescent element like a brazier under the dot and a squiggle like a flame-tip (or dripping snow-melt) above the dot. Specifically, to prime the mind for vase-breathing and inner fire in this tradition, all four syllables have the threefold melting-dripping element added to their main character: the two upright syllables at the navel and throat have the crescent, dot, and squiggle pointing up like flames; and the two inverted syllables at the heart and crown have the crescent, drop, and squiggle pointing down like melting drops. This subtlety is another reason why I prefer to use exclamation points for all four, since they include a dot element which can be enhanced as in Sanskrit or Tibetan. If you choose to use this shorthand, obviously the exclamation points at the navel and throat need to be inverted, and those at the heart and crown upright, technically the opposite of the Sanskrit and Tibetan syllables.

Given the centrality of this phase in the art of sublimation, we'll survey the practice of kindling inner fire—Tsong Khapa's third point—step by step, under seven sub-headings: (a) releasing bliss; (b) adding vase-breathing; (c) mastering vase-breathing; (d) immersing energy, dissolving mind; (e) regulating bliss; (f) deepening sublimation; and (g) adding diamond recitation.

3.a *Kindling in Practice: Igniting the Fire and Releasing the Flow of Bliss*

Tsong Khapa advises that we take these syllables as objects of single-pointed meditation, just as we might focus on the mind in quiescence meditation or its ultimate emptiness in insight meditation.⁴⁰ So he reminds us that they must be engaged with a centered and balanced attention, in order to avoid the distraction that comes of applying too little effort or the dullness that comes of applying too much. He also points out that we should try to immerse our minds so fully in the syllables that we feel we *become* them, since the degree of our immersion in them will correlate with the degree of blissful flow it induces, and the degree of bliss will correlate with the amount of control we gain over our neural energy. If we run into difficulty envisioning the

syllables as small as seeds, we can begin by envisioning them and the channels as larger, then gradually fine-tune their size. After briefly focusing on the three upper syllables, most of our time should be spent on the AH-stroke at the navel, the key to kindling the inner fire of sublimation.

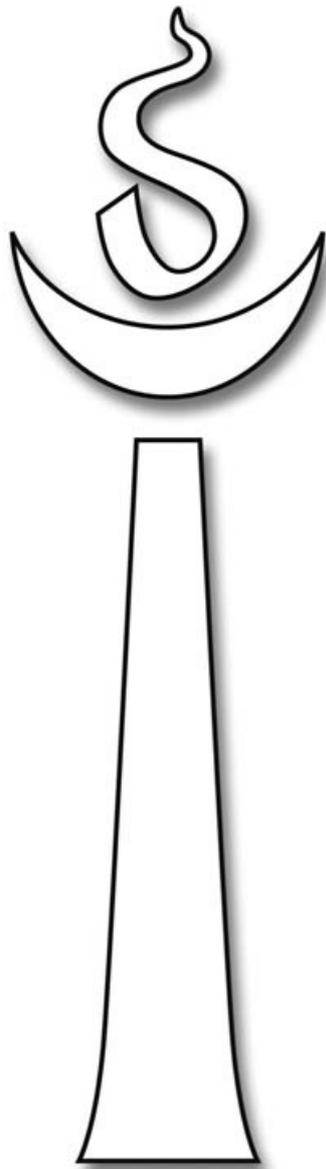


Figure 10.3 The Enhanced Ah-Stroke Syllable

According to the classical literature, this practice will gradually lead to being able to envision the inner anatomy of the channels, complexes and syllables as vividly and stably as creation stage practice allows us to re-envision our bodies and environment. Eventually, just by focusing stably on the AH-stroke at the navel, its radiance will increase until it begins to warm and light our body like a small, red hot flame.⁴¹ As the flame continues to intensify, its tip and heat eventually rise up the central channel until they begin to reach the sapphire blue HUM syllable at the heart complex, melting its down-facing tip until it begins to drip like wax into the tongue of flame at the navel. This further fuels and intensifies the inner fire, causing it to rise through the heart up the central channel to the throat complex, where it ignites the ruby OM syllable until it merges with the inner fire threading up the channel from the navel. Further intensified, the inner fire finally climbs to the crown, where it reaches the inverted diamond HAM syllable, causing it to melt and drip down through the central channel towards the throat, spreading a rush of bliss as it flows. While the claim that simply focusing in this way could release a real flow of bliss chemistry may seem incredible, current mind/body research supports the power of vivid imagery to have a range of neurological effects, depending on its

intensity, form and location. In addition, several studies show increased blood levels of endorphins in meditation,⁴² and others show Tibetan process techniques can support the self-regulation of basic functions including neural plasticity and metabolism.⁴³

Provided we carefully nurture it, the bliss induced by this practice gradually pervades the whole body, with our experience of it increasing in intensity as it spreads. Traditionally, this spread is described as a progression through four successive degrees of intensity. As the flow reaches the throat complex we experience bliss. As it reaches the heart it becomes sublime bliss. As it reaches the navel, it becomes supreme bliss. And finally, as it reaches the pelvic complex it becomes orgasmic bliss. In his review of the process, Tsong Khapa cites this description of the warming and melting of the heart from the *Perfect Union Process*:

At the center of the heart is a lotus
With eight petals, together with its (blissful) essence;
The channel that runs through its center
Has the nature of the flame of a butter lamp;
(The lotus) resembles the flower of the water tree
Opened in bloom, petals stretched downward.
Residing at its center is the (concentration) hero,
(Envisioned) the size of a mustard seed,
(As) the indestructible syllable HUM;
(The heat) causes the seed to melt like snow.⁴⁴

In addition to the imagery of this sketch of sublimation, I draw your attention to the way the central channel is described: not as a solid structure like a stem, but rather as a dynamic flux of heat energy. This kind of precise naturalistic description reinforces the recognitions that the actual channels, complexes, energies and drops visualized at this stage are not seen in a naïve or reified way as gross anatomical or microscopic structures. Rather, they are projected guides to a subtle network of dynamic elements which can nonetheless be influenced by conscious control of factors like attention and breath-rhythms. This brings us to the final preparation for inner fire, conjoining all the prior mind/body practices in an integrated exercise of vase-breathing.

3b. Enhancing the Inner Fire With Vase-Breathing

Though vase breathing is included as the most basic of the six exercises of Naropa, the oral traditions of Tibetan process lineages add that combining vase breathing with the mental preparations just reviewed will facilitate and speed our developing the capacity for sublimation through inner fire. The actual technique begins on the stage set by the preparations of visualizing the network of three channels and four complexes, and planting seed-syllables inside it at the four vital points. After reviewing this background, Tsong Khapa presents the art of vase breathing as having four steps: (1) breathing in; (2) filling like a vase; (3) compressing the breath; and (4) releasing it. As with all forms of physical yoga, inner fire enhanced by vase breathing should be practiced on an empty stomach.

Of course, we begin this practice as we said above, sitting cross legged with back upright and hands in our laps, clearing our energy with alternate nostril breathing or an expelling breath-lock.

1. We breathe in through both nostrils evenly, as gently, slowly and deeply as we can.
2. As we breathe in, we engage in the next step called filling the vase. Specifically, we envision the air directly entering the side channels where they open at each nostril, and slowly filling each channel like a sausage or tubular balloon, right down to the point where they loop around in the pelvis and curve up again to meet and insert together into the lower opening of the central channel, where the ruby AH-stroke sits.
3. Before we mildly compress the air, we imagine that the breath in the side channels has begun to flow into the central channel. Now we compress by swallowing some saliva and very gently pressing the diaphragm down. As we press gently down, we envision the air within the side channels flowing into and filling the central channel so that it presses down on the AH-stroke from above. Next, we very gently tone the muscles of the pelvic floor, imagining that this stirs and presses energies from the sexual and anal areas upwards, until they enter the lower opening of the central channel and compress the AH-stroke from below. I like to compare this compression of the relaxed and distended pot-belly from above and below to gently messaging a balloon with one hand from above and one from below. At the same time, bringing the energies from above and below together to compress the AH-stroke may be compared to pressing both middle fingers from above and below into the heart of the balloon until they make its two sides touch in the midst of the balloon. This two-way compression by inspiratory energy pressed down from above and excretory energy pulled up from below is often referred to as a "kiss." Tsong Khapa quotes the *Supreme Bliss Creation Process*:

The energies that course above and below
Through the mind are brought to a kiss.⁴⁵

After compressing the energies together into this kiss, we focus on the AH-stroke while holding this vase breath as gently and as long as possible,

- being careful to prepare to release it well before we're feeling forced or uncomfortable.
4. In the final step, we release the compressed breath-energy like an arrow, up and out the central channel, taking care to do so as gently, slowly and quietly as possible. At the crown we imagine the air re-entering the side channels and being expelled evenly out of both nostrils.

3c. Vase-Breathing in Practice: Pointers, Warnings and Signs of Success

In summarizing this compound practice, Tsong Khapa highlights two keys: using the vase technique to bring the two energies into a “kiss” around the AH-stroke; and focusing with luminous clarity on the vivid image of the seed-sized ruby stroke within the central channel at the navel complex.⁴⁶ According to the traditional explanation, when the side channels' lower openings are open, the central channel's lower opening is closed, and vice versa. So by squeezing the air out of the side channels until they've emptied into the central channel, we've not only opened the central channel but gathered and inserted into it all the energy normally circulating in the side channels. Again, Tsong Khapa cites and reiterates the advice of prior Tibetan masters to first open and clear the channels, and then compress and hold the breath-energies in a relaxed way with extreme gentleness.

Like any contemplative learning process, this one cannot be forced, but must grow naturally through persistent yet patient preparation over time. The flow of blissful energy and chemistry aroused by this practice will not last at first, but rather will naturally tend to be quite fickle and elusive, coming and going with no clear rhythm. So, in order to cultivate this art successfully over time, we must be unwaveringly nurturing and patient, and simply keep practicing gently and devotedly no matter what, as when tending an infant or toddler. On the other hand, it's important to bear in mind that diving unprepared into such advanced practice, or using excessive or forced control despite being prepared can actually reinforce the energy of stress and trauma rather than transforming them into blissful energy and openness. This risk is comparable to that faced by those who dive prematurely into practices like *Kundalini Yoga*.⁴⁷

As for signs of progress, when blissful energies and chemistry can be reliably released, held and savored at the vital points, it makes sense to try to stretch ourselves very gradually and try to increase their duration or intensity. The signs of success are that the AH-stroke at the navel complex is not only vivid and stable, but increasingly glows and radiates warmth and light.

3d. Immersing, Retaining and Dissolving Vital Energy Within the Central Channel

Once we've stabilized our focus on the flame of inner fire at the navel, the next step in the practice is to fully immerse our vital energies within the bliss-network of the central channel, and to be able to keep it there long enough to induce a real dissolution into clear light. Traditionally, the objective sign of having immersed the energies within the central channel is that the breath flows evenly and equally through both nostrils, without our having to exert effort to balance it. Once our vital energy has been fully immersed within the central channel, continued focus leads to a gradual calming of the normal breath-rhythm, to the point where the breath has become very subtle and slowed to a stop. This is the objective sign that the vital energy of the breath is being “retained” within the central channel, inducing a gradual dissolution of normal consciousness and full immersion into orgasmic bliss and clear light.

The depth of our retention is measured by a series of hand movements that serve as a clock: rubbing the right palm against the left three times, then snapping the fingers six times is the unit of measure, approximately five to seven seconds. The target length for the suspension of breath ranges from thirty-six units to one hundred and eight, in other words, roughly from three to twelve minutes. Traditionally, it is said that being able to retain the breath immersed within the central channel for this length of time allows us to fully master the dissolution of our mind/body elements into the clear light, whether during meditation or during actual death, a claim supported by recent research.⁴⁸ The key for us here is to be perfectly clear that taking vase-breathing to such athletic heights is not necessary in order to use it effectively to support sublimation and change. Introductory practices like vase breathing have been shown to be teachable to novices, and to have measurable mental health benefits in just a few short weeks' time.⁴⁹

However far we take it, when we've reached a degree of immersion and slowing of our breath-energies, with or without vase breathing, it naturally leads to the dissolution of our coarse mind/body processes into the subtle and extremely subtle body-mind, a dissolution marked by the signs we simulated in the course of self-creation.

The first sign is like a mirage,
The second like a wisp of smoke,
The third like the flickering of fireflies,
The fourth like a glowing butter-lamp,
And the fifth (through eighth) formless sign(s)
Resemble a sky free from clouds.⁵⁰

Though the experiences of dissolution, heat and bliss in the course of process practice may be of many degrees and kinds, they take on a special depth and intensity once we've gained some ability to immerse, hold, and dissolve the vital energies within the central channel. In cataloging common varieties of dissolution, heat, and bliss, Tsong Khapa recommends we not rest content with the superficial forms, but work towards those of greater depth, intensity and purity which involve immersion in the central channel with the help of vase-breathing.⁵¹

3e. Mastering Sublimation: Restraining and Reversing the Flow of Bliss

Whether we cultivate sublimation simply by focusing on channels and syllables or with the added help of vase-breathing, mastering the art of inner fire has to do with gaining control over the release and flow of bliss-energies and chemistry through the central channel. While the reason for channeling subtle energies into the central channel is to deepen dissolution and bliss, there's an added benefit to focusing on the flow of bliss through the five major complexes (the four envisioned above plus the secret or sexual organ complex). By bringing attention to the release of bliss chemistry from its source in the crown and following its flow in stages through the whole central nervous system, we can more easily practice gaining fine control over that flow. This is vital to sublimation, which requires that we master the most profound bliss states well enough to harness them towards realizing visceral wisdom on the first sub-stages and integration on the great perfection stages.

When kindling and channeling inner fire in this tradition, we practice controlling the flow of bliss chemistry through the central channel by pausing, holding and savoring it at each of the four points where we've envisioned seed-syllables, as well as at the tip of the sexual organ. By exercising our ability to stay mindful of bliss chemistry throughout its flow in this way, we not only avoid getting carried away with excitement but also gradually gain conscious control over its flow. This control is enhanced by practicing reversing the downwards flow of bliss energy and chemistry, by drawing them back up from the navel to the crown, again stopping to pause, hold and savor the bliss at each of the three higher points.⁵² This art of mastering the controlled flow of bliss energy and chemistry in both the descending and ascending directions is described in a key passage from the *Diamond Rosary Process*:

Then one should teach the emerging order:
In the crown of the great bliss wheel,
It is said to be "joy";
In the wheel of beatitude, it is "sublime joy";
In the wheel of truth, it is "supreme joy";
And in the emanation wheel, "orgasmic joy"—
All these are caused to be experienced....
(Then) in the emanation wheel there is joy;
Sublime joy dwells in the wheel of truth;
Supreme joy dwells in the beatific wheel;
Orgasmic (joy in the) great bliss (wheel),
These are declared to be (experienced) in the reverse order.⁵³

Although this text belongs to the *Esoteric Community* tradition of father process teachings, also called "art" teachings, the fourfold progression and two directions all carry over into the *Supreme Bliss Wheel* tradition of mother or "wisdom" process teachings. Though initially the flow may only go as far as the source of inner fire—to the complex just below the navel—before it's reversed, this is largely to check its intensity and keep it from triggering the instinctive sexual response associated with the lower pelvic and sexual complexes. Once we've begun to control the flow of bliss this far, we re-envision the lower end of the central channel as extending below the navel through the pelvis to the tip of the sexual organ. With this, we allow the downward

flow of innate bliss to naturally descend to the opening of the central channel at the tip of the sex-organ, and practice blocking its release in an uncontrolled orgasm by envisioning a sapphire seed-syllable HUM blocking the tip. If the orgasmic bliss gets out of control, Tsong Khapa recommends a forceful technique for stopping and reversing it, by focusing on the syllable at the crown, reciting the syllable HUM and trying to draw the bliss energy and chemistry back up the central channel to the crown.⁵⁴

This technique describes the art of restraining our normal sexual response, the foundation of the work of sublimation, especially in its early stages. While we may not grasp the specifics, most of us have had some experience of trying to restrain orgasm to enhance our interpersonal experience of normal intimacy. The process practice builds on that basic mind/body competence, and opens the door to an inwards path towards psychosexual maturity, which is seen as indispensable even if we plan to integrate intimacy as an outwards path to embodied altruism. In fact, this art is so central to developing sublimation that it figures as the prime technique for tapping into the central nervous system in the other of the two main methodologies of the process tradition, the so-called father or art methodology based on the *Esoteric Community Process*.

3f. Deepening Sublimation: Combining the Arts of Mother and Father

According to the *Esoteric Community*, the five primary neural energies of the peripheral nervous system are most efficiently drawn into the central nervous system by focusing on a drop at the tip of the sexual organ. In this method, the tip of the sex organ is considered one of three vital points for gaining control of neural energies and immersing, holding, and dissolving them into the central channel. These three are called “tips of the nose,” the other two being what we think of as the tip of nose and the point in the middle of the central channel at the heart complex. Within the synthetic process traditions of Tibet, this method may be seen as picking up where the inner fire technique from the mother systems leaves off. Although it requires a greater capacity for sublimation, it also supports a deeper immersion into the central nervous system, and so is used by Tsong Khapa to explain the more advanced phase of the first sub-stage leading to the gateway of freedom of speech. In explaining this methodology, he quotes this passage from the *Diamond Rosary* linking the five primary energies of the nervous system with the five families of enlightenment and the five main neural complexes which are their sources:

Vitalizing energy stays in the heart center,
Born from the scepter (scepter) clan of the *Immovable One*.
Evacuative energy stays in the genitals,
Born from the *Jewel Mine* clan.
Ascending energy stays in the throat,
With the (lotus family) nature of *Infinite Light*.
Metabolic energy stays in the navel lotus,
With the (sword family) nature of *Real Success*.
Pervasive energy stays in all parts,
With the (wheel family) actuality of the *Illuminator*.⁵⁵

And later in the same chapter, he cites this passage from the *Further Process* of the *Esoteric Community* tradition:

Breath, with the nature of the five wisdoms,
Is the reality of the five elements,
Arising in the form of a lump,
Imagine it on the tip of your nose.
That five-colored jewel (drop)
Is called “life energy” and “control.”⁵⁶

This more advanced phase is correlated with gaining access not just to the subtle central nervous system, but specifically to the extremely subtle nervous system mapped onto the “indestructible drop” in the midst of the central channel at the heart complex. The language used to map this next phase of the journey draws on the image of the core complexes not just as hubs but as points where the central channel is knotted by the side channels coiling around it multiple times. The idea here is to illustrate graphically the normal resistances which block our conscious access to deeper, more primal levels of consciousness and neural function. The insight implied in the image of the complex knots is that those resistances are maintained by the grip exerted

on our body-minds by our clinging to reactive swings between extreme states of hyper-vigilance and paralysis or collapse. According to all process traditions, accessing our subtle and subtlest mind/body requires centering our minds enough not just to tap into the subtle nervous system at vital points but also to gradually unravel these knots, so that we can regulate the normally unconscious energy, chemistry and mind-states they support.

3g. Refining the Fire with Diamond Recitation: Unraveling the Heart Knot

Of all the complex knots that constrict and block off the central nervous system, it's said that the knot at the heart is by far the most primal, complex, and profound. This is usually illustrated by the image of the normal, constricted heart complex as knotted where each of the side channels wrap around the central channel three times, making a six-fold knot. In contrast, at the knots of all the other complexes, the side channels wrap around the central channel only one time each, making a double knot. Another indication of the primacy of the heart complex is the teaching that the knots at each of the other complexes must be loosened and resolved separately, one at a time, while the knot at the heart, once loosened and resolved, also loosens and resolves all the other knots at the same time. This is why, once we've been able to tap into the central channel and immerse, hold and dissolve our mind and energies into that channel, the next phase on the way to freedom of speech is to begin focusing our efforts on unraveling the heart-knot, in order to tap into the extremely subtle body-mind. Tsong Khapa quotes the *Diamond Rosary*:

Abiding in the center of the mid-brow,
The drop is truly taught as wind-energy,
And is opened through the reality of affirmation.
The practitioner, upon releasing the (heart) knot,
Knows the reality of wind-energy.

Whether the five energies are immersed in the central channel at the “lower nose-tip” of the sexual organ or at the mid-brow complex near the “upper nose-tip,” eventually the father method is to bring the drop of coalesced energies to the “middle nose-tip” at the heart, where the knots of the subtle nervous system can be fully released and the extremely subtle body-mind accessed. Once vase breathing and inner fire help us access the central channel, Tsong Khapa invokes the father process arts of focusing on the drop and diamond recitation to describe the unraveling of the heart knot and the work that follows. The art of diamond recitation involves focusing mindfully on the balanced and slowed breath which flow when mind and energy are not just immersed in the central channel, but (more or less fully) immersed within the indestructible drop mapped at the hub of the heart complex in the central channel.⁵⁷

Coming out from the indestructible drop, which abides in the center of the lotus in the heart-center, is the exhalation, HUM, entering inhaled there is OM, and held abiding there is the nature of AH. These depend on the color white, etc., having the characteristic of the elemental spheres of water, etc. They occur with process of (normal breathing) through the superficial nostrils, right and (left). Thus you do the diamond recitation which effortlessly accomplishes the activities of pacification, etc., and effects the purification of all previous obscurations.⁵⁸

Although inspiration, holding, and exhalation are aligned with the seed-syllables of the enlightened body, speech and mind—OM, AH, HUM—traditionally this alignment is seen as purely symbolic, since the “recitation” here involves simply minding and “hearing” the in-breath, pause and out-breath as the real sound of the three seed-syllables.⁵⁹ As for the alignment of the breath-energies with the elements, referred to in the preceding quote, the breath is symbolically linked with the four elements/states of matter depending on whether it flows mainly through the right nostril (air/gas), the left nostril (water/liquid), or both (fire/energy in, and earth/solid out).

The importance of these fine points is to clarify that diamond recitation helps us dissolve any dualistic distinction between the constructive activity of thought or speech—including verbal and/or visual symbols—and the non-constructive, elemental processes of breath-energy. We apply this art to unraveling the heart-knot because freedom from traumatic habits of thought, speech and imagery is needed to free our minds and neural energies from the oscillating extremes that come from reifying the binary constructs like “safe” and “unsafe.” In effect, the knots formed by the side channels represent the crystallization of those symbolic habits in the form of a blocked off and fragmented pattern of neural energy and information processing. Once we've accessed the central channel and tapped into the extremely subtle heart-drop, freeing our minds from

symbolic habits with the help of this ecstatic, non-conceptual mode of breath-mindfulness is vital to fully tapping and harnessing the chemistry of orgasmic bliss. To illustrate this, Tsong Khapa quotes the *Diamond Rosary*, which proclaims itself the sole source of this art:

The nature of the supreme secret
Which is not stated clearly anywhere,
That opening of the drop—
I will explain it—you listen to it!
In the sky chamber of the heart-lotus,
The intuitive wisdom scepter always dwells,
Showing truly the lower and upper,
Home of the great life and evacuative energies.
There again, in the center of the hard to open,
It is wrapped up by three (double) knots.
These defeat the evacuative energies,
Which do not succeed going upward.
These also defeat the fivefold energies:
The vitalizing, evacuative, ascending,
Pervading and metabolic wind-energies
(By splitting them into fragmented, stress-energies).⁶⁰

4. Sealing the State of Orgasmic Bliss with the Visceral Intuition of Emptiness

Once we've begun to taste orgasmic bliss inwardly with inner fire, especially when enhanced by vase-breathing and diamond recitation, we've reached the point at which we can begin to practice the process form of meditation on emptiness. With our minds and nervous systems increasingly free and clear of the reified dualistic constructs and polar energies that normally block and fragment them, we're naturally disposed to realize the openness and interconnectedness of all subjects and objects, minds, and things. In particular, the Naropa tradition of mother process practice encourages us to start harnessing bliss to emptiness meditation as soon as we've been able to follow the flow of bliss in the descending order down to the tip of the sexual organ and hold it there without normal orgasm.

Although reached meditatively, this altered state resembles normal orgasm in its destructuring of normal dualistic perception of self and other, subject and object. This state makes us naturally more open and receptive to seeing through reified dualistic appearances and sensing our deeper connectedness with others and the world around us. In effect, this state—which we think of as altered though it's far older and more basic to life than our waking state—reflects that part of our psychobiology which is best suited to seeing through our normal self-limiting delusions and to perceiving intuitively the selfless nature of things which is ultimately freeing and healing. Although the tradition encourages us to apply the same analysis and insight we cultivated on the paths of self-healing and engagement, it also offers an alternate intuitive path to those unversed, based on just seeing subjects and objects from the perspective of non-conceptual bliss and openness. Tsong Khapa explains:

At that time one must engage mindfulness of the view of emptiness to be ascertained, and must place the mind firmly there. Rest within the inseparable ecstasy and (wisdom of) emptiness. Even if you do not have a profound understanding of the emptiness doctrine, at least avoid all distraction and rest in the singular ecstasy of the experience until the absorption becomes stable, mixing this with beyond-conceptuality consciousness.⁶¹

These alternate paths may be compared to the divergence in contemporary affect therapies between more analytic approaches like neuro-psychoanalysis⁶² and more affect-based methods like accelerated emotional dynamic therapy.⁶³ Though the level of access to traumatic conditioning possible through emptiness meditation based on inner fire and diamond recitation is generally much deeper than that reached by such modern therapies, the methodologies overlap.⁶⁴ In either meditative mode, the next step is to hold the deconstructive experience of inseparable bliss-emptiness or bliss-void intuition as we reverse the flow of bliss chemistry back up the central channel to the crown: experiencing bliss/void, sublime bliss/extreme void; supreme bliss/universal void; and orgasmic bliss/complete void. This then begins the final phase of

sublimation, working with the four bliss-void intuitions to gradually deepen and refine our direct experience and embodied realization of the objective reality of emptiness, known on the perfection stage as the objective clear light.

In effect, the induction of stable, deep and intense natural bliss states is the bridge on this path which leads from an ordinary inference and mental perception of emptiness to an extraordinary intuition and contemplative direct perception of emptiness as clear light translucency.⁶⁵ The way this is traditionally framed is that the objective clear light of emptiness known by this path is one and the same as the ultimate objectivity of emptiness on the engaged path, but the subjectivity which knows that reality is radically different. In particular, the intuitive subjectivity of orgasmic bliss accessed by sublimation is far more profound and efficient a platform for realizing emptiness than the bliss of ordinary flow states accessed by concentrative quiescence. This is not only because its bliss is more profound and intense, and hence more disarming and deconstructive, but also because the extremely subtle level of consciousness of that bliss state supports the mind's natural capacity to immerse itself indivisibly in its object, making intuitive realization more profound, complete, and transformative.

Cultivating Bliss-Void Indivisible Wisdom Between Sessions

As with prior practices like mindfulness or quiescence-based insight meditation, such bliss-void meditation involves practice not just within sessions but also between sessions. In describing this, Tsong Khapa points out that even such profound realizations of orgasmic bliss and intuitive emptiness do not immediately translate into experiencing blissful openness or profound insight when encountering people and things in the world between sessions. Instead, we must consciously work at extending those realizations through our meditative aftermath into our daily life, as we would on the engaged insight path. So at this point he briefly introduces the key art of great seal practice, in which we practice making the universe our partner on the altruistic path by communing with all things through blissful openness:

During the post-meditational periods one must consciously cultivate mindfulness of the experience of ecstasy and emptiness, and stamp all objects and events that appear and occur with the seal of this ecstasy and emptiness. This application causes a special ecstasy to be ignited, which one should foster.⁶⁶

As for the end result sought by enhancing inner fire with diamond recitation, the aim is to deconstruct the whole network of mental constructions which make up our ordinary, traumatized self and life history. This is described in terms of the final extinction of stress-reactive habits called Nirvana, the final aim on the path of self-healing and the fulfillment of self-interest sought on the path of engagement. The path of inner fire and its destination is eloquently expressed in this realization poem from a Nalanda successor of Naropa's, Atisha:

Conquer the progress of sun and moon—
Otherwise in the door of the great sky
The wind-sphere will not enter.
By the yoga of opening and closing (the lower doors),
You should compel the fierce goddess (of inner fire),
The five Buddha (systems) and four goddess (elements)—
You should burn them again and again.
The ten directions' heroes and practitioners
Gather and dissolve into the crown *chakra*.
The four drops in the four lotuses
Will generate the sixteen blisses.
The self-luminous wisdom dwells
In the center of the formful lotus navel.
When enlightenment dwells in the jewel tip,
You gain Nirvana like a butter lamp.
When you win Nirvana there
In the tip of the jewel,
The host of notions such as self and other,
I no longer see them at all.
When the planet (Rahu) seizes sun and moon,
The mind and the wind-sphere do not proceed.
When all notions fully dissolve,

The mind becomes pure experience of the (reality) realm.⁶⁷

After reviewing the arts of compressing the polar energies with vase breathing and inserting them into the central channel with inner fire, Atisha describes mastering the flow of bliss chemistry and harnessing orgasmic bliss towards realizing emptiness. Deepened by the complete immersion, holding, and dissolution of polar energies (sun and moon) within the central channel (the mythical planet Rahu which eclipses them both) that blissful realization is profound enough to de-reify all constructs of self and life, yielding Nirvana through the space-like equipoise in the pure objectivity of clear light.

Of course, in its eloquence, this poetic statement seems to gloss over the reverse flow of bliss-void realization up to the crown, as well as the final phase on the way to freedom of speech: compressing the energies from above and below into a “kiss” that helps us gradually unlock and access the indestructible drop within the heart complex. This elision may reflect the fact that Atisha relied mainly on the *Death Terminator Process*, which merged arts from the mother and father traditions and influenced the Tibetan synthesis attributed to Gampopa⁶⁸ and refined by Tsong Khapa. In any case, Tsong Khapa affirms the teaching that we must practice mastering bliss-energy and chemistry at all three “nose-tips”—at the sex organ, mid-brow, and heart—and ultimately work to compress and immerse the upper and lower energy-drops into the central heart-drop. Recommending this method of using the heart complex to practice diamond recitation and reach freedom of speech, he cites this passage from the *Vow Arisal*:

The energy gone into the heart-center lotus,
In the likeness of a white HUM letter—
You should visualize and be entranced with that,
And you will not be bound by objects.
The energy (normally) moving up into the life-cycle
Will progress downwards into Nirvana.
The totally non-local Nirvana
Dwells in the heart-center lotus’ anthers.⁶⁹

Diamond Recitation: Immersing, Holding and Dissolving into the Heart-Drop

Later, Tsong Khapa explains in detail that the many colors and configurations of syllables used in vase-breathing each may be helpful for some novices. Here, he includes the intriguing array of three concentric circles of vowels, consonants and seed-syllables (like AH or HUM), visualized respectively in diamond, ruby and sapphire light, attributed to Naropa. This is of interest not just because it shows the intent of this stage not to obliterate speech but to purify and free it of conditioned habits, but also because these three rings are linked in the tradition with the three luminous intuitions—luminance, radiance and immanence—described as the fifth through seventh signs of dissolution into clear light.⁷⁰ This relates to the fact that, as we practice alternately radiating rainbow light-energies from these syllables and gathering them back to immerse and hold in the heart drop—the sapphire seed at the hub—we’ll naturally experience a dissolution into clear light, marked by the signs, only now based on dissolving into the extremely subtle drop, rather than merely into the central channel. As opposed to dissolution ushered in by vertical movements of bliss-void energy-drops—descending to jewel or ascending to crown—the final dissolution here is ushered in by a radial or concentric movement into the heart-drop.

Of course, since this preparatory practice is meant to help us progress towards a diamond recitation free of verbal or visual symbols, eventually the radiating and gathering involves single-minded bliss-void focus on the flow of exhalation, inhalation and holding within the inner space of the heart-drop. The suggested setup for this practice is to envision our extremely subtle minds as a luminous moon disc floating reflected in the inner space of clear light transparency, and supporting the sapphire blue A-stroke, with the complex crescent and flame-tip elements added to the upper point or drop. As we practice dissolving into and emerging out of the clear light within this sphere, aided by diamond breathing, we gradually deconstruct our ordinary conceptuality, which has conditioned our mind and energy from very early development. Naropa explains the rationale for this deconstructive work beautifully:

Since the various memories and mental constructions
Arise from the (subtlest) mind as (source of) evolutionary actions,
Meditate the affirmation wheel at the heart center,

The base where consciousness and life-energy converge.⁷¹

According to Tsong Khapa, without having to purposefully hold the breath-energy within the heart-drop, simply practicing single-mindedly breathing in and out in a state of blissful immersion that loosens and unknots the heart, the inhalation and exhalation will both naturally shorten and eventually be suspended. At this point, the three phases of breath will no longer feel discernibly different, and within that suspension, will merge into the altruistic spirit of blissful openness, free from ordinary conceptuality. He cites this passage:

By (such a) sign, (breath-)reality stays, (all) three,
The nature of natural recitation;
Nameless and inexpressible,
This is the supreme enlightenment spirit.
Those very three become one,
And neither go nor come.⁷²

Vase Breathing and Inner Fire in Light of Contemporary Science

While it is not my intention to explain away the profound arts we've been exploring in terms of modern science, it's clear that this tradition considers it necessary to explain them in terms of its own science of mind, body, contemplation, and enlightenment. Just as it would be misleading for a translator to use a modern term to translate the traditional language of these arts without comparing and contrasting the way the modern and traditional terms are used, so I have found it misleading to present these arts and their explanation without any reference to the culturally specific sciences we moderns have been taught. Of course, given the limits in our popular and scientific understanding of sublimation, any attempt to compare process models and explanations with analogues from modern science can only be provisional and hypothetical at best. Even if such comparisons are in some sense accurate or valid, as when they're somehow "tested" in a modern laboratory, this in no way means that the modern scientific account is more necessary, true or helpful to people who seriously try to put those arts into practice. Still, I've found that making careful comparisons and contrasts, however tentative, is helpful for scientifically educated minds to understand these life-transforming arts. With these caveats, let's explore how vase breathing and inner fire might be explained in terms of modern science.

Sudarshana Kriya Yoga: A Comparative Model of Vase Breathing

If we start with vase breathing and the other physical exercises which support it, our work is made somewhat easier by a growing body of modern research and thinking about the physiological effects and mechanisms of related breath practices from the yoga tradition.⁷³ While much of the modern research on yoga breathing practices either focuses on one specific technique or else studies them very generally as "yoga breathing," some excellent work has been done recently by my colleagues Richard Brown and Patricia Gerbarg on a rigorous system of practices which are very close to the six exercises of Naropa. So the simplest and most direct way for us to link these exercises with modern science is to draw on their research on a system called *Sudharshan Kriya Yoga*, also known as SKY.⁷⁴

First of all, Brown and Gerbarg themselves draw comparisons between SKY and contemporary versions of Naropa's exercises taught by Tibetan masters like Lama Lobsang Palden as *Trul Khor* or *Yantra Yoga*,⁷⁵ as well as comparable practices from the Hindu tradition like *Kundalini Yoga*.⁷⁶ As for the specific exercises, SKY groups them into four: victorious breathing; bellows breathing; OM recitation; and pure vision in action. Of these, OM recitation may best be thought of as analogous to recitation of the role-modeling steps and requests leading up to the exercises, as well as a kind of basic training for diamond recitation. The other three contain most of the practices that make up the six exercises. The key elements of both systems include: alternate nostril breathing; slow nostril breathing; breath-holding; slow prolonged exhalation through the nostrils; rhythmic shoulder and arm movements; toning the muscles of the pelvic floor; tilting the head to slightly close the epiglottis; forced nostril breathing and exhalation; and activating fast movements/ breathing. Taken together, these elements seem to have as similar intent and effect: to expand, flex, and tone the capacity of our whole breath apparatus, including the lungs, chest, diaphragm, and abdomen.

Naropa's Six Exercises and SKY: Two Total Nervous System Work-Outs

While I have no wish to blur the distinction in the detailed methods of these two traditional systems, I believe the comparison Brown and Gerbarg themselves make with Tibetan breath-exercises is right on target. The overall impression is that these two systems are different versions of a multifaceted, total breath work-out,⁷⁷ which has the intent of exercising, strengthening and toning our breath capacity while re-setting our breath, nervous system, and awareness towards a calmer, clearer baseline. Besides putting the six exercises from the Nalanda tradition in the general context of the Indian yoga tradition, an added windfall of this comparison is that it allows us to draw on Brown and Gerbarg's comprehensive review of the clinical benefits of such practices,⁷⁸ as well as their thoughtful summary of the current research on their likely neural mechanisms.⁷⁹

Clinically, SKY has been shown to be as effective in treating people suffering from major depression as the antidepressant imipramine, and almost as effective as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).⁸⁰ In addition, other studies have shown as little as three weeks of practice to be effective in treating depression, and as little as one week of training to bring about a remission in 68 percent of people diagnosed with dysthmic disorder, a milder form of depression.⁸¹ Still other studies have shown victorious breathing alone to be effective in relieving insomnia, test anxiety and caregiver stress. And there have also been two studies showing SKY works well in reducing the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including one study in survivors of the Southeast Asia Tsunami of 2004.⁸² Since the methods of intensive breath "work-outs" like those offered by SKY and Naropa's system are not specific to disorders like depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress, Brown and Gerbarg, among others, believe the research supports their general effectiveness in enhancing the healthy balance, synchrony, and plasticity of the human mind and nervous system.⁸³ They state their rationale for this claim quite succinctly:

Breathing is controlled by both voluntary and involuntary mechanisms with complex feedback involving autonomic networks, brain stem nuclei, limbic system, cortex and the neuroendocrine system. The voluntary control of breath can modulate autonomic nervous system functions including cardiac vagal tone ... (and) level of central nervous system activation.⁸⁴

SKY and Naropa's Exercise System: Likely Mechanisms

When it comes to the likely mechanisms of action these methods have on the nervous system, Brown and Gerbarg initially summed their proposed model of mechanisms of the SKY breath work-out in eight points, depicted in figure 1.⁸⁵ I list these with some additions from a more recent article.⁸⁶ (1) strengthening and balancing sympathetic and stress-response systems; (2) decreasing chemoreflex sensitivity; (3) improving baroreflex response; (4) shifting to parasympathetic dominance *via* vagal stimulation; (5) synchronization of cortical areas by thalamic nuclei; (6) quieting of cortical areas involved in anticipation, planning, and worry, while enhancing cortical problem-solving through greater synchrony and integration; (7) activation of the limbic system leading to stimulation of forebrain reward systems and emotional release; and (8) increased release of prolactin and oxytocin, enhancing feelings of calmness and social bonding. While some of these proposed mechanisms, like the increased release of oxytocin, remain to be tested, additional aspects have emerged thanks to more recent research: (9) promoting neural flexibility and plasticity through the release of brain-derived growth factor. This added point is consistent with the finding that SKY practitioners, like practitioners of Tibetan compassion practices, show EEG trains of gamma wave activity associated with high levels of cortical synchrony, neural plasticity, and nerve growth or neurogenesis.

Polyvagal Theory and Self-Regulation: A Comparative Model of Inner Fire

Given this model of the physical exercises surrounding vase breathing, we can now turn to explore current models for the art these exercises support: inner fire. While there are numerous studies of advanced process practices conducted on adepts of both the Tibetan and Indian process traditions, a wide range of models has been invoked to explain their complex physiology.⁸⁷ Also, as we learn more about the brain, especially the regulatory role of the prefrontal cortex which is distinctive to humans, we seem to be coming closer every day to a detailed understanding of the neural mechanisms of self-regulation practices like yoga and meditation. If you recall, in parts 2 and 3 I made some tentative links between the new field of interpersonal neurobiology

and the theory and practice of altruism in the engaged and process traditions. Nonetheless, models which link phenomena as complex as the development of empathy and altruism to any one aspect or system of neural structure and function must inevitably oversimplify them, almost to absurdity. Despite this, since such models do circulate and become sources of partial understanding or confusion, we can't simply stand aloof and make no effort to correct or improve them.

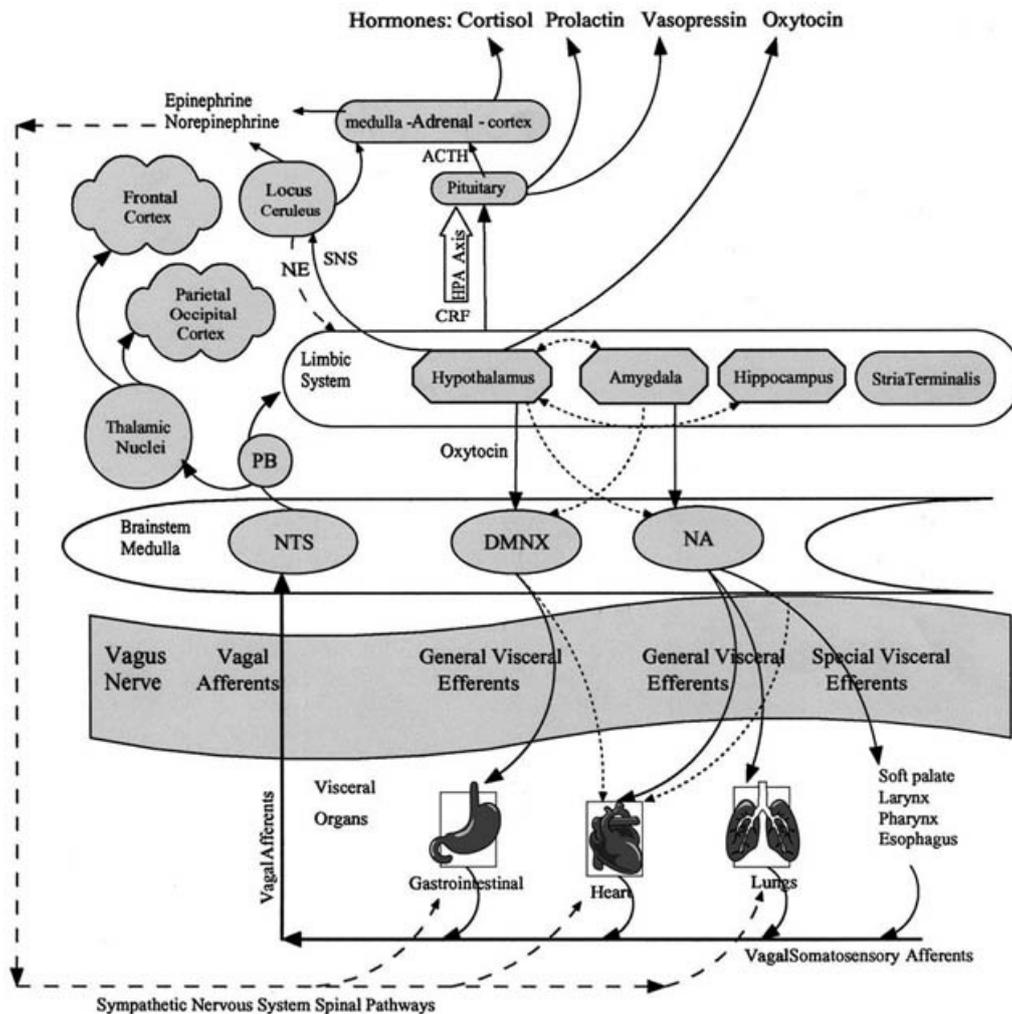


Figure 10.4 The Neural Mechanisms of Process Self-Regulation

One researcher who has spent his career helping us understand the mind/ body connection is Stephen Porges. Porges has focused on correcting our very partial model of the autonomic nervous system, which stands at the crossroads between higher brain functions and the regulation of primal bodily functions. Now that we're familiar with the model of interpersonal neurobiology, based largely on the invaluable synthesis of Dan Siegel, it's time to introduce Porges' model of the autonomic nervous system (ANS). Given the subcortical structure and function of the ANS, Porges' perspective on self-regulation offers a perfect complement to cortical models. It allows us to push our tentative alignment of Siegel's cortical map with the coarse and subtle body-mind map of the process tradition to the next level. Just as the perfection stage moves our attention inwards, towards the frontier between the subtle and extremely subtle body-mind, so Porges' model of the ANS helps us appreciate the deeper connections that link higher cortical areas, by way of the limbic cortex and midbrain, to the central regulation of the primary processes of awareness and bodily function in the brainstem.

Polyvagal Theory: A Brave New Vision of Autonomic Regulation

Before we can explore a model of inner fire based on Porges' work, we'll need to draw some tentative links

between his map of the ANS and the map of the subtle and extremely subtle body-mind used to guide the art of inner fire. To do this, we first need to understand some of the remarkable shifts in our conception of the ANS he has ushered in.⁸⁸ According to the twentieth century view, the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) played the leading role in the ANS, insuring our ability to mobilize in response to basic natural and higher social emotional challenges. In contrast, the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) was presented as a mere shadow of the SNS, which simply handled the primal vegetative needs for sleep, digestion, excretion, and so on. To balance this view, Porges focused on understanding the PNS, by exploring the structure and function of its substrate, the tenth cranial nerve, called the vagus or “wanderer” since its fibers and functions range diffusely through the body. This explains why he called his new theory the polyvagal theory. The real story begins when we look at his recognition that the vagus is not one monolithic nerve but has two main branches with two distinct origins in different but related nuclei in the brainstem, hence the word “poly,” meaning multiple. This brings us to the most intriguing and relevant part of his model.

By comparing the structure and function of the vagus in humans and other animals, Porges observed that one part of the nerve—the part with a myelin sheath that serves much of the upper body including the heart, lungs, the vocal apparatus, the esophagus, and muscles of the face and neck, is actually new to mammals. Nicknamed by Porges the “smart” vagus, it controls many of the new structures and functions mammals evolved in order to live on land, raise womb born young, and avoid larger, fiercer reptile predators through social engagement and communication. This part of the vagus is what allows mammals to consciously control breathing, as well as other newer functions like vocalization, social listening and rapid shifts from states of receptive attention to active mobilization. It does this by regulating the two older parts of the ANS: the SNS, which enhances the stress-response to danger with the “fight-flight” defensive reactions, and the most primitive survival system, mediated by the older unmyelinated branch of the vagus which supports not just unconscious life-rhythms but the “freeze” reaction of fear-based immobilization as well. Based in a new brainstem nucleus (the nucleus ambiguus, NA) that migrated away from the old nucleus (the DMNX), towards the roots of the cranial nerves (V, VII, IX, XI) that control speech, sucking, swallowing, social listening and facial expressions.

The newer, “smart” vagus is crucial to mammalian life since it insures the platform for social engagement by putting a “brake” on the defensive reactivity of the SNS and providing an alternative to vagal emergency immobilization, allowing mammals to stay in a mid-range where they can cooperate with others they see as safe without reverting to either primitive defense.

The most crucial element of the theory in terms of the biology of self-regulation is the insight that these three autonomic systems—the newer “smart” vagus, the older SNS, and the oldest vagal system which we share with reptiles—are organized in a hierarchy. Within this hierarchy of ANS response, the newest, highest level mode is preferred, but only in situations perceived as safe. Once we see our environment as dangerous or life-threatening, we tend to automatically revert to “fight-flight” stress-reactivity or the “freeze” reflex of fainting or simulating death, a potentially life-threatening defense for mammals whose oxygen-hungry hearts and brains may die if breathing and heart rate slow dramatically. Porges describes his model in his recent book, *The Polyvagal Theory*, which is well worth quoting at length:

Functionally, when the environment is perceived as safe, two important features are expressed. First, bodily state is regulated in an efficient manner to promote growth and restoration (e.g. visceral homeostasis). This is done through an increase in the influence of mammalian myelinated vagal motor pathways on the cardiac pacemaker that slows the heart, inhibits the fight-or-flight mechanisms of the sympathetic nervous system, dampens the stress response system of the HPA axis (e.g. cortisol), and reduces inflammation by modulating immune reactions (e.g. cytokines). Second, through the process of evolution, the brainstem nuclei that regulate the (newer or “smart”) myelinated vagus became integrated with the nuclei that regulate the muscles of the face and head. This link results in the bidirectional coupling between spontaneous social engagement behaviors and bodily states. Specifically, an integrated social engagement system emerged in mammals when the neural regulation of visceral states that promote growth and restoration (via the myelinated vagus) was linked neuroanatomically and neurophysiologically with the neural regulation of the muscles controlling eye gaze, facial expression, listening and prosody (vocalization).

The human nervous system, similar to that of other mammals, evolved not solely to survive in safe environments but also to promote survival in dangerous and life-threatening contexts. To accomplish this adaptive flexibility, the human nervous system retained two more primitive neural circuits to regulate defensive strategies (i.e. fight-or-flight and death-feigning behaviors). It is important to note that social behavior, social communication, and visceral homeostasis are incompatible with the neuropsychological

states and behaviors promoted by the two neural circuits that support defense strategies. Thus, via evolution, the human nervous system retains three neural circuits, which are in a phylogenetically organized hierarchy. In this hierarchy of adaptive responses, the newest circuit is used first; if that fails to provide safety, the older circuits are recruited sequentially.⁸⁹

In addition to providing a balanced view of the ANS, Porges' work is crucial for our purposes since his model is focused on the neural structure that supports the prime gateway of self-regulation in Indic contemplative science: the conscious control of breathing. The fact that the smart vagus gave mammals a means of consciously regulating the very oldest brainstem structures and functions helps explain the natural substrate for ambitious arts like those of the perfection stage. As we'll soon see, this not only involves regulating the systems mammals use for self-defense, it also involves sea-changes in the other most basic functions of life: courtship, mating, caretaking, and play. Both aspects of this profound change are key to our understanding the neurobiology of inner fire from the standpoint of modern science.

Towards a Comparative Model of Inner Fire: Polyvagal Theory and the Subtle Body

Before we can connect this new model of the ANS to the art and science of inner fire, we first need to link it with the process-oriented map of the subtle and extremely subtle body-mind. We can start by drawing some tentative comparisons between structural and functional aspects of both cultural models. For instance, the subtle mind-body map used to set the stage for inner fire depicts two side channels following and wrapping around the central channel, blocking, and knotting the five main complexes of the subtle body-mind. If we assume that these are linked with the neural axis we map onto the central nuclei of the spinal cord, brainstem, and cortex, then the two side channels could be linked with the polar structure and function of the SNS and the primitive PNS.

Like the sympathetic chain and the old, unmyelinated vagus, the side channels modulate wake-sleep cycles, shifts from mobilization to quiescent states like digestion, as well as peripheral aspects of vital functions like respiration, circulation and excretion. Specifically, the solar or feminine right channel could be aligned with the old vagus, and the lunar or masculine left channel, with the SNS. Although the sympathetic chain and the old vagus both are bilateral structures, in fact the function of the vagus is lateralized, with the right specialized for visceral regulation. Given this linkage, the central channel would seem to be more closely aligned with the structure and function of the "smart," myelinated vagus, balancing and integrating the extremes of the two side channels and serving as the royal road to higher, conscious self-regulation.

However unlikely it seems, a tentative linkage of higher vagal control of the ANS with the structure and function of the central channel has some things to recommend it. First, if we consider the node of the heart complex where the central channel is knotted off around the extremely subtle body-mind, there is an intriguing parallel in the ways the split between its upper and lower portions and those of the vagus are represented by the two models. In Porges' model, the regulation of breath and heart rate is the point of intersection where the new, upper branch of the vagus overlaps with the old, lower branch.⁹⁰ At the same time, this crossroads is also a fork, in the sense that the structure and function of the upper and lower branches are normally quite distinct, at times even diametrically opposed. This is naturally explained by the evolutionary divergence of these two systems, reflected in the anatomical division between their two nuclei, different kinds of nerve fibers, as well as their distribution and function.

The upper or smart vagus originates in the ventral vagal nucleus (NA), and sends special, *voluntary* motor fibers to the structures of the branchial arches derived from the gill arches of earlier aquatic life—the muscles of the larynx, pharynx, mouth, palate, jaw, face, and neck—as well as to the cardiac pacemaker and the bronchi. The lower branch originates in the dorsal vagal nucleus (DMNX), and sends largely *involuntary* motor fibers to the bronchi, heart, gut, pelvis, urethra, anus, and sexual organ. Its sensory afferents, 80 percent of its fibers, use a dorsal sensory nucleus linked with the DMNX, the nucleus of the solitary tract (NTS). Despite the divergence of the new and old vagal systems, given the proximity of their nuclei and their overlap in the realm of heart-lung function, it is possible for them to become functionally integrated.

In a similar way, the origins, distributions and functions of the five main energies within the central channel also follows a biphasic pattern.⁹¹ Two form an upper circuit, with vital energy from the heart complex circulating between the crown and nostrils, controlling circulation, inhalation, mental functions, sensation, and ingestion; and expressive energy from the throat, circulating from there to the crown and nostrils, controlling exhalation, speech, spitting, and emesis. Two form a lower circuit, with the digestive energy from

the navel circulating between there and the heart, controlling digestion and metabolism; and excretory energy from the pelvis circulating down to the sexual organ, urethra and anus, controlling elimination, and sexual function. Not only do the functions of the upper and lower energies based in the central channel parallel those of the new and old vagus, but the triple knot around the extremely subtle body-mind at the heart means that their energies are naturally split, unless conscious efforts are made to unravel the heart knot and integrate them.

Next, as the modern model maps the origins of the vagus in the primal crossroads where we find the main activating system for consciousness and the nuclei of the cranial nerves to the senses, so the process model maps the origin of vital energy in the heart complex, along with the primal clear light consciousness and the origins of the five secondary energies and their channels to the senses. Last but not least, in and around the same crossroads, both models map the origins of the main neurochemicals that help regulate basic life functions; and both models divide these into opposing groups that work together to maintain a balance of activation and calm throughout the nervous system and body-mind. A special case of this balance is the convergence of activating and calming chemistry in the primary process of seeking and finding satisfaction through food, social engagement, and sex.

Before we move on, it's important to expand on the last similarity and note that polyvagal theory has a neurochemical dimension as well. In particular, it presents the role of the mammalian neurotransmitters oxytocin and vasopressin as congruent with that of the smart vagus. Specifically, these two respectively alter the function of the older calming and arousing neurochemicals—acetylcholine, serotonin, melatonin, and endorphins versus epinephrine, norepinephrine, dopamine, and cortisol—working to modulate these messengers of the primitive defense systems and override them with new forms of calm and arousal that support strategies of social engagement like empathic communication, intimacy, caretaking, and play.⁹² This upgraded, mammalian version of vertebrate neurochemistry offers a parallel to the process model, in which the feminine and masculine drops of the subtle body-mind are identified as the twin “spirits of enlightened altruism.” Like the chemistry of the smart ANS, these drops are understood as the neural chemistry that supports the emotional intelligence of empathy and altruism, including the prime social emotions of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

A Comparative Model of the Self-Regulation of Visceral Mind/Body States

Given this comparison of the process map of the subtle body-mind with the modern map of the ANS, we can now suggest a comparative, hypothetical model of the art of inner fire.

The first point of the model is that *the basis of the exceptional self-regulation mapped in the perfection stage is the conscious control of the primitive defensive systems of the ANS*, which is normally available to well-developed humans thanks to the evolution of the smart vagal nervous system. If we align the side channels with the more primitive, defensive regulatory systems of the SNS and old vagus, this is how our model translates the teaching that inner fire is kindled when the polar energies of the side channels are immersed into the central channel.

The second point in our comparative model is that *the means by which normal control of the ANS is extended is through the repeated practice of progressive methods of enhanced mind/body self-regulation, based on enhanced conscious control of the breath*. This is how our model translates the traditional teaching that the gateway to inner fire is the breath work based on vase breathing.

The third point in our comparative model is that *the prime role of breath-slowing methods like deep abdominal breathing and breath-holding in inner fire suggests that its main mechanism is to stimulate vagal sensory fibers in the chest and gut, which feedback to enhance the tone of both the new and the old vagus, simultaneously*.

The fourth point of the model is that *prolonged breath-holding stimulates still deeper vagal feedback circuits, likely including vestiges of the diving reflex developed by aquatic mammals, which signal both vagal nuclei to induce a paradoxical state of profound physical calm and heightened mind/brain arousal like that found in REM sleep, hibernating, estivating and diving mammals*.⁹³ Induced by the freeze-response center in the hypothalamus under the influence of the motor nucleus of the old vagus (DMNX), Porges calls such states fearless immobilization and links them to “immobilized love” states,⁹⁴ though I prefer to call them “unconditional love” states.⁹⁵

The fifth point and main hypothesis of our model is that *consciously inducing the unconditional love system, which marries the most profound bodily calm with the most heightened mind/brain arousal, is the main psychophysical mechanism of the art of inner fire*.⁹⁶

The sixth point of the model is that *the art of inner fire—especially when enhanced by vase breathing and simulated or real intimacy—involves mastering a gradual state-shift from the simple social engagement of the smart vagal system (supporting the courtship stage of intimacy), to a vasopressin modulated social approach mode of SNS arousal (supporting the flirting and seduction stages), and culminating in an oxytocin modulated “old” vagal state of passionate immobilization (supporting the consummation stage).*

The seventh point of the model is that *the imagery of melting and releasing the flow of masculine and feminine forms of bliss chemistry may be linked to the release of vasopressin and oxytocin, functioning as mediators of the mixed sympathetic-primal vagal arousal of sexual excitement and intimacy, as well as modulators of the older arousing and calming neurotransmitters like norepinephrine, dopamine, acetylcholine, and the endorphins.*

The eighth point of this model is that *the mastery of the biology of intimacy and consummation is not limited to courtship and mating, since the same unconditional love system is normally recruited for nursing, the basic paradigm of mammalian caretaking.*⁹⁷

The ninth point of this model is that *mastering the biology of fearless social immobilization also provides a model for the socially engaged practice of fierce compassion, since the same kind of mixed sympathetic-vagal activation at work in sex, love, and caretaking*⁹⁸ *is also involved in the socialization of aggression exemplified by rough-and-tumble play.*⁹⁹

The tenth point of this model is that *kindling the inner fire and inducing a shift to a state of ecstatic immobilization supports the insight-oriented process of extinguishing the conditioning of fearful memories and defensive reactivity from aversive learning,*¹⁰⁰ *as well as the formation of new, unconditional social bonds reinforced by healing visceral states and transformational affects.*¹⁰¹

The eleventh point of this model is that *unraveling the heart knot by deepening ecstatic immobilization with diamond recitation may refer to the way profoundly slowed and calmed breathing—itself conceived as a reassuring rhythm of implicit vocalization—can slow and stabilize the “common cardiorespiratory oscillator,” helping to extinguish traumatic memories and reactivity in a broad range of brain regions.*¹⁰²

The twelfth point in this model is that *by slowing breath to a near standstill in the context of ecstatic immobilization induced by inner fire, diamond recitation helps reset the three systems of the ANS—smart vagal, sympathetic, old vagal—to an optimal state of freedom from reactivity and openness to receptive, fearless and intimate engagement, experienced as the three lucid intuitions that culminate in clear light transparency.*

The thirteenth point in this model is that *given the profound slowing of heart-breath rhythm induced by vase breathing and diamond recitation, inner fire practice induces drastic reductions in oxygen metabolism and dramatic shifts in blood flow that simulate normally preconscious or unconscious statetransitions like those to orgasm, fainting, deep sleep, or death, leading to the conscious experience of signs of body-mind dissolution and reemergence like those mapped in the eightfold process of death-like dissolution and birth-like reemergence.*¹⁰³

Vase Breathing and Inner Fire in Daily Practice

With this introduction to the arts of vase breathing, inner fire, and diamond recitation, we’ve surveyed the path of the first perfection sub-stage, hopefully with some sense of the gateway of freedom of speech. I’ve laid out the steps on the path in far more depth and detail than usual, because I believe if we have a clear view of what may lie ahead, it can serve to orient, inspire and challenge us. Again, I’ve taken some care to link the grand vistas of the process path to the simple steps laid out in some of its most basic introductory practices. Having linked the total nervous system work-out of vase-breathing to the simple preliminary form of the art taught in the action process practice of the *Healing Mother*, we turn now to link the profound arts of inner fire and diamond recitation to a simple practice of purifying our traumatic conditioning and reactive energies, akin to the practice of the *Heroic Altruist, Mother-Father*. Remember that if you’re not currently an optimal process practitioner, this experiment is solely for liberal arts purposes, not for regular practice.

Meditative Experiment 10.2: Our Inspiring *Heroic Altruist Father-Mother*

*In as peaceful and uplifting a space as possible,
With or without real offerings or images
Of the Heroic Altruist Mother-Father,
Settle into a comfortable, stable posture,
And clear your breath and balance your state*

With nine rounds of alternate nostril breathing.
 Now prime your energy and nervous system
 By taking three or more simple vase breaths,
 And, as you hold them, doing a breath work-out
 Using the rotating wheel, binding hook,
 Diamond binding, expelling breath-lock,
 And/or total shakedown, at least once or twice.
 When you've reached a balance of heightened clarity
 And profound calm, recite mentally or out loud the following
 Performance script, based on the purification process
 Of the Heroic Altruist Mother-Father, pausing after each section
 For as long as you like to hold its imagery,
 Follow the recommended breath practice,
 Focus on your experience, or seal in its meaning.

1. Taking Refuge in the Four Healing Gems

"In a state of true confidence and radical openness,
 I take refuge in my mentor's inspiration and clarity—
 A gem-like embodiment of triple kindness,
 In the prime example of the Great Sage, Shakyamuni,
 His enlightening teaching and altruistic community
 And in all mentor-archetypes of heroic altruism.
 To free myself and all sensitive beings I conceive
 The altruistic spirit of pure blissful openness, and will
 Develop myself and all beings as quickly as possible,
 Until we gain the enlightenment to heal this world!"

1a. Invoking the Mentor and Lineage as Heroic Altruists

"Suddenly out of the void, six inches above my crown,
 Your pure reality emits a thousand-petalled lotus
 Of rainbow light, in the midst of which your translucent mind
 Dawns like a full moon in water. Bubbling up from the moon
 Like a fish leaping out of the water comes a sapphire light HUM,
 Which instantly becomes a diamond scepter marked by HUM,
 Flawless and unbreakable as your commitments and vows,
 Beaming a rainbow aura everywhere that purifies
 The destructive habits and instincts of all living beings,
 And delights the enlightened, melting the whole multiverse
 Into gem-toned light that returns and melts into the scepter
 Until it dissolves and transforms into your embodied form
 As the moonlight-white *Heroic Altruist*, father and mother
 Of all enlightened beings and all master altruists.
 Seated in meditation, facing forward, hovering
 Just inches over my crown, your right hand holds a scepter,
 And your left a bell, as they embrace your partner,
Diamond Pride, who straddles your lap, her arms and legs
 Embracing you, holding a chopper and skull-bowl.
 At ease in heavenly silks, you both bear the marks and signs
 Of perfect altruism, and the living gems of transcendent virtue.
 Above your head, like a string of pearls, sit all the mentors
 Of your great seal lineage, up to Naropa and Tilopa,
 Above whom sits the prime *Heroic Altruist*,
 Mother-Father, all appearing exactly like you!"

1b. Inviting the Mentor and Lineage to Bless Your Efforts

"Your form glows like a cooling moon, lit from within
 By the diamond OM, ruby AH, sapphire HUM
 Seed syllables on moon discs at your crown, throat, and heart,
 Beaming gem-lights to invite your spirit and the pure genius

Of all mentors to melt into my vision and merge as one!”

2. *Welcoming Mentor and Lineage into Your World*

“In the presence of your clarity, all experience has the taste
Of blissful openness, pervading the mind and all the senses!
I HAVE A PURE NATURE WHICH IS
THE NATURAL PURITY OF ALL THINGS!
In the crucible of the clear light of bliss, my five mind/body
Systems and elements melt and transform into healing
Elixir, the quintessence of the five pure intuitions.
OM AH HUM HA HO HREE! (3X)
Welcoming you all gratefully into my world, I offer
A sun-shower of sense delights—scented waters,
Incense, flowers, lights, music, and delicacies—
Converging toward you from everywhere, horizon and sky!
Fully and freely I share with you all my resources,
Virtues, every aspect of my intimate life—
Transformed by healing the elixir of my blissful openness,
Plus this precious earth, with its oceans, continents,
Wonders, forests, waters, and infinite web of life.
Perfectly pleased, the primordial *Heroic Altruist*
And all the mentors from Tilopa and Naropa
One at a time, melt into you and merge as one!”

2a. *Requesting and Receiving Consecration*

“Intensified by absorbing the genius of the lineage,
And enjoying the singular taste of these blissful offerings,
The sapphire HUM at your heart beams gem-lights everywhere
Inviting the five Mother-Father Transcendent Ones
To consecrate you and grant me initiation.
The couples come holding vases of wisdom elixir
Which they pour into you crown, filling your body/mind
And overflowing as an *Unshakable* Buddha crown.
MAY THE CONSECRATED VOWS
OF ALL THE TRANSCENDENT SHINE!”

3. *Fully Disclosing Faults, Limits, and Blocks*

“Regretting all the negative instincts and habits I’ve acquired,
All that limits and blocks me from mastering inner fire,
From the depths of my heart I regret every one of them now,
And firmly resolve with your help to avoid and unlearn them all.”

4. *Vicariously Enjoying the Power of Inner Fire*

“Though all things are empty of any non-relative being,
With gratitude I enjoy your mastery of inner fire
And the power it gives you to burn blocks to pure bliss,
And refine the wisdom that yields a master’s communion.”

4a. *Enhancing Enjoyment with the Four Boundless Moods*

“May all beings have real happiness and its causes!
May we all be freed from all suffering and its causes!
May we all enjoy and savor all excellent things!
May we all know unwavering equanimity!” (Repeat 3X)

5. *Requesting and Receiving Blessings*

“Mentor of bliss and clarity, please bless my body-mind
With your inspiration, help me focus my awareness
And purify my energy so I can open and clear
The channels and complexes of my central nervous system,
Balance and gather my sun and moon energies into

The central channel at my navel, to ignite inner fire,
 Master the flow of bliss and realize innate wisdom!
 Moved by your love for me and all life, mother-father,
 You enter into a full embrace and melt into bliss
 That flows from your crown and sexual organs into your hearts,
 Which merge into one jewel drop of orgasmic bliss-complete void,
 Melting into my crown, into my central channel,
 Radiating warmth, bliss, and light, so I can see and feel it
 Opening and clearing the channel both frontwards to mid-brow
 And downwards to my throat, heart, and navel, where I see and feel
 Both side channels loop and curve back up to join into it.
 Savoring the drop's warmth, bliss and light, I see and feel it
 Light up and clear my crown complex, with its diamond
 Exclamation point, then flow to light my throat complex,
 With its inverted ruby exclamation point, then flow
 To light my heart complex, with its sapphire exclamation point,
 And finally flow to light up and clear my navel complex,
 Merging with its inverted ruby exclamation point, until
 It intensifies the navel point's innate warmth and light.
 Focusing now on that ruby point, I see and feel it
 Glowing with heat and light like a ruby-seed tongue of fire,
 Fanned to greater heat with each breath, its starts to flare
 From its brazier and point and burst from its tip into flame.
 Kindled now, I take some vase breaths to ignite inner fire,
 Melt and savor pure bliss and seal it with emptiness."

*Now slowly draw breath in through both nostrils,
 See and feel it filling both your side channels all the way down
 Below your navel, and then looping up with them into your
 Central channel. Nodding your head, as you swallow gently press
 The remaining breath down and out your side channels, into your
 Navel complex, and hold it down onto the flaming ruby-seed. Now
 Tone the muscles of your pelvic floor, drawing whatever sensual
 Energy you've aroused
 Up your central channel to your navel complex,
 Holding it up to the flaming ruby seed, to meet the breath above
 In a kiss. Now hold your breath and savor that kiss as long as you can,
 But well before any distress, start letting it go, gently and slowly,
 Up though the flaming ruby point, up the central channel to the crown,
 Where it reenters the side channels and leaves out the nostrils.
 As you repeat this 3, 7, or 21 times, taking care not to strain or push yourself,
 See and feel the flaming ruby exclamation point at your navel
 Burn and blaze more and more, until its flame-tip threads its way
 Slowly up the central channel, melting the sapphire point at the heart,
 Until it drips like wax into the fire, then threading up to throat,
 Kindling its ruby inverted exclamation point to burst into flame,
 And join the navel flame-tip until they reach the diamond exclamation point
 At the crown, heating it until it too starts to melt and drip like wax,
 Releasing the flow of bliss-chemistry. As it reaches the throat,
 It spreads a sense of bliss and emptiness, as it reaches the heart, it spreads
 Sublime bliss and extreme emptiness, at the navel it spreads supreme bliss
 And ultimate emptiness, and at the sexual organ it spreads orgasmic bliss
 And complete emptiness. Take care to restrain a natural release,
 And instead put your mind to drawing the flow of bliss back up
 From the sexual organ to the navel, spreading bliss-void, to the heart,
 Spreading sublime bliss-extreme void, to the throat, spreading supreme bliss-
 ultimate void, and to the crown, spreading orgasmic bliss-complete void.
 Finally, now practice gathering all your bliss energies and chemistry*

Into the extremely subtle body-mind at your heart. First, let your lunar Bliss melt down from your crown to your throat, spreading bliss-void, Dissolving your solidity and sight, marked by seeing all like a mirage; Next, draw your solar bliss up from your sexual organ to your navel, Spreading sublime bliss-extreme void, dissolving your bodily fluids And hearing, marked by seeing all things swirl like smoke; then Let your lunar bliss melt from throat to heart, spreading supreme Bliss-ultimate void, dissolving your bodily heat and smell, Marked by seeing all things scintillate like sparklers; finally, draw Your solar bliss up from navel to heart, spreading orgasmic Bliss-complete void, dissolving breath-gasses and taste, marked By seeing all things glow like a flame. At your heart level, Withdraw your subtle energy from your outermost circle of Distracted seeking into your sapphire exclamation, spreading Bliss-void as its body slips into clear light, marked by a luminance Intuition like a clear moonlit sky; next withdraw your subtle Energy from your intermediate circle of angry defensiveness Into your sapphire crescent, spreading sublime bliss-extreme Void as it slips into clear light, marked by a radiance intuition Like a clear twilight sky; then withdraw your subtle energy from Your inner circle of share-bound isolation into your sapphire Flame-drop, spreading supreme bliss-ultimate void as it slips Into clear light, marked by an immanence intuition like a Midnight sky; and finally, withdraw your subtle energy entirely From seeking, defensiveness, and isolation into your sapphire Flame-tip, spreading orgasmic bliss-complete void as it slips into Your extremely subtle energy-drop and clear light, marked by a Translucence intuition like a crystal clear predawn sky. As you Immerse your bliss-energy completely in clear light translucence, Observe your in-breath, pause and out breath themselves as the Diamond recitation of OM, AH, HUM, and reflect that your Subtlest breath-drop-mind knows no distinction between self And other, subject and object, body and mind, and lacks even The subtlest hint of any non-relative being, essence, nature, Identity or objectivity (1 or 3X). Seal the process by affirming your Enlightened pride & confidence:

**"I AM THE SELF WHOSE NATURE IS
THE DIAMOND INTUITION OF OPENNESS!"**

5a. *Self-Consecration: Embodying Pure Inspiration*

"From the womb of emptiness my clear light mind becomes
A vast rainbow lotus with sun and moon cushions
From which my affirmative thought bubbles up as a sapphire
Light syllable HUM, in which all my vowels and constants,
Neural energy and mind merge as one, beaming a rainbow
Aura, within which I take bodily form as the diamond white
Heroic Altruist Father-Mother, in blissful embrace,
Holding a scepter and bell, chopper and skull-bowl,
Symbolizing the union of great bliss and pure clarity!
Lit from within by a diamond OM, ruby AH,
Sapphire HUM on moon discs at my crown, throat, and heart,
I beam rainbow lights everywhere to invite all altruists
To melt into me and merge as one, while wisdom muses
And geniuses consecrate me with pure bliss-void nectars,
Overflowing as an immovable Buddha-crown."

6. *Requesting Constancy as you Practice Inner Fire*

"Recognizing this imagery as a mere simulation,

I ask you, mentor, and the whole inner fire lineage,
Please stay with me until I reach perfect mastery!
Moved by your love for me and all life, mother-father,
You instantly come to my crown, embrace and melt
Into one, indestructible drop, like a rainbow tear for joy,
Which slips through my crown and throat to melt into my heart,
Merging your blissful openness with mine, intensifying my light,
Energy and warmth until they fill me as a flame fills a lamp
And a nectar, a vase, rippling out in my actions
Until all those around me at home and on earth become
Heroic Altruists, returning a wave of joy to my heart!”
*Now pause to absorb and drink in the warmth and moisture of that joy
As long and deeply as you can, and then prepare to close the session:*
“Suddenly the earth, my meditation space and my body
All return to their normal appearance, and the three syllables
Sealing my body-speech-mind melt into my heart-drop.”

7. *Dedicating yourself to Embodying Sheer Brilliance*

“With any errors or omissions I’ve made in this practice
Out of ignorance, misperception, lack of resources, or art,
I ask you, mentor, please be patient and all-forgiving!
Any positive insight or energy I’ve gained through this practice
I dedicate to being always inspired by your teaching,
Until I myself become a *Heroic Altruist*,
In this very lifetime, as quickly as possible!
By mastering the arts of inner fire and diamond recitation,
May I gain the free speech to enlighten myself and all life!”