The Thirty-Seven Factors of Enlightenment and The Five Phases, Paths or Stages
by Tarchin Hearn

I realize refuge in the true state of affairs
the radical inclusivity of life unfolding in all it’s fullness,
the vast ungraspable suchness that is this living world/universe.
This is ever fresh buddha in action.

I recognize, celebrate and cultivate
the paths, teachings and encouragements
that support our realizing the true state of affairs.
This is dharma put to good use.

Releasing into a profound sense of being and belonging
with the entire community of life and living, I am home.
This is the knowing of true sangha, the fruition of all refuge practice.

Gradually, buddha, dharma and sangha merge and mingle
until each one contains and reveals the other two.
This is a wondrous three-in-one refuge.
It’s where we belong.

A Life-Journey of Maturing Humanness

Every multi-celled creature exists as a matrix of dynamic relationships. We are conceived in relationship, born into relationship and grow through relationship. Relationship is everywhere we look. What I do – the doing that is I – ripples through the tissues, organs and cells of my body and ripples through the living world around me. As I live, all that comprises my environment shifts and dances responding to my exuberance. As the world around me reverberates its ineffable functioning, I respond with chemical shifts and riffs of thinking, feeling and remembrance. These linkings are seamless. Intimate relationship is all that is, and the eternally present structure of
dancing organism and dancing environment, drifts in the space and time of knowing, tracing the stories of evolving life, a planetary community growing into sentience, coming to know the universe. This awakening, this dawning capacity for lived understanding, which is me and you and all of us together in the very midst of being the beings that we are, reveals itself in flavors and modes, in factors and pathways – life-lines of the ungraspable – symbiosing now as blessing and wonderment. In Buddhism the shared human experiences of these flavors and modes have been examined and named. They are called bojjhanga and magga. We might think of them as factors of awakening and paths of maturing into fullness.

This article contains a general outline of the process of awakening or what we might think of as a life-journey of maturing humanness, expressed using the concepts of Buddhism. In the Theravadin Tradition, this way of living is described in terms of cultivating the *Thirty-seven Factors of Enlightenment*¹. In the historically more recent traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, these 37 are elaborated and clarified by associating them with five ‘phases’, ‘paths’ or ‘stages’ while at the same time relating them to the view and practices of Prajñāpāramitā.² Generally, without extensive explanation and direct personal experience, these lists of terms and categories will not be particularly informative, but for someone deeply engaged in the lifelong adventure of awakening-in-action, they can be both inspiring and reassuring; especially when we begin to discern patterns in our unfolding realization that parallel the paths and realizations of great bodhisattva-yogis of the past. In this way we begin to feel part of, and at home in, a venerable community of contemplative scientists and practitioners of natural awakening – this magnificent life unfolding that we are.

From the point of view of paths and stages, generally speaking, on the *path of accumulation* one gathers experience with the various aspects of life and living that appear to be collaboratively weaving one’s current experience of now. On the *path of preparation* one deepens one’s conceptual understanding of these aspects, particularly in terms of form and function, appearance and process, self and other, and relative and absolute truth. On the *path of seeing*, a non-conceptual direct

¹ For a succinct summation of the 37 factors see:
- “Gone Beyond” vol 2 p 144 – 154, by Karl Brunnholzl, Snow Lion 2011
- “A Concise Enumeration of the Paths and Bhūmis of Bodhisattvas, the Children of the Victors ” by Patrul Rinpočhe p 545 - 552, found in “Groundless Paths” translated by Karl Brunnholzl, Snow Lion, 2012

² Prajñāpāramitā – the Perfection of Wisdom. In Buddhism this refers to a lived experience of radical non-clinging and to a vast collection of texts all oriented towards realizing śūnyatā, the ungraspable nature of co-dependently arising phenomena.
realization/experience of this seamless mandala of current experience arises. This marks the first ‘stage of the bodhisattva’. On the path of familiarization, this non-conceptual realization is refined through living the remaining nine stages of the bodhisattva. On the path of no more learning, the entire universe, this ungraspable mystery, continues as ever fresh arising presence, the source of inspiration and an endpoint of discovery for all who seek understanding.3

Note: Throughout this article, I have named and numbered the 37 factors of enlightenment in green. I have also added supplementary comments and footnotes with suggested further reading for those wishing to pursue the topic further.

I. The Stage, (or Phase), of Accumulation1 (tsogs - lam):
The Path of Study, and Learning

Through this stage, one ‘accumulates’ skills in wholesome engagement which together become the foundation for even more subtle explorations and lived understandings. Here one achieves mental quiescence, (samatha, shi-né), and a conceptual understanding of śūnyatā (the un-pin-down-able, spacious openness of interbeing) through the power of hearing a correct explanation of it, thinking about it and reflecting upon it. One emphasizes the first 12 factors of enlightenment across 3 levels: lesser, intermediate and high.

With the stage of accumulation, one begins to cultivate the skills of absorption (jhāna), as well as investigating themes such as: the potential opportunities in becoming a fully matured human, the dynamics of causal relations (paṭiccasamuppāda), life as a matrix of responsive activity, and the dysfunctional assumptions and patterns of the particular culture one is raised in. Classically, these four themes are referred to as “four contemplations to turn the mind towards dharma”.

Note: A summary and explanation of the paths and bhūmis, see:
- “A Specific Explanation of the Manner of Gradually Progressing through the Five Paths and the Manner of Attaining the Qualities of the Ten Bhūmis” by Patrul Rinpoché p 553 – 584 in “Groundless Paths” translated by Karl Brunnholzl, Snow Lion 2012

4 The stage of accumulation involves becoming familiar with all aspects of living/experiencing. Everything is an interbeing of everything else, thus revealing the un-pin-downable, illusory-like nature of oneself, the apprehender. At this stage, one is beginning to understand what one is working with but does not yet have mastery of these factors. Classically there are two categories of experience to be accumulated: wisdom and merit, or correct understanding and skillful means.

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Lesser level  Traditionally, this level of practice is called low or lesser to indicate that there is a sense that fruition of this practice is something that will occur at an unspecified later time – for those believing in re-birth, in an unspecified ‘future life’.

Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Satipaṭṭhāna)\(^5\)
-or Four Applications of Attentiveness (dran-pa nyer-bzhag bzhi)
1. Kāyānupassanā awareness of body (lus)
2. Vedanānupassanā awareness of feelings (tshor-ba)
3. Cittānupassanā awareness of mental states (sems)
4. Dhammānupassanā awareness of dhammas (chos)

Intermediate Level  This level of practice, built on the preceding, is called intermediate as it is accompanied by increasing confidence (saddha) that fruition will occur in the not too distant future – or from a Buddhist re-birth perspective, ‘next life’.

Four Efforts (Cattāro Sammappadhāna)
- sometimes called Four Renunciations (yang-dag-par spong-ba bzhi)
5. Recognize the presence of an unwholesome state and take steps to bring it to an end.
6. Take steps not to produce or encourage further unwholesomeness.
7. Recognize the presence of a wholesome state and encourage it to grow.
8. Encourage the arising of all that is wholesome.

Each facet of these four efforts involves a progression of five aspects\(^6\)
a) willingness to give rise to striving (‘dun-pa)
b) eagerness to do so (making effort) (‘bad-pa)
c) perseverance in doing so (applying vigor) (brison-’grus)
d) keeping the mind in check (holding the mind) (sems rab-tu ’dzin-pa)
e) having the mind firmly settled (setting the mind) (sems rab-tu ’jog-pa)

High Level  This is called high level to indicate a confidence that fruition will occur in the course of this life. (Progression through these three levels: lesser, intermediate

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\(^6\) These five aspects are applied to enrich one’s experience of each of the four efforts (viriya). ”Endowed with the vigor of rejecting the factors to be relinquished and adopting their remedies, the mind becoming workable through samādhi (absorption)”. – Groundless Paths p 251. Doing so supports, but also requires, a deepening of samatha/vipassana.

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and high, reveal a deepening confident/trust in knowing that one's moment by moment living is one's path of awakening. It's all we have to work with.)

**Four Means of Accomplishment (Iddhipāda)**

- Four Footholds for Higher Forms of Cognition
- Four Limbs of Miraculous Power.

It is called miraculous power because it is the foundation for attaining the various qualities of a calm, clear, engaged and profoundly peaceful mind. The general nature of the *iddhipāda* is *samādhi*. Each one involves a global or holistic appreciation for what is happening.

9. **Will/determination/aspiration** (*chando*) (*dun-pa*)
   - "will to manifest or bring forth compassion", N.R. – Namgyal Rinpoche
   - *samādhi* of trust in the actuality of what one is trying to familiarize with, P.R. – Patrul Rinpoche, *Groundless Paths* p558

10. **Effort** (*viriya*) enthusiastic perseverance (*brison-pa*) – "energy from compassion", N.R. – *samādhi* of engaging while being enthusiastic P.R.

11. **Thought** (*citta*) or attentiveness (*sems-pa*) – "realization of compassion", N.R. – *samādhi* of one-pointed engagement P.R.

12. **Reason** (*vīmaṃsa*) or discursiveness (*dpyod-pa*) – "wisdom arising from compassion", N.R. – *samādhi* of analyzing whether or not dullness or agitation are present P.R.

II. **The Stage, (or Phase) of Preparation; integration, link-up, or junction (sbyor-lam): sometimes called, the path of application (of what one has learned)**

This is called the path of preparation because it prepares one for the path of seeing. Here, through four stages called 'heat, peak, patient endurance or poised
readiness, and supreme dharma’, one develops and integrates penetrative insight, (vipassana, lha-tong) and a conceptual/inferential understanding of śunyāta\textsuperscript{12}.

Patrul Rinpočé, in his "Concise Enumeration of the Paths and Bhūmis of Bodhisattvas"\textsuperscript{13} wrote; "When one rubs a wooden support with a wooden stick, before the arising of fire there arises heat in the wood. Likewise, there arise signs of heat in one’s mind stream that are unlike what happened before and coarse afflictions are suppressed. Therefore, this is called the level of heat of the path of preparation. Its level of ‘peak’ is so called because it represents the peak of mundane roots of virtue. Its level of ’poised readiness’ is so called because the poised readiness of not being afraid of the basic nature – the actuality of emptiness – is attained. Its level of ’supreme of all dharma’ is so called because it is the supreme of all dharmas that arise from mundane meditation. These make up the path of preparation as the four factors conducive to penetration.” In this phase of preparation, one realizes a significant degree of mastery in absorption and flexible inquiry.

The tentative phase is divided into 'heat' and 'peak'.\textsuperscript{14} This involves the process of entering one side of true reality (i.e. the Four Noble Truths or Four Realities\textsuperscript{15}) called emptiness of the apprehended. Here the bodhisattva recognizes that everything that appears is an expression of the functioning of his or her mind. At this point distractions of the apprehended are relinquished and only distractions of the apprehender remain.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{a. heat, warmth or warming up} – the warming, or heating up, or dawning of realization that 'afflicted' phenomena (what is apprehended) are without nature. This is sometimes called the initial samādhi of 'the illumination of prajñā'.
  \item \textbf{b. peak, summit or maximum level} – the realization that ‘purified’ phenomena are without nature. This is an intensification in the illumination of prajñā.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{12} śunyāta => often translated as 'emptiness'. The word śunyāta points towards the spacious, open, un-pin-down-able nature of interdependent phenomena. Looking deeply into anything will reveal a network of causes and conditions, an interbeing of myriad things and processes, such that you can't say definitively, it is this or it is that, and so it is said to be 'empty' of this and that.

\textsuperscript{13} "Groundless Paths" p 547-8

\textsuperscript{14} "Groundless Paths” p 310 and 559

\textsuperscript{15} For a rich and expanded view of the Four Noble Truths, see The Avatamsaka Sutra – Book Eight.

\textsuperscript{16} The tentative phases of heat and peak, include a progressive mastery of jhāna (factors of absorption). Heat involves the development of the first level of jhāna with emphasis on examination (focus) vitakha and analysis (scanning) vicāra. Peak involves the development of the remaining jhānas through to the arūpa level of 'nothingness'. Through these trainings the mind is becoming very malleable and responsive.

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The Five Faculties\(^{17}\) (Pañcindriyāni): or Inner Controls

13. confidence (saddhā) in the Four Realities (dad-pa) – realization of which constitutes full enlightenment.

14. effort (viriya) enthusiasm and perseverance for realizing the Four Realities (brtson-'grusb) – This is bodhisattva conduct.

15. mindfulness/remembrance (sati) not forgetting the focal objects and aspects (of an enquiring mind), in terms of the Four Realities; This is also known as attentive inspection (dran- pa) – the supreme study of mahāyāna.

16. concentration (samādhi) or holistic experience (ting-nge-'dzin) with regard to the actuality of the Four Realities – calm abiding presence.

17. wisdom (paññā or prajña) or appreciative understanding, or superior insight in thoroughly discriminating each of the Four Realities.

Wisdom – prajña Skt. – has been usefully described by Brunnholzl as the basic inquisitiveness and curiosity of one’s own mind which is very precise and playful at the same time. We might think of this as ‘wisdom-in-action’. In Tibetan, this aspect of prajña is called sherab. The exercising of sherab eventually flowers as wisdom in the form of realization, which is described in many ways: for example, luminous non-abiding presence, pristine awareness, the ever-fresh expanse of uncontrived wholeness, dharmañcātta wisdom. In Tibetan, wisdom as realization is called yeshé. Both sherab and yeshé are forms or faces of prajña.

The decisive phase (for entering the path of seeing). This is divided into ‘patient endurance’ or ‘poised readiness’, and ‘supreme dharma’.\(^{18}\) => Together, they involve the process of entering full reality [the Four Noble Truths or Four Realities], the emptiness of both apprehended and apprehender.

c. patience, acceptance, or, poised readiness – In English translations of some of the mahāyāna sutras you may come across the same term rendered as ‘patient endurance of the uncreate’. This refers to the patience that arises with the realization that the apprehender is without nature and not being afraid of this ungraspability of profound actuality.

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\(^{17}\) These 5 faculties are directed towards the Four Realities. See “Groundless Paths” p 756, fn 543.

\(^{18}\) “Groundless Paths” p 310 and 559

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The term ‘supreme dharma’ refers to the realization that the apprehender as a manifestation of mind – as an imputed individual – is without nature. This is the samādhi that immediately precedes the path of seeing.

The Five Powers or Five Inner Strengths (to overcome all that impedes the link-up with the Stage of Seeing.) Here one manifests the power or inner strength to overcome the obstacles associated with the Five Faculties: lack of confidence, laziness, forgetfulness, distraction, and lack of alertness.

18. confidence (saddhā) (dad-pa)
19. effort (viriya) (brtson-'grus)
20. mindfulness (sati) or attentive inspection (dran-pa)
21. concentration (samādhi) or holistic experience (ting-nge-'dzin) – a growing feeling of well grounded thoroughly integrated wholeness.
22. wisdom (prajñā) or appreciative understanding (shes-rab)

III. The Stage, (or Phase) of Seeing, Insight, or Penetration

This stage is explained in different ways depending on the school, the context and the teacher, for example: seeing the essence, nature and expression of mind; seeing the Four Realities in a fresh way, i.e. through the eyes of śunyatā; directly realizing personal and phenomenal identitylessness; or fully experiencing the complete Mahāyāna view or Madhyamaka view. The Mahāyāna path of seeing is the path of directly realizing emptiness free from reference points. The Madhyamaka path of seeing is the path of all dharma being free from the two extremes of permanence and extinction. The Buddhist scholar, Herbert Guenther in his writings poetically described this seeing as a ‘limpid clarity and consummate perspicacity’. In essence the stage of seeing is the yogi’s initial correct experiencing of reality as un-pin-downable wholeness.

"By relying on mere mind,
One does not imagine outer objects.
By resting in the focal objects of suchness,

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One should go beyond mere mind too.
Having gone beyond mere mind,
One must even go beyond non-appearance.
The yogin who rests in non-appearance,
Sees Mahāyāna.” – (Laṅkāvatārasūtra)

With the stage of seeing, one attains a non-conceptual, bare perception of śunyatā through fully maturing one's realization of the seven factors of enlightenment. The stage of seeing is also referred to as the first stage of the Bodhisattva, the first bodhisattvabhūmi, and is called, 'Joyous' or 'Supreme Joy' or 'Spotless Joy'.

Seven Factors of Enlightenment (sattabojjhanga)

23. mindfulness (sati) (dran-pa) – attentive introspection
24. investigation of dharma (dhammavica) (chos rab-rnam-'byed) – appreciative discrimination
25. sustained effort (viriya) (brtson-'grus)
26. joy (pīti) (dga'-ba)
27. quietude or tranquillity (passadhi) (sometimes called suppleness) or refinement and serenity (shin-tu sbyang-ba) – a state of increasing physical and mental health and fitness
28. concentration (samādhi) (ting-nges-'dzin) – a state of wholeness
29. equanimity (upekkhā) btang-snyoms)

IV. The Stage, (or Phase) of Familiarization

This stage is also referred to as the stage of cultivation of, or resting in, or acclimatization (Bhāvanā) to, the nature of mind. It is also sometimes referred to as The Path of Cultivation of Refinement. Here, all latent emotional and conceptual obscurations and misunderstandings are gradually purified and the positive qualities or attributes of the enlightened state are revealed.

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20 See Appendix 2
21 Familiarization is the process of making something one's family. We were conceived and grown in, a family of relationships that in their totality make up 'the total field of all events and meanings', the dharmadhātu. This family of inter-knowing/interbeing is our ground, our soil, our companionship, our teacher and our life’s fruition. The stage of familiarization is a period of integrating all the implications of knowing our family-ness with all that is.

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In the preceding 'stage of seeing', all manifest delusions are absent. In the stage of familiarization, all latent (potential) delusions are gradually eliminated. Here, the final delusions obscuring one's Buddha Nature are incrementally abandoned; eliminated by deepening insight into the eight-fold noble path. Progressing through the second to tenth stages (the bodhisattvabhūmis) one familiarizes oneself with abiding in non-conceptual awareness of śunyatā – abiding where there is no abiding – refining and perfecting the pārami while eliminating increasingly subtle obstacles.22

**Eight Path Factors or Eightfold Noble Path (ariya-aṭṭhangka-magga)**

30. complete or 'right' view (sammā-diṭṭhi) (yang-dag-pa'i lta-ba) – to see/experience in a non-fragmenting, radically inclusive way – (to fully understand the Four Realities – P.R.)23
31. complete thoughts (sammā-sankappo) (yang-dag-pa'i rtogs-pa) – to think in terms of the whole.
32. complete speech (sammā-vācā) (yang-dag-pa'i ngag)
33. complete action (sammā-kammanto) (yang-dag-pa'i las-kyi mtha’)
34. complete livelihood (sammā-ājīvo) (yang-dag-pa'i tsho-ba)
35. complete effort (sammā-vāyāmo) (yang-dag-pa'i rtsol-ba)
36. complete mindfulness (sammā-sati) (yang-dag-pa'i drang-pa)
37. complete concentration (sammā-samādhi) (yang-dag-pa'i ting-nge-'dzin)

**V. The Stage, (or Phase) of Completion, or No-more Learning (mi-slob-lam)**

This final stage is also referred to as the stage or phase of complete accomplishment or the path of non-meditation. With the culmination of the Stage of Familiarization comes realization of the tenth bodhisattvabhūmi called, the "Assembling the Clouds of Dharma". Here, the phrase found in various Theravadin sutras, "Done is that which had to be done. For this, there is no more being subjected to becoming," becomes profoundly meaningful. According to Prajñāpāramitā, Mahāmudrā, and Dzogchen commentaries, this fifth stage is the level of Buddhahood and is sometimes equated with an eleventh bodhisattvabhūmi but now thought of as a Buddhabhumi. It is known by different names such as, "Light Everywhere", "Unequalled", "Endowed with Wisdom", and "All Illumination".

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22 See Appendix 2
23 See "Groundless Paths" p 568

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Appendix – 1

Five States – according to Yogacara

These ‘five states’ according to Yogacara, are very close the the five stages outlined in Tibetan teachings. I am including them here as they can help shed further light of understanding on the over-all process.

1. State of equipment (sambhara - avastha), or cultivation of aids to liberation. Here, the bodhisattva is able to deeply believe and understand the characteristics and nature of consciousness.

2. State of added effort (prayoga - avastha), or cultivation of aids to penetration of mahāyāna. Here the bodhisattva is able to gradually subdue the grasped and grasper (the two clingings or obstacles) and promote a true view.

3. State of thorough understanding (prativeda - avastha), or the path of insight dwelled on by all Bodhisattvas. Here the bodhisattva thoroughly understands in accordance with reality.

4. State of cultivation (bhāvanā - avastha), or path of cultivation dwelled on by all bodhisattvas. Here, the bodhisattva cultivates what he understands, over and over, in accordance with principles he has perceived and subdues remaining obstacles.

5. State of culmination (nistha - avastha), that is abiding in Supreme Perfect Awakening. Here, the bodhisattva is able to emerge from the obstacles perfect and clear, being able, to the end of time, to convert sentient beings and cause them to awaken to and enter the characteristics and nature of ‘consciousness-only’.

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Appendix – 2

The Ten Stages of the Bodhisattva – Bodhisattvabhūmis

These stages are referred to in different ways and with different names in many Mahāyāna Sutras. Bhūmi literally means ground, foundation, earth, area, level, and stage. The sequence of the ten stages of the bodhisattva are marked with increasing mastery of the illusory/empty/cognizing nature of being, culminating in the experience of buddhahood/suchness. With each progression there is an expanding of vision of life and living and a refinement of the wisdom and skill to be of service to others. The early stages are just about imaginable for most people. The last stages describe an expanse of awakening activity that is awesomely inconceivable and immeasurable in scope.

From the stance of meditative-absorption on wisdom, each of the ten stages are the same, comprising a profound realization of the nature of mind and a experiential knowing of the dharmadhātu – the total field of all events and meanings. From the point of view of the subsequent activity of compassion or skillful means, the stages are different. Each stage involves a refining of all ten pāramitā, with a particular emphasis on one, and a relinquishing of ever more subtle tendencies for clinging.

The first bhūmi called "Great Joy" is the equivalent of the "Path of Seeing". Here training in generosity, dāna pāramitā, is emphasized conjoined with realizing the empty nature of phenomena.

The second to tenth bhūmis arise on the "Path of Familiarization".

The second is called "Spotless Purity". Here, wholesome relating sīla pāramitā, is emphasized conjoined with realizing the empty nature of phenomena.

The third is called "Illumination or Refulgence". Here, patience kśānti pāramitā, is emphasized conjoined with realizing the empty nature of phenomena.

The fourth is called "Radiant Wisdom". Here, skilled use of energy viriya pāramitā, is emphasized conjoined with realizing the empty nature of phenomena.

The fifth is called "Invincible Strength or Difficult to Conquer". Here, a continuity of
caring and enquiry samādhi pāramitā, is emphasized conjoined with realizing the empty nature of phenomena.

The sixth is called "Direct Presence". Here, wisdom emerging from the integration of the first five pāramitā, prañā pāramitā, is emphasized conjoined with realizing the empty nature of phenomena.

The seventh is called "Far Reaching". Here training in expansive skillful means, upāya pāramitā, is emphasized conjoined with realizing the empty nature of phenomena.

The eight is called "Steadfastness or Immovable". Here training in unshakable aspiration/determination, praṇidhāna pāramitā, is emphasized conjoined with realizing the empty nature of phenomena.

The ninth is called "Good Mind or Meritorious Wisdom". Here training in immeasurable power to nourish the wholesome and mature all sentient beings, bala pāramitā, is emphasized conjoined with realizing the empty nature of phenomena.

The tenth is called "Assembling the Clouds of Dharma". Here the mastery of enlightened activity; the realization of effortless union of wisdom and compassion and the spontaneous rain of blessings, jñāna pāramitā, is emphasized conjoined with realizing the empty nature of phenomena.