Tilopa’s Six Nails

Powerful advice for meditation from the 10th-century Indian master

By [Justin von Bujdoss]

Illustrated by Daniele Tozzi

Developing a **meditation practice** can seem daunting, especially at the beginning, when we are unsure about what having a meditation practice even means. It took me awhile to find a sense of confidence in what I was doing; perhaps more important than the confidence, though, was learning how to be *comfortable*.

My first teacher, a Sikkimese Buddhist nun, once likened the development of a meditation practice to being an expectant mother. “Now that you’ve taken the time to begin this process,” she explained, “you must learn to take care of and protect your practice, to nurture it, and to maintain the necessary conditions for its growth. You should think of yourself as pregnant—you need to apply that same level of care.” Even at that early stage, her advice made immediate practical sense. And now, two decades later, her words resound with a wisdom that captures the way in which maintaining a practice becomes a life’s work.

The 12th-century Tibetan meditation teacher Gampopa suggested in his work “The Precious Garland of the Supreme Path” that when our practice begins to coalesce we ought to protect it as we would our own eyes. It is during this embryonic stage of practice that we experience moments of vulnerability and tenderness, ripe with the potential to develop a deeper connection to practice.

When I was at this stage in developing my practice, I was introduced to a meditation instruction known as Tilopa’s Six Nails. Tilopa was a *mahasiddha*, a great adept, who likely lived in the region of present-day West Bengal, India, and Bangladesh around the turn of the 11th century. Little is known about his life, but traditional biographies tell us that he was a cowherd and showed a natural inclination for meditation and mystical experiences. Over the course of his life he became a very experienced meditator with a profound understanding of the mind. Like many of the other famed mahasiddhas from the Indian subcontinent, Tilopa was instrumental in creating and refining core spiritual practices that later spread throughout the Himalayan region—the Six Nails teaching, also known as Tilopa’s Six Words of Advice, is one of his best-known instructions:

Don’t recall. Let go of what has passed.
Don’t imagine. Let go of what may come.
Don’t think. Let go of what is happening now.
Don’t examine. Don’t try to figure anything out.
Don’t control. Don’t try to make anything happen.
Rest. Relax, right now, and rest.

—trans. Ken McLeod

At its heart, this meditation instruction is about using simple awareness to allow what is happening in the present moment to take place. It's almost as if Tilopa is trying to point a finger at what the experience of meditation is all about. These six very short lines of instruction not only show us how to settle—or, as is sometimes said, how to "place the mind"—but also highlight all that we as meditators need to be careful of as we cultivate our practice. Tilopa is showing us how we can nurture our practice while simultaneously deepening its meaning, that the two are not mutually exclusive, and that when we find ourselves craving complexity, sometimes we are best served by simplicity.

DON'T RECALL.
LET GO OF WHAT HAS PASSED.

This instruction, especially in the beginning, is simple. It's almost too simple. Let go of what has passed. Don't chase after past experiences—easy, right? One might think so, yet when we sit down and begin a meditation session, what happens? What do we experience? Often we are faced with a natural cascading replay of the experiences that we had earlier in the day. If it's not from earlier today, then it's from yesterday, or earlier in the week, or before that. The mind can be a busy place, especially when we are early on in developing a relationship with the way it manifests. Sometimes when we are bored, rebellious, or tired, we find ourselves replaying experiences from the past that we feel are significant because they bolster our sense of self-importance. In a similar way we may have a habit of recalling ourselves as not good enough, broken, or without worth. Key to this instruction, though, is gaining a better understanding of how our relationship to the past affects us right now.

DON'T IMAGINE.
LET GO OF WHAT MAY COME.

This instruction is similar to the one about letting go of the past, but now we are invited to not think about what may come in the future. This means not getting distracted by thoughts of chores, meals to make, tasks to accomplish, goals to achieve, or any myriad of things we are convinced we must remember. Sometimes these arise as thoughts or mental images, and sometimes they arise as what I like to call "thought-chains"—mental narratives that, if we are not careful, will run their course throughout the

duration of the meditation session. Just as we define ourselves in relation to the past, we also tend to seek particular outcomes for the future. Here Tilopa is asking us to gently let this go.

DON'T THINK.
LET GO OF WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW.

Sometimes our own brilliant mind can be an impediment. The desire to know exactly what we are experiencing is very natural: sometimes we want to codify our experience in practice as either good or bad, and at other times we want to distract ourselves with an endless play of thought activity. Tilopa is suggesting we turn the inner television off and just experience. A Zen Buddhist instruction is similar to this point: "When you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." What Tilopa is suggesting is that we cut away labeling and reactivity in relationship to whatever is arising—thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations. Try not to worry about what is happening right now. Instead, let it arise naturally, without judgment.

DON'T EXAMINE.
DON'T TRY TO FIGURE ANYTHING OUT.

Sometimes in Buddhist practice one is advised to be wary of engaging in overly intellectual practice. This is not to say that the Buddhist tradition is anti-intellectual, but rather that it's easy to substitute descriptions from books for experiences gained in meditation. Practically speaking, this may take shape in our practice when we try to assess our own meditative development based upon what we have studied. Such assessments can create a subtle shift in the experience of meditation from an openness to whatever may arise to an experience that is objectified and studied. In the previous instruction, "thinking" pertains to mental activity in a general sense; in this instruction, "examining" has more to do with an analysis of what is going on, whether one is making progress, and whether the experience fits into one's larger idea of what meditation is "supposed" to be all about. It is also worth noting that once an assessment or diagnosis occurs, we create the ground for subsequent reactions and so perpetuate our distraction.

Here Tilopa is highlighting the importance of making sure that our experience remains that which is experienced, not something that we

study. He isn't worried about how much you have read or whether you are literate; he is pointing out the importance of letting analysis evaporate to give space for direct experience to occur.

DON'T CONTROL. DON'T TRY TO MAKE ANYTHING HAPPEN.

In some meditation texts, meditators are advised not to fabricate any experience within their practice. That's what this instruction is all about. Think of sitting on a beach and watching the waves come and go, the flatness of the horizon, and the way the clouds appear. Can you control them? Can you make the salt air different? What would happen if we approached meditation the same way? Here we are faced with putting down the desire to induce change in our experience of practice. This can be challenging when we don't feel like remaining present, when we want to be distracted, or when we want to push back. But here Tilopa is gently reminding us that actively manipulating what arises in meditation is not the experience we seek to develop.

REST. RELAX, RIGHT NOW, AND REST.

Relax. Practice isn't about being intense; it's about coming back to ease—letting the mind and body settle into an experience that holds the seeds of expansiveness. In order to have a clearer sense of what the mind is like, we need to become comfortable letting ourselves, and our mind, rest with ease. Often it isn't until we fall out of connection with this experience that we feel the need to do something. Maybe we begin chasing after thoughts, examining what is happening, or playing with everything that the mind seems to contain.

Sometimes during a meditation session we feel awkward, as though we need to do something, or as though we need to keep thinking about some particular thing, or else our ability to have a sharp, agile mind will disappear. (That's not going to happen.) It's hard to rest, especially given the busy pace that our lives often take. Two other instructions may help convey the sense of rest that Tilopa is getting at: Rest like a bee stuck in honey. Rest like a laborer sitting down at the end of a day of hard work. Try to let your mind settle with an ease born of natural relaxation.

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In the Tibetan tradition we often talk about meditation as familiarising ourselves with the mind. This is a way of saying that with each practice session we get to know what is actually going on with greater clarity. Tilopa's six instructions, which can be applied in a number of ways, are particularly effective in aiding this process. They can be read or chanted before a meditation session, and if you are struggling with one particular instruction you can even focus an entire meditation session on that particular one. Later, once you have developed a more personal relationship to the six instructions, they should be considered akin to a set of boundaries that together allow the experience of mind to take place in a direct, fresh, and uncontrived way. To move in this direction, it will help to minimise how much you study or read about this kind of meditation. Indeed, my first teacher advised me not to read too much about instructions like these. "If you must read," she told me, "try to read and then instantly forget. Too much knowledge of the path can make meditation much harder than it needs to be."

As is true for many meditation instructions, it can take time for them to feel natural and integrated into our experience. That's OK. Developing a practice takes time. It's natural to want to jump to the end result, but that isn't possible. The great mystery of cultivating a meditation practice might be the path itself—how it twists and turns; the work we must put into it along the way—yet the result is worth the effort. Over the course of repeated practice, with the kind of gentle care that my teacher taught me and that Gampopa shared with his students, mind becomes less of a mystery and more of a canvas upon which the wealth of our existence is displayed.

Justin von Bujdoss (Repa Dorje Odzer) is an American Buddhist teacher and the former Chief Staff Chaplain for the New York City Department of Correction. He was formally recognized as a repa, or a lay tantric practitioner, in the Karma Kamtsang tradition of Tibetan Buddhism by Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche.