



# Meditation Without Stages: A Study on the Concept of Directedness in Mahāyāna Buddhism

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## Abstract

Meditation gives the basic criteria or circumstances which meditation can be developed from, and without them there is no opportunity for any progress. The second phase is the meditative path itself which usually includes successive stages, and might vary according to the type of meditation. And finally, the result or fruit of meditation is the achievement of the process, and it does not necessarily mean enlightenment itself, but the realization of the aim of the given meditation.

Undoubtedly, the scheme mentioned above is underlined on the general rules of logic, and might present a habitual idea about one of the basic types of meditation which is suitable for being named as ‘meditation with stages’. In spite of this familiar pattern, among some Buddhist lineages, particularly in Mahāyāna Zen or Tibetan Buddhist schools, one could encounter the term ‘meditation without stages’, which might require a different line of thought.

*Keywords:* Buddhist lineages, Meditation, Without Stages

## Introduction

After the mahāparinirvāṇa of Buddha Śākyamuni, in history, Buddhism arrived at various regions of Asia, and, for thousands of years to come, it gave a great impetus to the different areas to develop their new spiritual culture. In the last centuries, the Western world has become acquainted with the Buddhist lore, and gradually an honest endeavor has appeared in a significant amount of Westerners to comprehend its theory and the practice of meditation in a profound way.

Generally, in Buddhism the symbol of ‘path’ or ‘way’ containing various stages, at least three main phases, is applied for the comprehension of the fundamental structure of meditation. The first is the beginning point, regularly the state of consciousness of a person who is about to meditate, the state of which, of course, might vary individually, however, any meditation gives the basic criteria or circumstances which meditation can be developed from, and without them there is no opportunity for any progress. The second phase is the meditative path itself which usually includes successive stages and might vary according to the type of meditation. And finally, the result or fruit of meditation is the achievement of the process, and it does not necessarily mean enlightenment itself, but the realization of the aim of the given meditation.

Undoubtedly, the scheme mentioned above is underlined on the general rules of logic and might present a habitual idea about one of the basic types of meditation which is suitable for being named as ‘meditation with stages’. In spite of this familiar pattern, among some Buddhist lineages, particularly in Mahāyāna Zen or Tibetan Buddhist schools, one could encounter the term ‘meditation without stages’, which might require a different line of thought.

Taking the importance of clear structure referring to basic methods of various Buddhist branches or ‘yānas’ into consideration, one of the objectives of the research is to present the different and typical levels of meditation with stages. This analysis with its terms and relations might serve as a wider framework for supporting the understanding of the meaning of meditation without stages.

As another and main objective, the research plans to focus on the principles of meditation without stages and make an attempt to formulate the elements of its definition. To accomplish this objective, an analysis referring to the methods of Zen Buddhism, and Tibetan Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen tradition is required.

In order to establish the elements of definition formulated in the objectives mentioned before, the research intends to represent two Tibetan texts in which the ideas of meditation without stages are included. As a third objective, the research analyses the terminology of Tibetan expressions and outlines its traditional meaning.

As far as the hypothesis is concerned, even though the method of meditation without stages is adorned to ineffable character, the elements of its definition could be compiled. Thus, the concept of meditation without stages is based on the Mahāyāna idea of Buddhahood innate in every sentient being, which is the source of enlightenment. This kind of meditation is an instantaneous and non-rational method which, in case of the mature state of mind, can traverse all the levels or forms of existence and bestow the qualities of enlightenment.

As for the first objective, it is commonly assumed that Buddhism can be divided into three main schools, namely Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Tantrayāna, which distinction is also accepted by the research. Each school possesses its own structure and methods of meditation which could be systematised item by item from the beginning until the final stage, namely enlightenment itself. Thus, the basic method of this part of the thesis is ‘systematisation’; that is to say, constructing a structure of various types of Buddhist meditation with stages, and focusing on their stages or levels themselves.

The basic method of next section referring to the second objective, or the study of meditation without stages is ‘abstraction’. Having examined the descriptions and experiences of the methods of ‘directedness’, the thesis strives to unravel the characteristic elements of this method. The third basic method of thesis might be called ‘presentation’, because two traditional Tibetan Buddhist written sources could demonstrate the elements of the definition of directedness in an authentic context.

## **Meditation in Buddhism**

### **1. Meditation as A Method of Transforming Human Existence**

Buddhism explains a series of operations, symbolically described as a ‘path’, which specifically details the methods that evolve through different stages from our present state in order to get rid of the Samsaric state and allow Nirvāṇa to unfold. Buddhist philosophy gives a detailed description of the starting state of this process, that is, as humans find their present selves in the relation of the outer and inner worlds which is traditionally

characterized by the expression “three seals”: the nature of our world is suffering, change and being without essence<sup>1</sup>.

Taking this starting point as the basis, in some of its strains, Buddhism has developed meditational structures that include higher and higher states starting from the Samsaric basic stance, and in which these higher states mean purification inasmuch as they can be less described with suffering, impermanency and being without essence (i.e. the characteristics of the three seals). The construction of structurally organized stages that can be achieved with different meditative techniques gives a certain ‘map’ for the practitioners who realize states that are more and more virtuous from the perspective of Buddhist enlightenment with the above meditative methods<sup>2</sup>.

A meditative method therefore always starts out of a state of mind to be ‘transformed’ or ‘purified’, and results in a state that is higher and cleaner in terms of realizing enlightenment. Buddhist meditation thus evolves higher and higher states of mind, and the highest level of these stages is generally speaking achieving enlightenment or Nirvāṇa. A given meditation can be usually described with the trio of a starting point, a process of different states – which is the meditation itself – and the final aim, while meditational techniques can be put together from interlinking practices, which follow each other in time to realize the aim of Buddhism, or enlightenment.

## **2. Concerning the Idea of Meditation Without Stages**

Related to the previously explained scheme of “starting point – meditational levels – aim”, it surfaces that in Buddhism there are such techniques which are not compatible with this pattern. The basic characteristic of these meditative techniques is that the starting point and final aim of the meditation are regarded as essentially the same. This approach practically cannot be interpreted from the point of view of a meditative process evolving on a timeline. One cannot either speak of a meditational process, symbolically called a ‘path’ which would evolve according to sequential stages, as the starting point and the final aim are the same.

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<sup>1</sup>Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, (New York: Grove Press, 1959), pp. 16-21.

<sup>2</sup>As an example for levels of existence organize cf. Acariya Anuruddha, *The Abhidhammattha Sangaha, A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, tr. by Narada Mahathera, (Sri Lanka: Power Press, 1993.), pp. 7-9.

This approach is absurd at first sight, yet it still has deeply rooted traditions in Mahāyāna Buddhism. According to the basic teachings of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the final nature of every phenomenon, i.e. dharma<sup>3</sup>, is emptiness that, however, is veiled by the obscurations present in ourselves. Thus, the empty nature of existence has been there since the beginning, in a „timeless way”, ready to be recognized by followers of Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> This recognition itself takes place in a timeless way, and in some meditational schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the disciple is directly faced with the final nature of things, and is given the opportunity of recognition.

From a theoretical point of view, such an insight is usually directed at the final aim of Buddhism, recognizing the Buddha nature, or Buddhahood within ourselves, as worded in Mahāyāna.<sup>5</sup> Since this method is fundamentally different from the ones that are based on stages, some authors use the expression of ‘directedness’ for the latter.<sup>6</sup>

It has radical techniques, for instance, an interruption for the usual functions of the mind, and as a result of this, both the proliferation of the functions of the mind, and the urge of the mind to involuntarily categorize our experiences are suddenly disrupted. By this stalling of the functions of the mind the Buddha nature present in every being can surface. This is the reality, which is ‘before’ and ‘above’ the mind’s automatic creation of categories and structures, is the state of ‘suchness’ (skrt. tathatā). The result of this exercise is traditionally depicted with the symbol that the clouds of the usual functions of the mind clear from the sky of Buddha nature.

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<sup>3</sup>These phenomena include the whole existence and all of its aspects: not only the experiences in Samsāra but also Nirvāṇa, which is a dharma in the philosophy of Abhidharma, cf. Acariya Anuruddha, pp 258-260.

<sup>4</sup>“When the Madhyamaka speaks of all dharmas as empty (śūnya) it means specifically that all dharmas (and therefore all things) are empty of inherent existence.” In Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism, The Doctrinal Foundations*, (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 61.

<sup>5</sup>It is worth underlining that this is a peek or an intuition from the practical aspect, which later deepens via further recognitions. Hans Schumann Wolfgang, *Buddhism, An Outline of its Teachings and Schools*, (Madras: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1989), pp. 121-127.

<sup>6</sup>Sam van Schaik, pp. 11-13.

## The Paths of Meditation with Stages in Buddhism

### 1. The Basic Scheme of Theravāda Methods

As one of the most essential teachings, in his first sermon at Sarnath, near Benares, Śākyamuni Buddha 'set in motion the Wheel of Truth' and expounded 'The Four Noble Truths' to his previous five ascetic companions<sup>7</sup>. In a condensed form, and particularly in its Fourth Noble Truth, this teaching provides the principle of any spiritual progress and also the basic pattern of meditation with stages. Our human existence is characterised by suffering, or Sanskrit *duḥkha* (the First Noble Truth), which is caused by craving (the Second Noble Truth) and functions as a starting point that is to be transformed toward the state of *Nirvāṇa* (the Third Noble Truth).

As far as the Forth Noble Truth is concerned, the Noble Eightfold Path is the general method which is applied by a practitioner in order that Samsaric experience be gradually eliminated and transformed into *Nirvāṇa*. In terms of the Noble Eightfold Path, we might use the expression of 'meditation' in a broader sense, and it refers to the 'mental training' itself that could involve all the aspects of human existence.

The scheme of mental training determined by Śākyamuni Buddha in the Noble Eightfold Path in his first sermon was highly influential in Theravāda Buddhism and the later generations followed it in a stage by stage manner. The practice of gradual 'mental training', or 'meditation' in a broader sense, was later called the 'Path of Purification' that became the title of the grandiose work of *Visuddhimagga*, written by one of the most important commentators, namely Badantāchariya Buddhaghosa (in the fifth century)<sup>8</sup>. In his work, Buddhaghosa preserved the general structure of the gradual path of mental training which consists of the three basic categories of moral conduct, or *sīla*, the stages of concentration practice, or *śamathā* and the levels of insight practice, or *vipaśyanā*.

### 2. Mahāyāna Methods: Bodhisattvayāna

As distinctive characteristics, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, a special emphasis was laid on the so-called 'transcendental wisdom', or *prajñā* and 'great compassion', or *mahākaruṇa*. These

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<sup>7</sup>Walpola Rahula, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup>About his life and Indian brahmin origin see Badantāchariya Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, the Path of Purification, the Classic Manual of Buddhist Doctrine and Meditation, tr. by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980), pp. xxxviii-xliv.

two qualities are represented clearly in the figure of ‘Bodhisattva’ interpreted differently to some degree in Mahāyāna and the word ‘Mahāsattva’ was added to it. Generally, Bodhisattva, or ‘Great Being’ is a term for a person who is aiming for enlightenment, or bodhi, however, a Bodhisattva Mahāsattva embodied both basic qualities. Thus, regardless of the length of his path, or the number of times he has to be reborn, he took a vow to ‘attain the perfect Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings’<sup>9</sup>.

The attitude of a Bodhisattva Mahāsattva unfolds through a long gradual path which might be followed during plenty of lives, or even eons, i.e. extremely long epochs. The bodhisattva path with numerous stages usually begins with generating the so-called ‘bodhicitta’ which, from a practical aspect, is in general a vow or aspiration for becoming a Buddha and acquiring all the qualities of a Buddha as well as for saving worldly beings from suffering<sup>10</sup>.

As a typical example of meditative practice with stages in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the 26th chapter of *Avatamsaka sūtra*, the *Daśabhūmika sūtra*, or the “sūtra on the Ten Stages” provided the basic standard of the bodhisattva career. Later on, in the process of elaborating the sophisticated structure of this career, the ten stages and the six, and afterwards, ten perfections, or pāramitās are combined. In order to make it complete, the final system had comprised the so-called ‘five paths’ or mārga, originating from non-Mahāyāna sources, but restructured in conformity with Mahāyāna principles by proponent masters, for instance, Atiśa (980-1054), the leading figure of the second emanation of Buddhism in Tibet<sup>11</sup>.

### 3. Tantrayāna Methods: Deity Yoga

Although the word ‘tantra’ (t. rgyud) has a multidimensional meaning, its basic interpretation, provided by one of the oldest scripts, namely *Guhyasamāja tantra*, recalls also the idea of ‘connection’, or literally ‘continuity’<sup>12</sup>. It refers to the continuous presence of the ‘nature of mind’ (t. sems nyid) which might be rendered as ‘awareness’ that is beyond the ordinary consciousness. As a possible definition of the tantric meditative path, or tantric sādhanā, it might be cited as follows: the “systems of practice and meditation

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<sup>9</sup>Paul Williams, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup>Nalinaksha Dutt, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, (Calcutta: Orient Press, 1973), p. 97.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Williams, p. 204.

<sup>12</sup>Herbert V. Guenther, *Buddhist Philosophy in Theory and Practice*, (London: Shambala, 1976), p. 156.

derived from esoteric texts emphasizing cognitive transformation through visualization, symbols, and ritual”<sup>13</sup>.

The system of tantric practice could be presented through diverse patterns, and it might vary depending on the different esoteric texts, i.e. tantras. As the typical techniques or meditations with stages, this structure consists of, firstly, the set of common and then specific preliminary practices, secondly, the scheme of tantric initiations, and lastly, as the subsequent levels of realization of the final aim, or Buddhahood in a tantric sense, the meditations with numerous ritualistic peculiarities included in the four classes of tantras.

The tantric *sādhana*, i.e. “means of achievements”<sup>14</sup> (t. sgrubs thabs) is a complex process of rituals and meditation with series of stages, which consist of prayers, visualizations, hand gestures and even bodily movements. Regularly, the centre of a tantric *sādhana* is the so-called ‘meditational deity’, or in Sanskrit *iṣṭa devatā*, or in Tibetan *yidam* (t. yi dam), which is one’s potential for awakening, or Buddhahood, therefore, this system is often named as the so-called ‘deity yoga’.

The term ‘deity’ is applied in a special sense in tantric practice and in accordance with the principles of Buddhism it does not have any independent reality, but its nature is also emptiness. A tantric deity is an attribute or epitome of Buddhahood itself, for example, a manifestation of compassion or wisdom, and throughout the practice a tantric follower devotes himself to identifying with the awakened quality via deity yoga. In a repeated practice the follower “simulates in oneself the quality that deity represents” and gradually the “mind of meditator becomes indistinguishable from the mind of the deity”<sup>15</sup>.

## The Paths of meditation without stages in Buddhism

### 1. About Zen Buddhism

The Japanese term ‘zen’ and the Chinese ‘chan’ are basically the equivalents of the Sanskrit ‘*dhyāna*’, and they mean ‘meditation’. This Buddhist school therefore expresses the importance of meditation in its name, and it supposedly is a continuation of the tradition

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<sup>13</sup> John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), p. 249.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.



that lays special emphasis meditation besides theoretical teachings. There were so called ‘dhyāna masters’ in this tradition, who supervised the practice of sitting meditation, and their activity was independent of which Buddhist school they belonged to<sup>16</sup>.

As far as the notion of Buddhist enlightenment is concerned, it is totally reevaluated in Zen Buddhism and is reinterpreted according to the teachings of Mahāyāna sūtras. For instance, based on its teachings on emptiness, the *Vajracchedikā sūtra* teaches about the mirage-like nature of all our experiences, and the state of Nirvāṇa is the here and now present. Therefore, intending to achieve Nirvāṇa equals to losing it, and it cannot be a final destination of a path with stages one following the other, but rather it can occur instantly and directly<sup>17</sup>.

The central experience of Zen Buddhism is the *satori*, without which one may not even speak of Zen Buddhism, since it would be like “sun without its light and heat”<sup>18</sup>. It is equated to enlightenment itself, and “an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it”<sup>19</sup>. Almost a new birth takes place as a result of it, after which life and the usual experience of things are put into a new context.

## 2. Tibetan Methods: Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā

The meaning of the word *Dzogchen* is ‘Great Perfection’ or ‘Great Completion’, which is basically “the primordial state of being that is each individual’s own intrinsic nature from the very beginning”<sup>20</sup>. This expression does not merely denote a school or a philosophical system, but even more so a point of view which originates from the experience of directly recognizing and realizing this state. Every moment of existence is then experienced in accordance with this realization.

Besides the term ‘primordial state’, which awakens as the realization of the direct method, for this perfected state, the Dzogchen teaching also uses ‘nature of mind’ (t. sems

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<sup>16</sup> Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, (London: Luzac and Company, 1927), p. 216.

<sup>19</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>20</sup> Choegyal Namkhai Norbu, *The Crystal and Ways of Light*, (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 12.

nyid). In the explications it is also called Mahāyāna emptiness (skrt. śūnyatā), and it is described not only in negative terms, but also positively as primordial bodhicitta<sup>21</sup>. Space is usually applied for the nature of mind as a symbol, as it is present everywhere, it is clear, transparent and it is the same in every time and location. When this symbol is expounded, our attention is drawn to the fact that it is not simply empty, it is radiant at the same time, and thus it is the unity of emptiness and clear light<sup>22</sup>.

As far as the word Mahāmudrā is concerned, it is rooted in Sanskrit and is explained in different ways by the masters. The expression is used by Tibetan schools in both its original Sanskrit and its Tibetan literary translation, i.e. phyag rgya chen po. The word Mahāmudrā literarily means ‘Great Seal’, ‘Great Symbol’ or ‘Great Gesture’, which refers to an assent of a monarch, or a comprehensive, universal law, according to which there is no other reality than the ultimate nature characterized by radiation and emptiness<sup>23</sup>. ‘Seal’ in this interpretation suggests as if “stamped on all phenomena” which give the validity and real-ness of the phenomena. In other words, every experience, be it Saṃsāra or Nirvāṇa, exists according to an ultimate nature, which is Mahāmudrā<sup>24</sup>.

In its radical approach, Mahāmudrā teaches the ‘one taste’ (tib. ro gcig) experience in which every distinction and definition based on duality dissolves. Every division of our existence, besides the dualities of ‘subject and object’, ‘relative and absolute’, even the Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa is traced back to one single root<sup>25</sup>. According to this teaching, wisdom and enlightenment are not outside the ordinary mind, and the master awakens the Mahāmudrā experience in the very same mind<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Choegyal Namkhai Norbu, *Dzogchen, The Self-Perfected State*, (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> John Powers, p. 392.

<sup>23</sup> Dzogchen Ponlop, *Wild Awakening, The Heart of Mahamudra and Dzogchen*, (London: Shambala Publications, 2003), p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang Rinpoche, *The Practice of Mahamudra*, (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1986), p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Tsele Natsok Rangdröl, *Lamp of Mahamudra, The Immaculate Lamp That Perfectly and Fully Illuminates The Meaning of Mahamudra, The Essence of All Phenomena*, (Massachusetts: Shambala Publications, 1989), p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> Dzogchen Ponlop, p. 76.

### 3. Presentation of Two Tibetan Textual Sources

In favor of demonstrating the tenets relating to ‘directedness’ in context, the thesis has selected two very traditional Tibetan sources, and its commentary. The first source is actually a set of scripts including two root texts and a commentary relating to the second one. The English title of the first root text is “The Three Statements That Strike the Essential Points”<sup>27</sup>, and it comprises the spiritual testament in three sentences bequeathed by the first human master of the Dzogchen lineage of the Nyingma (t. rnying ma) Tibetan order, i.e. Garab Dorje (tib. dGa rab rdo rje) to his disciple, Mañjuśhrīmitra. The second root text, “The Special Teaching of the Wise and Glorious King”<sup>28</sup> and its own commentary are written by the venerable Patrul Rinpoche (tib. dPal sprul rin po che) (1808 - 1887).

The testament of Garab Dorje, the text of three statements is greatly honoured and it is treated as an expression of the essence of the “Great Perfection”. The three statements with their concise pattern might shed light on the method of meditation without stages in terms of Dzogchen and provide the structure of the root text of “The Special Teaching of the Wise and Glorious King” and its commentary.

In general explanations of the root text, the central Mahāyāna ideas originally generated in Mahāyāna sūtra, such as in Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, play a significant role. For instance, primordial or pure awareness, or Buddhahood does exist not only in the heart of all Buddhas, but it is the intrinsic quality of every sentient being therefore the act of ‘introduction’ mentioned in the first statement could happen.

As for the second source, it is The Flight of Garuda, and even its full title could express the idea of directedness: “*Song of the View of the Thorough Cut of Luminosity Great Completion Called Flight of the Garuda Capable of Quickly Traversing All the Levels and Paths*”. From the point of view of the thesis, the script teaches the methods that could cut across the ‘levels’ or ‘paths’ which might be interpreted differently in Buddhist yānas.

As far as the content and teachings are concerned, the twenty-three chapters of the The Flight of Garuda find their fundamental principles in Mahāyāna doctrines: “In

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<sup>27</sup>The original Tibetan title also has different English versions such as ‘The Essential Point in Three Statements’, or ‘Three Words That Strike the Crucial Point’. The title in Tibetan: tshig gsum gnad du brdeg pa.

<sup>28</sup>The title in Tibetan: mkhas pa shri gyal po’i khyad chos.

reality no distinction between Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa can exist in anybody's mind"<sup>29</sup>. This approach originated from the Mahāyāna notion about the empty nature of all phenomena, or the "impossibility of dividing appearances from emptiness"<sup>30</sup> (in Tibetan: snang stong dbyer med). Therefore, the view and instructions included in the text refer to the capacity of an immediate method of realizing Buddhahood.

## Conclusion

Over the course of time, a wide range of techniques of meditation has been elaborated in Buddhism, and they are classified into different categories in order to be able comprehend their essential attributes. According to our thesis, one of the possible categorizations could be a division between the meditations with and without stages. Relying on this distinction, pursuant to our hypothesis, a definition of meditation without stages, that is, 'directedness' is also provided, and its significant elements might be determined as well.

In spite of their ineffable character, the thesis presented the general meanings of the elements of the definition relating to 'directedness', such as 'instantaneity', 'non-rationality', 'simultaneity' or the feature of 'beyond form'. In order to deepen the understanding of this method, the thesis elaborated the structures of the meditation with stages in Buddhist yānas, and from their perspectives, it presented the concept of 'directedness' in different Buddhist schools and in two Tibetan Buddhist sacred scripts.

As we have seen, these schools and texts have achieved a detailed explication of their terminology and could support the justification that the elements of the hypothesis do exist in peculiar lineages of Buddhism. However, the research, in terms of phrasing, could often merely fulfill the role of „the finger pointing at the Moon"<sup>31</sup>, and at best, it could give points of reference to the inner experience.

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<sup>29</sup> The Flight of the Garuda, tr. by Keith Dowman, Teachings of the Dzokchen Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1994), p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 106.

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