



The Mahāmudrā and the Five-Fold Mahāmudrā *- A Study and Practice Guide -*

“If you make an effort to look at the mind (with an Enlightened Motive of Bodhicitta), then it is impossible for you not to develop quickly and with certainty the pristine awareness of penetrative insight.”¹

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¹ p. 75. Ninth Karmapa (Wangchug Dorje). The Mahāmudrā, Eliminating the darkness of Ignorance, Translated by Alexander Berzin, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, New Delhi, 1978.

The great Yogi Shabkar said,

“These days, some people say, “There is no need to expend great effort on the preliminary practices. What is the point of so much complication? It is enough just to practice Mahamudra, devoid of all elaboration. Don’t listen to such nonsense. How can someone who has not even reached the shore talk about the sea?”

Introduction

This guide was composed for study, contemplation and meditation. Even though it uses some logic and modern concepts to explain the path and experience of Mahāmudrā, it is full of direct meditation instructions of exactly where to look, practice and seek the natural freedom and compassion of mind. Though we discover the Mahāmudrā by going beyond concepts, profound words derived from a multitude of lineage master’s personal experiences help point out the way to proceed. As a metaphor, though we may be asked, we cannot define the taste of pure water. It undoubtedly helps to have repeating tastings, over a long period of time to gain certainty before expressing confidently that which cannot be described. By evoking the experience from genuine recognitions and leading beings to taste pure water, one may encourage others to discover the ineffable. That is the purpose of writing this booklet. Instead of giving detailed instructions for the tranquility meditations, which are so well described in the many authoritative sources provided in the footnotes, the focus of this pithy text is directing practitioners to the necessary gatherings needed on the path and crafting the art of Mahāmudrā contemplation.

Before explaining the meaning of the word Mahāmudrā, there are fifteen² key background points to understand. These provide a clarification of the view, practice, conduct and fruition of the Mahāmudrā:

1. Shaping by mind: From the Buddhist perspective of meditative realization, how we experience our world, internally or externally, is shaped and understood by our minds.
2. Knowing mind’s nature is the essence of Dharma: Mind is the most important thing to understand, know, and realize. This is the essence of Dharma practice.

² Solely an arbitrary number. However, these key background points encompass a thousand years of Buddhist meditation masters’ investigations and philosophical writings, such as the three turnings of the Buddha’s Teachings, especially the development of the Mahayāna, Cittamatra, Madhyamaka, Vajrayāna and lay the basis for understanding the profound view, meditation and conduct of the Mahāmudrā.

3. All experience is data and is reinterpreted: From the research of modern cognitive psychology and neurophysiology we would state that all experience (data) is altered and reorganized by our brain and the five senses.
4. Experience is a tiny view of reality: Our senses take in very little of the extraordinary rich field of data present. Our brains reinterpret this data in a seamless-invisible fashion to appear to us as a firm, continuous reality.

After 30-40 years of experimental-scientific research and 2,500 years of Buddhist meditative tradition on this topic, the conclusions in 1) to 4) above are indisputable. Therefore:

5. All experience is interpretation and distortion: All experience is not the way things are. We interpret (distort) everything. Even touching a flower or seeing a face is only an interpretation of sensations, such as light and sound, by a highly complex brain and organism we call human.
6. Speech is fictional: When we speak, internally (internal dialogues and fantasies) and externally we make up stories and fictions – attempting to convey what happened – to try to understand experiences. Thereby, we lessen anxiety and fear, express joy, and communicate what we need and wish to do. Human beings' ability to plan, by referencing past and present fictions or interpretations to imagine a future, is evolutionary and cultural. Yet even a cursory enquiry shows us everything we have and have created is an imaginary fiction or construct of our mind. For a weak ego formation, hearing or reading these statements can be frightening. For a being with a flexible and open experience of their world, the above statements show infinite possibilities and creativity and generate profound joy.
7. The illusion of perceiver and perceived (subject-object): Another fiction is that we usually experience that which is perceived and the perceiver as two different things. Perceiving that there is a person or object out there and a person observing that person or object is an utter illusion. Though it is what we are habituated to experience it is not actually happening. For there to be any separation would be like saying that while dreaming there is a uncoupling between what we dream about and the dreamer's mind. Oddly enough, that is most often how we experience the dream. Moreover, that subject/object split is how it is in our waking life. This illusion is at the heart of the confusion that causes suffering.
8. The illusion of self: As all our experience is illusory and fictional, so too is our experience of self. Every part of us – body, feelings, emotions, sensations, perceptions, and consciousness – is an interpretation of experiences over time from conception. We have an autobiographical storyline of who we are and what we are within a world and culture. For example, we are not exactly the same organ-

ism from one month to the next or year to year. Physiologically, experientially, and intellectually it is easy to see this. Yet, through steady attentive contemplation, we can see that we are not the same from second to second. However, in our imaginations and interpretations, we feel we are the same entity. For a weak ego formation, these statements of illusory self-nature are often frightening. For a being with a flexible and open experience of their self view, the above statements show infinite possibilities, creativity and freedom.

9. The cause of suffering and bewilderment: Any holding, slight or long term, to these imaginations and fictions of outer and inner, self and no-self, real or imagined, a reality and no reality, a past, present, or future, causes to some degree large or small stress and anxiety. No fiction can ever live up to what is really occurring; as it is. Moreover, most of the stress is invisible to our consciousness unless we go into retreat and gradually unfold a quiet reflective awareness. Only gross stress like illness, loss of love and affection, not getting what one wants, having what one wants and not being satisfied, death, and so on is generally called suffering. Furthermore, we do whatever we can to make a happy existence out of a fictional experience. There is a holding or clinging to an idea of reality that does not match what is happening. This clinging to a mismatch is what causes suffering, anxiety, and misery. Buddhism teaches that clinging to imaginary appearances, speech, and cognition is unnecessary. It is only habitual. With teaching, study, meditation, and changing how we conduct ourselves – mind training – the holding can fall away into a natural continuum of freedom. The natural abiding of mind.
10. Freedom and collapse of all fictions: Realization of this natural state – recognizing the fictional nature of all phenomena – confers tremendous lasting freedom of the mind and positive alterations of one's physiology. It is fully compassionate as it also unbinds and dissolves afflictive emotions and concepts of greed, hatred, stupidity, pride, jealousy, and ignorance (the six poisons).
11. Buddha-nature and Emptiness: Many schools of Buddhism state that this natural state of freedom that is effortlessly compassionate and liberating to all life forms is the underlying or inherent natural state of all creatures. This quality of openness, freedom, lack of delusion, and boundless compassion is called Buddha-nature (Skt. *tathāgatagarbha*). Its nature is uncovered. What is uncovered is called in Sanskrit, *śūnyatā* (Tib. *tongpa nyi*) often translated as emptiness or voidness.³ This emptiness is both free of any elaboration or fabrications of mind, but endowed with luminous-clarity, an ineffable spontaneous wish and ability to transmit the paths and manifest the freedom of the innate wisdom of Buddha-nature.

³ Empty or void of the six poisons or conflicting emotions and the fact that no phenomena, matter or consciousness is solid or lasting. The word *śūnyatā* is not nihilistic. It does not describe falling into either extreme view of nothingness or somethingness. In Vajrayāna, *śūnyatā* is also compassion, realized as the luminous clarity of Buddha-mind.

12. Bodhicitta – Enlightened Motive: Buddha-nature is the unity of śūnyatā and relative and ultimate compassion. As these two qualities are inseparable, it is essential, right from the start of our practice, that we generate a tremendous wish to fully liberate ourselves quickly for and with all sentient life. This unbounded wish, natural to the awakened mind or Buddha-nature, is called *bodhicitta* (Skt.)
13. Recognition of the natural state: We need to be made to recognize the nature of primordial stainless mind through the precious blessings and pith instructions of our Guru who has the realization of this nature.
14. Delusion and (or bewilderment) is not permanent and does not truly exist: Buddhism teaches that Buddha-nature is only hidden for a time due to obscuring habit patterns of self and history. Though training is gradual, obscuring habit patterns are removed, like suddenly lifting a blindfold, through hearing, studying, and practicing the inseparability of the View, Meditation, and Conduct of mind's innate, unobstructed nature.
15. Buddha-nature and its manifestations are ultimately real: In the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras, Buddha-nature is stated to be real, eternal, unborn, and filled with inconceivable enduring virtues of infinite compassion. In the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions,⁴ conforming to the third turning of the Wheel of Dharma, Buddha-nature is the reality, and so are the formless and form bodies of Buddhas, the Trikāya (three Buddha-bodies).

Mahāmudrā

Mahāmudrā (Skt.) (Tib. *dzogpa chenpo*) – the Great Seal (great stamp), Great Completion, or Great Movement – refers to *recognizing the nature of mind and all experience and the meditations designed to arrive at this recognition*. The term means completely Awakened Mind or Buddha-nature and the path to this realization. Quoting my teacher Lho Ontul Rinpoche, "the Mahāmudrā is total reality."

Mahāmudrā is called great (Skt. *maha*) seal (Skt. *mudrā*, seal, stamp, gesture), as it is the mark or seal of all phenomena and experiences: śūnyatā. All phenomena, every single experience, is already stamped by the Mahāmudrā. The great master of Dharma, Jigten Sumgön said that "Mahāmudrā is the essence of all qualities."⁵ This stamp or nature is the permanent basis of all phenomena. Mahāmudrā is reality or

⁵ p.18. #14 section VI. Root Text of Jigten Sumgön, Gongchig, The Single Intent the Sacred Dharma, the So-called 150 Vajra Utterances, Translated by Markus Viehbeck, Otter Verlag, Dusseldorf, 2009.

suchness. Thus, it can not be destroyed or created and is described as being *unborn* (Skt. *anutpāda*, Tib. *skye med*) or primordial wisdom (Skt. *jñāna*; Tib. *yeshe*⁶):

...2. In truth there is no birth -
Then surely no cessation or liberation;
The Buddha is like the sky
And all beings have that nature.

3. Neither Samsara nor Nirvana exist,
But all is a complex continuum
With an intrinsic face of void,
The object of ultimate awareness...⁷

Regarding the investigation of the emptiness of inherent existence, Gampopa says in his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*:

It is the realization that all phenomena are, by nature, emptiness, unborn, without a foundation and without roots.

A basic premise to uncovering the Mahāmudrā is that the true nature of mind is beyond any conceptual fabrication or elaboration-proliferation (Skt. *prapañca*; Tib. *sprospa, tröpa*)⁸. Jigten Sumgön Drigungpa (b. 1143 - d. 1217) states in his *Cintamani Shashtra*:

Without realizing the [truth of] non-elaboration⁹,
How can he abandon the symptoms of elaboration?
Without realizing the birthless luminosity,
How can he cut the chain of rebirth.¹⁰

⁶ Other translations used: timeless awareness, inborn knowing, pristine cognition and deep awareness.

⁷ Nagarjuna's Mahamudra Vision, The Twenty Mahayana Verses -translated by Keith Dowman, <http://keithdowman.net/mahamudra/nagarjunas-mahamudra-vision.html> See Appendix II.

⁸ Literally, proliferation, to spread forth, to spread out, diffuseness. reference points.

⁹ Skt. *Nippapañca*, Tib. *sprospa bral*, literally, freedom from reference points.

¹⁰ p. 34. Lord Jigten Sumgön Drigungpa, *Cintamani Shashtra*, The Garland of Blazing Wish-fulfilling Gems, Translated by Khanpo K. Sherab, Songtsen Library, Drikung Kagyu Institute, Dehra Dun, 2012.

In the teaching of Dharma,¹⁶ great bliss, *mahasukha* (Skt.) is the collapse of all stories constructs, fabrications, reference points, and fictions, built from conventional truths (Skt. *samvrti*, Tib. *kun rdzob*) of the mind. It is said¹⁷ that a full collapse of fabrication is the complete Awakening to compassion and wisdom of a Buddha, the Prajñā-pāramitā. It is called *Appearance of Dharmata Exhaustion*,¹⁸ the complete exhaustion of all concepts, both of phenomenal reality and of reality itself.

To have a glimpse of the Mahāmudrā means that even for a brief moment, the play of the habit patterns must have temporarily ceased, like clouds suddenly dissolving to reveal a resplendent sun in a vast clear sky. Although our minds are *fundamentally* free of obstacles, obscurations, and impediments – an unexcelled freedom – it takes specific instructions and practice to glimpse this pristine nature. Habit patterns, which are empty of any solidity or firmness, only appear to hide our mind's pristine nature. These meditations, as taught in the path of Mahāmudrā help us cut through the jungle thicket of obscuring habit patterns and belief systems to recognize our stainless mind.

Form is Emptiness, and Emptiness is Form

The Mahāmudrā includes the teachings of the Prajñāpāramitā and the Heart Sūtra.¹⁹ A key point of the Heart Sūtra is that all forms and appearances (Pāli. *rūpa*) are not in any way different from śūnyatā. Śūnyatā is not different from form (*rūpa*) and appearances. The idea that śūnyatā is different from the outer and inner world of form is often tenaciously clung to, even among experienced Dharma practitioners. There is a fiction that an appearance (e.g. the visualization of a Yidam, hearing sounds, taste, touch, dreams, vision) is somehow different from emptiness. It is understand-

¹⁶

The third turning of the wheel of Dharma, specifically the Mantrayāna or Tantrayāna.

¹⁷

From the perspective of Sūtra Mahāmudrā.

¹⁸

chos nyid du 'dzin pa'i zad pa - cessation /exhaustion of clinging to reality/ fixation to dharmata [IW], or chos zad blo 'das kyi snang ba - appearance /vision / experience of dharmata exhaustion beyond concepts [IW]: <http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/Dharmata>

¹⁹ see Study Guide, Heart Sūtra, the Prajñāpāramitā and the Path of the Bodhisattva, by Lama Yongdu, April 14, 2016.

able then that this point of realization takes such prominence in the Heart Sūtra and in practice *sādhanas*²⁰ of the Vajrayāna generation and completion stages.

Also, all matter — such as animals, trees, and buildings — whether we experience matter through our conditioning and consciousness or not, is still the nature of śūnyatā. This is very problematic for the vast majority of humans, mainly due to confusing what is a thing and what is a concept. Most things or phenomena have their own reality for many people as we have been taught in schools, by our parents, and peers. Even names have an automatic reality. If we watch very closely, we will see that just a fraction of a second after our name is called forth, there is a vision (often with an image of our body), feeling and emotional quality of ‘me’. It appears to arise spontaneously out of space. So too, if we are suddenly told to imagine biting into an apple; for most people, the vision and taste, even the sound, suddenly arises out of the mind’s space. Thus the name is linked to the form, similar to a puppet and its master. We can all recall how fast we let go of seeing the strings and becoming engrossed in the puppet play’s fictional narrative. Similarly, when a word is overly used, marketed, and branded, such as vipassana or insight, even Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen, many people confuse the word without understanding the vast scope of meaning; the practice, the conduct, and the realization. We confuse the name with the appearance and the name with understanding or deep knowledge such that a cabinet maker would have with different woods and fasteners. Therefore, for the vast majority of sentient beings, the word ‘emptiness’ or śūnyatā cannot also and simultaneously mean forms and appearances.

From the Mahāmudrā perspective, since all experience is the nature of mind, and mind is the nature of śūnyatā, then practices (most often through sādhana) are given to realize this inseparable unity.

In the Heart Sūtra, Avalokiteśvara replies to Sariputra:

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Sadhana (Skt.). Literally ‘means of accomplishment’. Meditative and contemplative practices of the generation and completion stages intended to bring about realization of the four empowerments and thus the manifesto of the formless and form bodies of Buddha-nature.

They should correctly view the five aggregates²¹ also empty of inherent existence.²²

From the *700 Stanza Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra)*:

The realization that all phenomena are unborn — that is the perfection of wisdom awareness.

And the Condensed Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra says:

Fully realizing that phenomena are without any inherent existence is the practice of the supreme perfection of wisdom awareness.

Attaining the resplendent nature and compassionate skill of Buddha-nature or Mahāmudrā requires that we not only understand that our bodies, speech, and mind, all phenomena, are illusory — empty of all grasping to appearances and a negation of appearances, as emphasized in the Prajñāpāramitā teachings — but that all this nature is the play of Buddha-wisdom. This latter point, one of extraordinary profundity, is only brought out in the Vajrayāna or Tantrayāna teachings on Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen/Ati Yoga.²³

We cling tenaciously to our bodies, speech, and concepts of self and others. To not just cut through the illusion, but to see that this illusion is the luminous play of mind's nature requires special yogas and instructions:²⁴ thus the skillful practices of the Five-Fold Mahāmudrā integrated into the creation and completion stages and yogas.

By virtue of seeing that there are no essences in terms of personal selves of phenomena within cyclic existence, regardless of how things may appear, a transcendence of suffering is achieved that involves a fundamental transformation. Since one has genuinely accessed the way things are, there is no discrepancy between the way things appear and

²¹ see footnote 14.

²² p. 19. Lopez, D. S. Jr. (1988). *The Heart Sutra Explained*. Indian and Tibetan Commentaries, State University of New York Press. This line is missing in the Conze translation.

²³ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, Its Fundamentals and History*, Translated and Edited by Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstien, Wisdom, Boston, 1991.

²⁴ p. 408. Takpo Tashi Namgyal, *Mahāmudrā, the Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*. Translated by Lobsang Lhalungpa, Shambala, Boston, 1986.

the way they are.²⁵

Compassion

When mind is free of the taints of the six poisons, quite naturally and spontaneously, our experience acts for others' ultimate welfare. It is effortless. However, relative compassion, which supports and helps all beings be comfortable and happy, such as feeding people who are hungry, good education, health care, or providing a source of clean drinking water does take effort. Standing in the way to have relative good outcomes is the play of the six poisons (afflictive emotions). Mahāmudrā naturally and spontaneously liberates beings' minds of all the confusion, like cutting through a dense jungle thicket with a machete. These spontaneous rays of ultimate compassion (the illumination of the Dharmakāya) filling all of space, penetrating and liberating beings minds from bewilderment are called luminous clarity.

Mahāmudrā is an all-encompassing compassion, or as my root Lama the Ven. Namgyal Rinpoche (b. 1931 - d. 2003) would sometimes say, "great love." The great Indian Buddhist saint Nāgārjuna (c. 150 - c. 250 CE) wrote:

...11. Dissolving figment and fantasy
With a mind of compassionate insight,
Remain in perfect awareness
In order to help all beings...²⁶

The recognition of innate wakefulness (cognizance),²⁷ is full unity with compassion for all: a compassion that the great Jamgon Kongtrul (b. 1813 - d. 1899) called "uncommon bliss, which does not change" and "the path of uncommon emptiness whose essence is compassion" ... the "supremely great love." This great bliss of compassion is ineffable: the power and splendour to skillfully protect and free beings from delusion and suffering. It is a compassion beyond all statements and reference points. This great bliss is another word for the Mahāmudrā.

²⁵ Maitreya's Distinguishing Phenomena from their Intrinsic Nature. Commentary by Ju Mipham of Maitreya's text and elucidation by Khenpo Shenpa. Translated by the Dharmacakra Translation Committee, Shambala, Boston, 2013.

²⁶ Nagarjuna's Mahamudra Vision, The Twenty Mahayana Verses -translated by Keith Dowman, <http://keithdowman.net/mahamudra/nagarjunas-mahamudra-vision.html>

²⁷ Innate wakefulness, is cognizance of knowing the stamp of reality or the knowledge of the nature of mind.

When innate wakefulness and compassion are unified, then as the *Uttaratantrashas-
tra*²⁸ describes, the true nature of mind is defined as *luminous clarity* (Skt. *prabhāsvara*,
Tib. *gsal stong*). In describing Buddha-nature (Skt. *svabhāvavikāya*):

...It is definitely freed from the three veils—
the mental poisons and the obstructions
to knowledge and meditative equipoise.
It is unpolluted and not an [object of] thought.
Being the field of the yogis and the dharmadhatu,
being by essence pure, it is luminous clarity.²⁹

The Mahāmudrā, as presented in the Sutra tradition or of Madhyamaka, is emptiness as free of conceptual elaboration. Whereas in Tantric Mahāmudrā, exemplified by Maitreya's *Uttaratantrashastra*, the basis is freedom from conceptual elaboration with the vital added dimension on realizing the clear light (Tib. *od gsal*) or *rig-pa* (Tib.).

One of the key Sutras at the core of the Buddha's third turning of the wheel of Dharma is the *Mahāyāna Uttaratantra Śāstra* by Maitreya. From a commentary on this text by the Dharma Lord Jamgön Kongtrül:

B.II.2.2.2.23.2.2.2. The fruit of purification of the three poisons

“Having eliminated the silt of desire,
he lets the waters of meditative stability
flow onto the lotus[-like] disciples,
and thus resembles the lake of pure water.
having freed himself from the Rahu of hatred,
he pervades beings with the light rays
of his great love and compassionate concern,
and thus is similar to the immaculate full moon.
Totally freed from the clouds of unknowing
and dispelling [its] darkness within beings
through the light rays of primordial wisdom,

²⁸ *Mahāyānottaratantra Śāstra* (Skt.) Tib. *Gyü Lama, the Treatise on the Sublime Continuum* or the Ratnagotravibhaga. *Buddha Nature*, with Jamgön Kongtrul's commentary, translated by Rosemarie Fuchs, Snow Lion, New York, 2000. This text is one of the Five treatises of Maitreya and is a commentary on Buddha-nature. Considered as a profound teachings of the Third Turning of the Wheel of the Buddha's Dharma.

²⁹ p. 49. Ibid. Root Text of Maitreya written down by Arya Asanga. Luminous clarity: chos dbyings 'od gsal stong pa, an all-encompassing void w luminous clarity, the luminous emptiness of dharmadhatu [IW]: http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/chos_dbyings_%27od_gsal_stong_pa

Buddhahood is similar to the unpolluted sun.³⁰

As has been stated by many great Buddhist masters, “Emptiness without compassion (bodhicitta) will only lead to the fruit of the lower vehicles.”

Objects, Perceived, Perceiver and Mind

Normally, we experience that which is perceived and the perceiver as two different things: experiencing that there is a person or object out there and a person (or a feeling of our awareness) observing that person or object. And, there is a mental fantasy and someone (awareness of the fantasy) watching the fantasy. There is a subject and an object. This experience is an utter illusion. Lord Jigten Sumgön clarifies:

The Presentation of the Mahamudra:

That which arises from ultimate devotion,
The self-occurring mahamudra,
Is not an object of the intellect,
Why then can there be the dual perception
of subject and object?

When the birthless luminosity is realized,
The stream of samsara dries naturally.³¹

Having a perceiver and that which is perceived (appearance in the mind) would be like saying that while dreaming there is a separation between what we dream about and the dreamer’s mind.³² Oddly enough, that is most often how we experience the dream and a dreamer. Moreover, that is how it is experienced in waking life. It is the most common experience that we observe so-called outer objects as separate from ourselves, or awareness, as the observer. However, the perception of objects is experienced in mind. It can not be anywhere else. They do not *truly* exist outside the mind. Thus, there is never a separation of perceiver and perceived. If one can come

³⁰ p. 188. *Buddha Nature. Mahāyānottaratantra Śāstra* by Arya Maitreya, written down by Asanga, commentary by Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé, “*the Unassailable Lions’s Roar*”, explanations by Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso Rinpoche, Translated by Rosmarie Fuchs, Snow Lion, Ithaca, 2000.

³¹ p. 35. Lord Jigten Sumgön Drigungpa, *Cintamani Shastra*, The Garland of Blazing Wish-fulfilling Gems, Translated by Khanpo K. Sherab, Songtsen Library, Drikung Kagyu Institute, Dehra Dun, 2012.

³² Exceptions are lucid dreams where there is an experience that one is dreaming. Yet, even with this lucid experience, there may still not be the recognition of the illusion of subject and object. And to grasp the key point that all of experience is an illusion requires the liberating instructions of the completion stage and it’s practices, such as the Six Dharmas of Naropa or Niguma. These are conferred by empowerment (Tib. *wong.kur*) and pith instruction by one’s Gurus.

to at least an intellectual appreciation of this insight it will give the confidence to meditate and recognize this unity directly. Nor should we stray into an extreme position and confuse that the objects are *just* mind or mind *only*. This, too, is considered a classic error of Mahāmudrā practice.

We must discern the relative and absolute differences between the appearing objects, objects, ordinary mind (Tib. *sems*), and the natural essence of mind (Skt. *cittatā*; Tib. མི་སེམས་ལྟོ་སྲོལ་, *semnyi*; Wyl. *sems nyid*) and in Dzog pa chenpo (Skt. *vidyā*; Tib. རྩོམ་གྲུབ་པ་, Wyl. *rig pa*). The incomparable Longchen Rabjampa (b. 1308 – d. 1364) stated:

The appearing objects [percept or things that appear] (sNang Yul) are not mind (Sems), because the objects remain, even when the person himself is not there. The objects won't move when the person moves elsewhere; and the objects possess various colours, and so on. If the objects are the mind itself, then they should change as he changes. they should be present if he is present, and if he is not, they shouldn't be. As mind has no colour or design, neither should the objects have them. The presence and absence of appearance are the projections of the mind. So the mere appearances can be classified as the mind. But boasting that the objects of appearance are the mind is a grave folly.³³

These statements do not negate that phenomena (objects) manifest in some way out there, but they in no way (empty of fixation/elaborations) manifest as we experience it.

Through deep contemplation, we must recognize that we distort all the data of phenomena into a recognizable fiction (conceptual elaboration, projection).³⁴ Nothing exists as an independent entity. For example, trees and plants are a symbiotic community of fungi and bacteria, with soil, water, and sun as supporting and dependant conditions making the tree what it appears to be. No tree or plant, or any creature or inanimate object is a thing unto itself. It has no separate entity-ness. The word tree and our perception-conception of a tree is a minor snap-shot of what that object is – it is extraordinarily vast. Even if we use technology and scientific instruments to define outer objects, we have designed and built those tools with our minds – microscopes, telescopes, temperature probes, gas and rock analyzers, UV and Vis spectra machines, particle accelerators, specific gravity, weigh scale, CO₂ and O₂ analyzers, gas and liquid chromatographs, densitometers, etc. All those simple and sophisticated pieces of equipment are extensions of our senses and mind, created by our genetics' restrictions within a cultural time slice and scientific paradigm and through a

³³ p. 263. Buddha Mind, An Anthology of Longchen Rabjam's Writings on Dzogpa Chenpo, translated by Tilku Thondup Rinpoche, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, 1989.

³⁴ see p. 194-196. Takpo Tashi Namgyal, Mahāmudrā, the Quintessence of Mind and Meditation. Translated by Lobsang Lhalungpa, Shambala, Boston, 1986.

very brief snapshot in time. Ants, squirrels, lions, dogs, birds, fish, insects and other creatures do not experience the world as we do. It does not imply they are wrong or we are right or visa versa. The great majority of sentient life, bacteria and other single-celled organisms (protists³⁵) do not experience the world and its manifestations as humans do. No creatures, short of complete liberation, experience the vastness of phenomena the way it really is.

Further, all perception and cognition is an interdependence of phenomena, that of a phenomenal world and an entity called self. No two things are existing. We shape phenomena, and phenomena shapes us. From Rigdzin Chokyi Dragpa's commentary on Jigten Sumgön's Gongchig:

1. The natural state of the innate disposition, or abiding of all phenomena, was taught.
...Therefore., [the Buddha knows] the innate disposition of their³⁶ own abiding
Which is cause and effect, i.e. interdependent connection;
...And because the innate disposition, the abiding nature of all phenomena is emptiness.
Realizing this principle, one will realize the natural state of all phenomena, without exception...³⁷

How we feel at a given moment may be more influenced by how many cars are on the road, what we ate during the last week, the phase of the moon, how cloudy and rainy it has been, or the hours of sunlight in a given week – more than anything to do with us.³⁸ We are not really us. That is a bewildered state lacking training in penetrative insight (as taught through the path of Mahāmudrā). What appears to our mind as 'us,' 'them,' or 'it' is a vast manifold mixing of causes and conditions gener-

³⁵ Protists are single celled (and colonial) organisms comprising a very large informal kingdom of life called Protista. They are eukaryotic but do not form tissues and do not conform to the genetics and taxonomy of plants, animals or fungi. Examples of protists are: diatoms, dinoflagellates, and many types of green and red algae.

³⁶ phenomena

³⁷ p. 29-30. Rigdzin Chokyi Dragpa, *The Lamp Dispelling the Darkness, Commentary on the Gongchig*, in *Root Text of Jigten Sumgön, Gongchig, The Single Intent the Sacred Dharma, the So-called 150 Vajra Utterances*, Translated by Markus Viehbeck, Otter Verlag, Dusseldorf, 2009.

³⁸ That we, as Westerners, often consider what we are thinking and feeling is 'us' and solely us, and especially due to our psychological states is a 100+ year old fiction based on recent cultural and scientific attitudes. This belief system is slowly changing due to recent advances in ecological science at all levels in in all scientific fields. That humans are an multifaceted ecology of many types of organisms interdependent and interpenetrated by the causes and conditions of a vast network of internal and external life and matter, is only now becoming mainstream within scientific research and published papers.

ated over billions of years; it is a history written in every thought and concept. It takes pre-conditions and supportive conditions (the current environment, internal and external) to have an outcome. Another way of approaching the reality of experience is to say we are always embedded, like clouds and sky, stars in space, the moon in water: never separate, only appearing separate to a conceptualizing mind as two different things. That is also at the heart of confusion, which causes suffering. Again the incomparable Longchenpa states:

Although forms appear to the mind, the (objective) appearances are not mind... Like wise, various kinds (of phenomena) are appearing in the deluded mind because of the interdependent origination of the causes and conditions of delusion. the various objective appearances, such as mountains, are not mind. Also there is nothing in the mind that truly exists, but (merely) appearances (created by the) delusory habituations of the mind. So they are the forms of delusory appearances.³⁹

From the perspective of the realization of Mahāmudrā, the luminous clarity, all appearances, thoughts, concepts, sensations, and emotions are the light play of mind's innermost nature, or dharmatā. Go and look very closely at any object of the mind, any experience at all. It is not nothing. Nor is it something. However, it is full of luminosity, inexpressible by the conceptual mind. Now, go out and see if you can grasp a rainbow. Try holding it in your hands! Then go and try and grasp an appearance of the mind: a tree, foot, nose, pond, the moon, sky, clouds, a thought, a being: there is no fixation found and with patience, the sheer unbounded brilliance of compassionate display is experienced.

Meditation can obscure the Mahāmudrā

Many meditation systems of both the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen trekchö have detailed instructions for developing calm-abiding or mental quiescence and the exact qualities of mind-body that ensue. For example, the Ninth Karmapa (b. 1556 – d. 1603) devotes chapter two of his famous classic, *The Mahamudra, Dispelling the Darkness of Ignorance*,⁴⁰ to developing mental quiescence as does Dakpo Tashi Namgyal (b. 1512 - d. 1587) in his brilliant book *Clarifying the Natural State*.⁴¹ They also state why this calm-abiding and clarity is so crucial for recognizing the natural state of the mind. Without it, one's consciousness is too distracted and turbulent to look penetra-

³⁹ p. 262. Buddha Mind, An Anthology of Longchen Rabjams's Writings on Dzogpa Chenpo, translated by Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, 1989.

⁴⁰ Ninth Karmapa (Wangchug Dorje), *The Mahāmudrā, Eliminating the darkness of Ignorance*, Translated by Alexander Berzin, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, New Delhi, 1978.

⁴¹ Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, *Clarifying the Natural State*, Translated by Erik Pema Kunsang, Rangjung Yeshe Publications, Boudhanath, 2001.

tively at what is. The ability to recognize mind's nature in all experiences requires steady mindfulness of the essence and not on the attachment or discernment of the particulars of the object of mind, nor the calm that comes with being mindful. We wish to have a steady and bright concentration like a lamp flame protected from the wind,⁴² not blown about and flickering. Recognizing the flame's inherent light, not just the light given off or illuminating us, is closer to this manner of looking.

Any clinging to calm-abiding meditation, even if thought-free, is to go astray. Takpo Tashi Namgyal states:

...Or, even if they practice with tenacity, they will linger in ordinary states of shamatha. Clinging to the meditative moods and states of shamatha will not effectively bring them to enlightenment even though they may strive for many years.⁴³

Calm with wide-awakeness, like a bright torch illuminating all darkness, or a brilliant sun in a vast sky is the right mudrā (gesture). Non-clinging to this primordial wakefulness – a naturally clear, naked open seeing – is the true penetrative insight of Mahāmudrā meditation. No fixation, mixed with unbounded compassion or luminous clarity, is the hallmark of the Mahāmudrā.

Often, in the first couple of seconds when we begin meditation, there is a quality and freedom that is just about right. It is often fresh, open, and spontaneous. One may notice there is very little fixation in that fresh-looking, just an open, clear wonder and interest. Any meditation that fixates, holds, constructs, connives, arranges – to anything – is to go astray from the Mahāmudrā. Abide and trust in this fresh simplicity. Recall the first time you walked into a Tibetan temple and saw all the painted deities and mandalas on the walls and ceiling: like a child in wonder and awe, speechless and vibrant.

Traditionally it is taught in the lineage of Mahāmudrā to initially make sessions of meditation very brief. Then as confidence and the correct bright calm and looking is revealed, extend the sessions, over twenty or more sessions per day. Perhaps starting with less than a minute and extending when confident to many minutes to hours.⁴⁴ Eventually, the meditation is a continuum of practice, day and night. What else

⁴² An ancient metaphor for ordinary mind (*sems*) turbulent and moved by the pranas (Tib. *lung*, winds). When the winds (*pranas*) are steady, so to is the experience of mind (Tib. *sems*).

⁴³ p. 38. Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, *Clarifying the Natural State*, Translated by Erik Pema Kunsang, Rangjung Yeshe Publications, Boudhanath, 2001.

⁴⁴ pp. 45-46. Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang Rinpoche (1999), *The Practice of Mahamudra*. Snow Lion, Ithaca. And, p. 47, p. 69, Ninth Karmapa (Wangchug Dorje), *The Mahāmudrā, Eliminating the darkness of Ignorance*, Translated by Alexander Berzin, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, New Delhi, 1978 and pith instructions from the Ven. Namgyal Rinpoche.

could it be? Look to see if even the common background experience of awareness is ever broken. Does it disappear when falling asleep or during periods of non-attentiveness? If you find that it is not, then one can naturally and effortlessly abide in this recognition. If upon closer and closer looking you discover that it is empty of any characteristics, any conceptual contrivance, and it is luminous with the light of compassion, then something very precious has been found.

No watcher found, no-thing watched to be attached to. They were never there to begin with. Keep it simple, uncontrived, yet naturally profound.

Meditate on mind's nature, not the infinite parade of the objects of mind. Or the fascination of the innumerable different qualities of the mind. If one senses objects, it is mind. Comprehend this luminous indivisibility. Keep it simple yet naturally profound.

Je Gampopa pointed out,

All this diversity of appearances
Is the solid manifestation of one's latent
consciousness.
It will all clear by itself without having to be
abandoned
If only one masters non attachment and nonclinging.
All that the mind clings to
Becomes the seed of perceptive duality.
For the mind that does not cling to any [thought or
appearance],
Its arising and release occur simultaneously.⁴⁵

Make no fabrications and meditate on mind's nature — no need to banish thoughts, no need to encourage thoughts. Instead of interfering with the setting sun, let it set of its own accord. So too, for emotions and all concepts. This is the unelaborated conduct.

No fixation, spontaneous, naked, and direct, is primordial knowledge.⁴⁶ It is a clear cognizance of actual abiding freedom, a knowledge that has no origin and no end. To quote the words of my precious teacher Namgyal Rinpoche, it is "An unborn innate knowing, existing from the very no-beginning."

⁴⁵ p. 401. Take Tashi Namgyal. *The Mahamudra, the quintessence of mind and meditation*. Translated by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa. Shambhala. Boston. 1986.

⁴⁶ Tib. *yes he*.

As a generalization, people entering Dharma practice tend to stray into either trying to perfect nothingness, emptying out all phenomena under the guise of practicing vipassana (Pāli) or Mahāmudrā, and wishing for Nirvana (total peace). Those who run toward elaborations and fictions and wish to mostly visualize deities and say mantras stray into the arms of Samsara. Those wishing a formless release of all thoughts, thinking this is the direct path to liberation do not perfect the luminous clarity of the Mahāmudrā. This way can be a profound form of calm abiding by focusing too much on the spacious, non-conceptual aspect of one's mind. People wishing for more visions and phenomenal experiences do not perfect the emptiness aspect of the Mahāmudrā. Often they are searching for bliss and lights of the phenomenal play of the mind and attach too much importance to these experiences.

Attempting to only practice without support for one's Mahāmudrā practice (so-called 'objectless meditation') is straying from the realization that "form is emptiness and emptiness is form" as taught by Avalokiteśvara in the Heart Sūtra. They also feel that sensations, feelings and all states are ultimately tainted, so they try to purify by seeing a hollowness in everything. This misses the form aspects, the Five Primordial Wisdoms and the Four Buddha Activities of Buddha-nature as taught and practiced in the Buddhist Mahāmudrā Tantras, the ripening Empowerments and their sādhanas. Besides, it is taught that this emptiness tainted with concepts will be conceptual-analytical and not spontaneous freedom of the innate mind. So, we either stray into the arms of Nirvana or the clutches of Samsara. As Nagarjuna said, Buddha-nature is free from both extremes of Samsara and Nirvana; so too is genuine Mahāmudrā meditation.

Mind is thoughts, and mind is empty of thoughts. Realize the unity and essence of both. Our pristine awareness is beyond these two experiences of one nature. Running away or into either one is a meditative obstacle and misses the View of Mahāmudrā.

All meditations, no matter what tradition, religion, or meditative practice, can uncover and develop states of bliss (happiness), clarity (light and spaciousness) and non-thought (non-conceptualization). With the changing balance of the five-prāṇas (earth, water, fire, air and space), mixed with the experience of the balance of bliss, clarity and non-thought arises most of our meditation experiences. For example, an uneven increase of earth prāṇa mixed with a predominance of clarity can produce a classic feeling like the size and weight of a mountain but with spaciousness and lightness and little thought. Or with a predominance of space, clarity and non-thought can be the experience of nothingness, and even no objects sensed. There is an infinite possibility of mixtures, yet it turns out mostly standard classic combinations.⁴⁷ All meditation experiences can, and often do, produce mild to tenacious at-

⁴⁷ Unless there is a history of recreational drug use. Then the range of experiences alters, sometimes dramatically but with a hallmark of taints.

tachment, with negative or positive affect. Moreover, meditation experiences, like daily or dream experiences, are simply the play of the six sensations. Since our brains function on rewards, generally, the more bliss, clarity, and no-thought experiences, the deeper the attachment and identification with one's ego formations and even personality. Like a drug addict, we self medicate for ever-greater rewards, thereby missing the essence, the great reward of both relative and supreme bodhicitta, rigpa or Buddha-mind. The great master of Dharma, Jig-ten Sumgön, declared in his Gongchig, *The Single Intent the Sacred Dharma*:

19. Faultless samādhi is the cause of saṃsāra, the three realms.
It is said: "The three faultless samādhis are the cause of saṃsāra, the three realms."
People that assert that the three faultless samādhis, i.e. bliss, clarity and no-thought,
Are effective samādhis, [proclaim that] the essence of the mind is endowed with
Bliss, clarity and no-thought, and that this is the dharmakāya. How wrong!...⁴⁸

States of bliss (happiness), clarity (light and spaciousness) and non-thought (non-conceptualization) that are natural to meditation (and deeply relaxed but alert states in general) are called in Mahāmudrā, the *peels, boons*,⁴⁹ or *meditative moods*⁵⁰ of meditation. Why? Just as an orange is covered in a peel but hides the inside and core, by staying with the experience of the meditation peels, we still have not penetrated the essence of the orange. We have not tasted the orange, just the beautiful colourful outer coating. Or we mistake the excitement of the outer coating for the real-full taste of the orange. Peels of meditation are so entrancing that one may never want to penetrate through to the core or essence. Yet the boons are excellent as they provide the necessary settling and alertness to look vividly and with sustained interest at awareness. This way of looking at the ordinary mind (Tib. *sems can*) of awareness, whether there is bliss, clarity, no-thought or any experiences of awareness is called penetrative *vipaśyanā* (Skt.) (*Pāli. vipassanā*, Tib. ལྟན་གྱི་མཐོང་ལྟོགས་, *lhaktong*). Awareness must penetrate through to naked ordinary mind, non-dual awareness or innermost nature by parting the dense clouds of confusion. Not only must we *observe* this

⁴⁸ Section V, #19. p. 17. Root Text of Jigten Sumgön, *The Gongchig, The Single Intent the Sacred Dharma, the So-called 150 Vajra Utterances*, Translated by Markus Viehbeck, Otter Verlag, Dusseldorf, 2009. And p. 94. Rigdzin Chokyi Dragpa, *The Lamp Dispelling the Darkness, Commentary on the Gongchig*, Ibid.

⁴⁹ p. 56. Ninth Karmapa (Wangchug Dorje), *The Mahāmudrā, Eliminating the darkness of Ignorance*, Translated by Alexander Berzin, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, New Delhi, 1978.

⁵⁰ Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, *Clarifying the Natural State*, Translated by Erik Pema Kunsang, Rangjung Yeshe Publications, Boudhanath, 2001.

awareness closely, but we must *look* closely with a vivid special interest. This is not a thinking meditation but a contemplative meditation (Tib. *sgom*) with the force of uncontrived looking into and discovering the naked essential Mind. One must be on a quest of discovery. Not passive watching. When this type of vipaśyanā is mentioned in the Mahāmudrā texts, it has the dimension of not just sustained vivid looking, but the unity of investigating pristine awareness.^{51, 52}

Though taught as two methods in the Sūtras, this penetrative vipaśyanā of Mahāmudrā is not in any way separate from the bright, calm mind. No two states are produced; only apparent concepts and sensations make them different. Mental quiescence and penetrative vipaśyanā are joined in Mahāmudrā like an unwavering bow and arrow sighted to the target with the arrow hitting the bullseye, repeatedly and effortlessly. Penetrative vipaśyanā is a lucid non-fixated, resting gaze at the nature of the inseparability of awareness-emptiness (emphasis of Sutra Mahāmudrā) and bliss-emptiness (the emphasis of Tantric Mahāmudrā). That means that beyond the techniques, genuine penetrative vipaśyanā is the contemplation of the nature of mind or Mahāmudrā. Fixed meditation of the eight *jhānas* (Pāli) (Skt. *Dhyāna*) meditative absorptions can get in the way. However, they are excellent for washing the mind of the five hindrances⁵³ before a contemplative abiding in mind nature.⁵⁴ As the Ninth Karmapa said:

Now that mental quiescence has been joined with penetrative insight, sublime experiences and insights will happen. This fulfills the requirement of actually having entered the path of Liberation. Voidness is the way the mind is, clarity is its defining characteristic and the unity of these is the mind's nature.⁵⁵

⁵¹ e.g. p. 75. Ninth Karmapa (Wangchug Dorje), *The Mahāmudrā, Eliminating the Darkness of Ignorance*. And p. 370. Annotation 57, Khenpo Tsultrim Rinpoche's explanations of Jargon Kongtrul's text called *The Unassailable Lion's Roar*, a commentary on Arya Maitreya's Mahayana Uttaratantra Shastra, Snow Lion. Ithaca. 2000.

⁵² Special insight, penetrative insight in Mahayana is qualified as the direct realization of emptiness. Or, in Mahamudra, the special quality of meditation of emptiness or pristine awareness (Tib. *lhag mthong mthshan nyid pa*). see p. 370. Ibid.

⁵³ Five Hindrances (Pāli. pañca nivāraṇa): see Appendix I.

⁵⁴ Often taught by the Ven. Namgyal Dorje Rinpoche.

⁵⁵ p. 91. Ninth Karmapa (Wangchug Dorje), *The Mahāmudrā, Eliminating the Darkness of Ignorance*.

The Importance of the Guru's instructions

For this discovery into the essence of awareness to happen, invariably, we require the kind practice instructions, liberating instructions, and occasionally forceful directions of our guru.

Should you find a wise critic to point out your faults, follow him as you would a guide to hidden treasure.⁵⁶

Gurus of the Mahāmudrā lineages have been clear on the vital point that not only do we need to develop excellent mental quiescence, but we skillfully need to be made to recognize its nature.^{57, 58} Gampopa said:

This meditation relies solely on ordinary mind. I have discovered it through the grace of [my guru], the Buddha in human body.⁵⁹

Otherwise, we cycle around in the samsara of cyclic existence and attachments, but we do not recognize the natural, effortless mode of the Mahāmudrā. Jigten Sumgön stated in his *Garland of Blazing Wish-fulfilling Gems*:

Of that very nature,
The co-emergent primordial wisdom,
Is realized and actualized,
With the sublime guru's blessing.⁶⁰

The purpose of Mahāmudrā meditation and one's work together with the Lama, is to cut out the root of ignorance of the natural abiding state; it is not to produce a myriad of happy or beatific states, or any states in particular. As Lama Ven. Ontul Rinpoche states, "the Dharma is not about becoming happy or sad, but to be liberat-

⁵⁶ Sakyamuni Buddha, verse 76, the Dhammapada.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 56-59, Ninth Karmapa (Wangchug Dorje), *The Mahāmudrā, Eliminating the Darkness of Ignorance*.

⁵⁸ p. 254. Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, Its Fundamentals and History*, Translated and Edited by Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstien, Wisdom, Boston, 1991.

⁵⁹ p. 245. Takpo Tashi Namgyal, *Mahāmudrā, the Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*. Translated by Lobsang Lhalungpa, Shambala, Boston, 1986.

⁶⁰ p. 59. Lord Jigten Sumgön Drigungpa, *Cintamani Shastra, The Garland of Blazing Wish-fulfilling Gems*, Translated by Khanpo K. Sherab, Songtsen Library, Drikung Kagyu Institute, Dehra Dun, 2012.

ed.”⁶¹ Thus it is said, the greater the merit (Skt. *puṇya*, Pāli. *puñña*) and devotion to the Guru who is a living embodiment of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, the swifter the recognition, stability and realization of the essence of mind. Further, ‘devotion or lucid faith is the head of meditation.’ As numerous lineage Gurus have said, you can cut off an arm or leg and still live, but not the head.⁶²

Sūtra Mahāmudrā, Tantric Mahāmudrā, and Essence Mahāmudrā

If we practice bare attentiveness, then bare Insight⁶³ into sensations, even dreams and visions, what are we learning? From the perspective of Sūtra Mahāmudrā, we recognize the emptiness of the play of the six sensations and the emptiness of the five skandhas.⁶⁴ Buddha Dharma teaches that when we perceive these five aspects of self-experience as solid or real and not empty of essence, we suffer or are at dis-ease:

1. **Form/matter/appearance** (Skt. *rūpa*; Tib. ལྗོ་ལྗོ་ལྗོ་, Wyl. *gzugs*)
All material forms in the Buddhist tradition start with earth, water, fire, and air followed by the twenty-four secondary types⁶⁵ of form enumerated in the Abhidhamma. Since we only experience forms through the five sense faculties of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching, it is through the organs and the six senses, the consciousness, where we experience their subtle aspects and the objects of experience (appearances). Thus the whole body is included, as is any external matter and form. Something that can be sensed.
2. **Feeling or sensation** (Skt. *vedanā*; Tib. ཚོར་པ་, Wyl. *tshor ba*)
Pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral sensations of the mind. Bare **affective** sensations of objects interacting with form and consciousness. Not the same as emotion, which is a more complex phenomenon.

⁶¹ Lho Ontul Rinpoche, upon starting to teach a transmission of the Five-Fold Mahāmudrā of the Drikung, Tso Pema, India, 2013.

⁶² Quoting many texts, and in addition, oral teachings by Ven. Lho Ontul Rinpoche and Mindrolling Khandro Rinpoche.

⁶³ Looking for the three characteristics of transience, suffering and non-self.

⁶⁴ Skt. *pañcaskandha*. Five Aggregates or Five Heaps: - Five aspects that constitute the experience of a sentient being.

⁶⁵ eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, form, sound, odour, taste, touch, femininity, masculinity or virility, life or vitality, heart or heart-basis, physical indications (movements that indicate intentions), vocal indications, space element, physical lightness or buoyancy, physical yieldingness or plasticity, physical handiness or wieldiness, physical grouping or integration, physical extension or maintenance, physical aging or decay, physical impermanence and food.

3. **Perception** (Skt. *saṃjñā*; Tib. འདྲེན་ལྗོན་མཁྲོན་, Wyl. 'du shes)
Perception or cognition. The interpretation of the meaning of an object. It has the quality of recognition, noting and marking the object for further identification. It is like stamping the experience so it can be stored away in memory for another time.-The grasping of distinguishing features; not as subtle an awareness as *viññāna*.
4. **Volitional formations** (Skt. *saṃskāra*; Tib. འདྲེན་ལྗོན་ལྗོན་ལྗོན་, Wyl. 'du byed)
Literally, "that which puts together," volitional formations or impulses in that they cause future actions to happen. Habit patterns of the conditioned mind. Saṃskāras are fabrications that are the quality of consciousness that is motivation or intention.
5. **Consciousness** (Pāli. *viññāṇa*, Skt. *viññāna*; Tib. རྣམ་ཤེས་ལྗོན་མཁྲོན་, Wyl. *rnam shes*)
Consciousness arises due to the material sense bases. It arises from mind (*mano*) and has the function of being aware of the mind and its objects. No consciousness, then no craving. It is a more refined awareness than perception.

From *The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*:

That which is called wisdom awareness has been thoroughly explained as coming from the realization of the emptiness of inherent existence, which is the realization that aggregates, constituent elements, and sources are without birth.⁶⁶

Realizing fully that these five skandhas are empty of essence is a profound liberation and purification of the five poisons of greed, hatred, dullness, pride, and jealousy (five poisons). This type of liberation should not be denigrated; it does take considerable meditation ability and in-depth Dharma training. However, according to Mahayāna and Vajrayāna traditions it has not purified the taint and subtle obscurations of ignorance about all phenomena and the nature of Buddha-mind. Moreover, it does not unify emptiness of all phenomena with universal compassion.⁶⁷

In *Sūtra Mahāmudrā*, the object of meditation is luminous clarity and non-fabrication as a means to attain realization of the essence of mind or the Dharmakāya. Generally, this meditative training is gradual through ordinary and extraordinary preliminaries, (Tib. *non dro*) Yidam practice, and Guru Yoga, a deep practice of calm abiding, penetrative insight, and the kind assistance of one's guru to introduce one's mind to mind's nature: first the experience, then recognizing the nature of the experience. For example, it is one thing to have a perfect balance of bliss, clarity, and non-thought,

⁶⁶ p. 236. Je Gampopa, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, the Wish-fulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings, Translated by Khenpo Gyaltsen Rinpoche, Snow Lion, Boston, 1998.

⁶⁷ pp. 51-267. Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, Its Fundamentals and History*, Translated and Edited by Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein, Wisdom, Boston, 1991.

even for sustained periods (e.g. hours to days). It is altogether another matter to recognize mind's nature from within the ocean of still mind. The same for experiencing thoughts and concepts and recognizing they have the same nature as the essence of mind. Similarly, the experience of appearances (illusory or otherwise) is not necessarily the same depth as recognizing all appearances to be the same taste and nature of innate pristine mind. The path of Sūtra Mahāmudrā follows the development of the five paths and ten bhūmis of a bodhisattva.⁶⁸

From the perspective of *Tantric (Vajrayāna) Mahāmudrā*, the play of the six sensations, the five skandhas — all cognition-experience of self and other — is recognized as the play of the Five Wisdom Buddhas⁶⁹ as the co-emergent unity of bliss-emptiness.⁷⁰ Therefore rejecting objects of mind or treating them as empty (Nirvana) or negative (tainted - Samsara) strays away from the Mahāmudrā View: Samsara and Nirvana are of one nature or “taste.” Moreover, that taste is bliss-emptiness (Tib. *bed stong*). The path of Tantric Mahāmudrā — using both creation and completion stages and the unity of these stages — leads to the realization of Mahāmudrā through a path of luminous clarity, by the skillful means of the Six Dharmas of Naropa/Niguma, especially the inner yogas (i.e. inner heat: Tib. *tummo*, Skt. *caṇḍālī*) and completion stage practices. It is identified in the texts of the Third-Turning of the Buddha's Dharma⁷¹ and various teachings by great Tantric masters such as Gampopa⁷² and Tashi Namgyal⁷³. One of the qualities swiftly granted through Tantric Mahāmudrā is the at-

⁶⁸ Gampopa, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, the Wish-fulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings, Translated by Khenpo Gyaltzen Rinpoche, Snow Lion, Boston, 1998.

⁶⁹ Tib. ye shes Inga, five-wisdom Buddhas: The dharmadhatu wisdom, mirror-like wisdom, wisdom of equality, discriminating wisdom and all-accomplishing wisdom. The basis for all the Tantric mandala's and empowerments. The underlying basis of the five aggregates (five skandhas).

⁷⁰ Tib. *bde stong*. Tib. *bde stong ye shes*, primordial wakefulness that is blissful yet empty. Also the *four joys* (Skt. *catvārimudītā*; Tib. *gawa shyi*; Wyl. *dga' ba bzhi*) are four increasingly subtle experiences of bliss-emptiness connected with the advanced practices of tsa-lung; they transcend ordinary feelings of joy or pleasure. They are: 1. joy (Skt. *mudītā*; Tib. རྟམ་འཇམ་པོ།, Wyl. *dga' ba*), 2. supreme joy (Skt. *pramudītā*; Tib. མཚན་ལོ་ལོ་ལོ།, Wyl. *mchog dga'*), 3. special joy (Skt. *viśeṣamudītā*; Tib. ལྷན་ལོ་ལོ་ལོ།, Wyl. *khyad dga'*) and 4. innate joy (Skt. *sahajamudītā*; Tib. ལྷན་ལོ་ལོ་ལོ་ལོ་ལོ།, Wyl. *lhan skyes kyi dga' ba*): http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Four_joys

⁷¹ see footnote 5 and in *Luminous Heart*, Third Karmapa, translated by Karl Brunnholzl (2009). Snow Lion, Ithaca.

⁷² See discussions and teachings between Je Gampopa and his closest students: *Gampopa Teaches Essence Mahamudra: Interviews with His Heart Disciples, Dusum Khyenpa and Others*, translated by Tony Duff, Padma Karpo Translation Committee, Kathmandu. (2011).

⁷³ p. 408. Takpo Tashi Namgyal, *Mahāmudrā, the Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*. Translated by Lobsang Lhalungpa, Shambala, Boston, 1986.

tainment of the Yidam's *actual* illusory body and the two-fold form bodies of Buddhahood – luminous clarity.

Essence Mahāmudrā is the direct introduction to the nature of mind by one's Guru. The essence pointed out and experienced is then *the* meditation. It does not discount the use of both gradual and sudden means and the preceding paths of Sūtra and Tantric Mahāmudrā. It is the fourth empowerment.

From the *Mahayanasutralamkara*:

When murky water become clear,
[Its] transiency does not arise from elsewhere,
But just its becoming free from pollution.
The same goes for the purity of your own mind
It is held that mind, which is always naturally luminous,
Is [only] blemished by adventitious flaws,
It is stated that there is no other mind apart from
The naturally luminous mind of dharmata.⁷⁴

Mahāmudrā View and Meditation

The crucial question, thus the meditation/contemplation, is: what is free from all fabrications and constructs of our mind? What has a natural, effortless and spontaneously unceasing resplendence of compassion, a wish to cut the root of ignorance in all beings? One may practice a lot and have many experiences, but are we learning about mind essence? That is the key point.

Furthermore, we may ask, what are we learning? Is it essential for liberation or more ego aggrandizement? Or, is the learning about embodying or wearing the Dharma; or is it another, perhaps subtler form of ego fictions? Since the ultimate attainment and path of liberation are ever more dissolution of solidity and fictions about self and other, and ever greater compassion-clarity, it serves us well to know we are unbinding the knots of all fabrications. This is the purpose, path and attainment of the Mahāmudrā.

The classic phrase, “like clouds suddenly dissolving to reveal a resplendent sun in a vast clear sky,” has a dual meaning of how Mahāmudrā is revealed. If one opens up the spacious aspect of mind's nature – still, tranquil, open, and space like – one can easily fall into the error of nihilistic yet blissful space like experience. However, Mahāmudrā includes all of samsara, so a boundless luminous aspect of mind's na-

⁷⁴ p. 187. in “*The Ornament that Explains the Dharmadharmatavibhaga*, 3rd Karmapa, in *Luminous Heart*, translated by Karl Brunnholzl (2009). Snow Lion, Ithaca.

ture, or luminous clarity (compassion) is necessary: this is the resplendent sun amid an infinite sky. This luminosity is generated then revealed by the Tantric practices of creation and completion phases, especially the inner yogas, as exemplified by one spontaneously arising as the Yidam who is identical with the Guru and Dakini and embodies the form bodies⁷⁵ (Skt. *rūpakāya*), of Buddha-nature.

Hollow body meditation without the Yidam body is good practice to experience emptiness of one's appearance; a type of illusory body. However, practicing hollow body as the Yidam via the path of Tantric Mahāmudrā combines emptiness and clarity (compassion). It lays the seeds for revealing the actual Illusory Body of Buddha-nature: luminous clarity. So too, experiencing one's awareness (being aware of awareness) is an essential *step* of meditation and spiritual development. However, to clarify, observing awareness is not necessarily the same meditation or liberative-bodhicitta recognition as meditating or abiding effortlessly in pristine naked awareness.^{76, 77} One has to be very sure one is not meditating on ordinary awareness enhanced by the meditation moods of bliss, clarity and non-thought or inflated by conceptual fabrication. But revealing awareness as a blazing torch of awareness-awakeness, inherent in all experience, this certainty liberates all types of beings through encountering the body, speech, and mind of a being embodying this awakened awareness: this too is the Mahāmudrā. Jigten Sumgön, the founder of the Drikung Kagyu, wrote about Mahāmudrā:

The way that mindness⁷⁸ is present within you is not known by the rational mind of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. It is not known through the exaggerations of appearance and emptiness. It is not the experience of appearance. It is not the experience of emptiness. It is not the experience of existence. It is not the experience of non-existence. It is not the experience of confusion. It is not the experience of liberation. It is beyond every one of these biased positions, all of which cut to one side or another. It is not made by Buddha. It is not created by sentient beings. It is not purified by the path. It is not a change of colour. It is primordially free from extremes. It is the fruition,

⁷⁵ Sambogakāya and Nirmaṇakāya.

⁷⁶ A true test that liberation is unfolding, to paraphrase the words of the great Yogi Shabkar Tsodruk Rangdrol (b.1781 - d. 1851) and the master of Mahamudra, Ven. Namgyal Rinpoche; no matter how much one practices Mahāmudrā or Dzogchen, the point is, are the the five poisons of greed, hatred, pride and jealousy dissolving? Shabkar Tsodruk Rangdrol, *The life of Shabkar, the Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin*, Translated by Matthieu Ricard. Snow Lion. Ithaca. 2001. pp. 88-89, p. 529 and many other references.

⁷⁷ pp. 256-257. Shabkar Tsodruk Rangdrol, *The life of Shabkar, the Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin*, Translated by Matthieu Ricard. Snow Lion. Ithaca. 2001.

⁷⁸ "Mindness" (Skt. *chittata*, Tib. *sems nyid*) is a term coined by translator Tony Duff as a translation of the term nature of mind or essence of mind.

the three kāyas, inherent within you. It is the perfection of discard and realization. It is the immediate brilliance having the two knowledges⁷⁹. It is the thing which is primordially spontaneously-present.⁸⁰

Thus, as emphasized by many great masters, emptiness experience without ultimate compassion will only lead to the fruit of the lower vehicles (self-liberation).⁸¹

Many Lamas have cautioned us not to cling to nihilistic emptiness experiences, no matter how blissful, clear, and thought-free they are. Further, they emphasize that profound emptiness, recognition of the mind's natural freedom – all phenomena, including us – are by nature fresh unobstructed openness, a grand pristine and luminous wonder. If not vividly apparent or sustainable, then the answer is not necessarily more meditation, or another meditation book, or the meditation technique, but a requirement to gather heaps more merit⁸². As Lho Ontul Rinpoche has said, “We can never have enough merit!”

Phenomena and thus Mahāmudrā cannot be described as being existent or nonexistent, as being something or nothing, or as being permanent or impermanent. Mind cannot be described or conceptualized in any way; the nature of mind is beyond all conceptual fabrication. Then, according to the third turning of the wheel of dharma, which are the teachings on Buddha-nature such as found in the *Uttaratantrashastra*, the true nature of mind is described as luminous clarity. The great Jamgön Kongtrül was 'right on' when he stated the importance of the dissolving yoga to see that appearance and sound (active mind) are empty or let go, of their form aspect into śūnyatā, its ground nature.⁸³ If one accomplishes this process through the Mahāmudrā practices without completion and creation yoga, one runs the real danger of not developing sufficient strength in bodhicitta for realization. As the great 18th-century

⁷⁹ Tib. *mkhyen pa gnyis*. The wisdom of knowing the nature as it is and the wisdom of perceiving all that exists. Knowledge of conventional and ultimate phenomena [RY]: http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/mkhyen_pa_gnyis & footnote 59, in Tony Duff, *Gampopa's Mahamudra, The Five-Part Mahamudra practice taught to Phagmo Drupa by Gampopa*. Padma Karpo Translation Committee, Kathmandu. 2008.

⁸⁰ Jigten Sumgön, *The Source of the Jewels of Experience and Realization, the Ocean-like Instructions of the Five Parts*, translated by Tony Duff, in: *Gampopa's Mahamudra, The Five-Part Mahamudra practice taught to Phagmo Drupa by Gampopa*. Padma Karpo Translation Committee, Kathmandu. 2008.

⁸¹ Je Gampopa, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation, the Wish-fulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings*, Translated by Khenpo Gyaltzen Rinpoche, Snow Lion, Boston, 1998.

⁸² The first five (generosity, ethics, patience, energy and meditative concentration) of the Six Parami: the sixth being wisdom.

⁸³ Jamgön Kongtrül, (Sarah Harding translator), *Creation and Completion, Essential Points of Tantric Meditation*, with a Commentary, Wisdom, Somerville, 2002.

Tibetan Yogi Shabkar said, “Without compassion, the Dharma is rotten.”⁸⁴ There is also the danger of straying into Mahāmudrā practice faults,⁸⁵ one being subtly focused on one’s own mind and not the recognition of all minds. This has been pointed out by many great masters, including the Ven. Namgyal Rinpoche.⁸⁶

Great teachers, such as Je Gampopa, the first Jamgon Kongtrul, and Ven. Namgyal Rinpoche have stated that the first five Paramis can be seen as creation stage – or the path of means (compassion) – and the sixth Parami, prajñā, is the completion phase, the path of wisdom. They are strong on the point that:

...If a bodhisattva only depends on wisdom awareness without method, he will fall into the one sided nirvanic peace asserted by the Hearers and be bound there, unable to attain the non-abiding nirvana...If one only depends on method without wisdom awareness, one will not cross beyond being a childish, ordinary person. Therefore one will be bound to samsara.⁸⁷

Thus, one will derive great strength in bodhicitta and teachings from practicing the longer sādhanās; they have plenty of sections and depth, where both stages and yogas are delineated. Yet, generally I recommend the highly abbreviated sādhanās for beginners becoming accustomed to Tantric practice or for quite experienced practitioners who understand the abbreviated terms and know how to make the necessary prayers and contemplations. Long, full sādhanās are like eating a rich and fulfilling Dharma meal.

One should not eliminate retreats focused on the Mahāmudrā or Trekchö without support, such as taught in great authoritative texts such as *Eliminating the Darkness of Ignorance, the Mahāmudrā* by the Ninth Karmapa or Patrul Rinpoche’s famous commentary of Trekchö called *The Three Statements that Strike the Vital Point*. However, as advised by many great Gurus, including H.E. Chogye Trichen Rinpoche, one starts with a Highest Yoga sādhanā to build strength of merit and Bodhicitta, prāṇa-mind, and other excellent methods and qualities. Then as the main focus in retreat, one

⁸⁴ p. 422-423. Shabkar Rangdrol, *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogi*, Translated by Mathieu Ricard, SUNNY, Albany, 1994.

⁸⁵ There are a number of authoritative texts that have extensive lists and descriptions of faults of Mahamudra Meditation, View and Conduct, such as in: Tsele Natsok Rangdrol, *The Bright Torch, in Mahamudra and related instructions; core teachings of the Kagyu Schools*, Translated by Peter A. Roberts, Wisdom, Somerville, 2011. For a brief summary by Tsele Natsok Rangdrol, see Appendix III.

⁸⁶ Personal instructions to Lama Tenpa Yongdu.

⁸⁷ p. 234, Gampopa, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation, the Wish-fulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings*, Translated by Khenpo Gyaltzen Rinpoche, Snow Lion, Boston, 1998.

uses the Mahāmudrā practices without support.⁸⁸ Thus we, as did our previous masters, alternate sādhanā with extended periods of Trekchö or Mahāmudrā, meditations on mind essence without support. That is why it is helpful to complete at least one set of the Extra-ordinary Foundation Practices (Tib. *non-dro*) of one’s Lama’s lineage: we build heaps of merit and wisdom as preparation for the penetrative vipaśyanā without the support of this or that – meditation on mind’s intrinsic nature. This alternating method is combined into one complete practice in the tradition of the Five-fold Mahāmudrā.

The Five-Fold Mahāmudrā

Gampopa said to Phagmo Drupa:

...You go to mountainous areas and so on, congenial places where disenchantment can be produced and experience can develop. There you arouse the mind thinking, “For the purposes of sentient beings, I will attain Buddhahood”. You mediate on your body as the deity. You meditate on the guru over your crown. Then, not letting your mind be spoiled with thoughts, not altering this mind—because it is nothing whatsoever—in any way at all, set yourself in clarity which is pure, vividly present, clean-clear, wide-awake! ...⁸⁹

The teaching above was the essence of the Five-Fold Mahāmudrā. Let us find out why it confers such speedy realization.

In order to come to the Heart Sutra realization and the Vajrayāna View of śūnyatā-compassion – the 2nd and 3rd Turnings of the Wheel of Buddha Dharma – the Mahāmudrā meditative tradition uses a four-step process, divided into two phases 1) recognize that form and emptiness are identical in nature, that is the Yidam is śūnyatā, and 2) not only does meditating on the body, speech, and mind of the Yidam unbind all clinging, but it reveals the real illusory body of the luminous clarity of Buddha-nature.

The process: First, realize the mind’s tranquil yet brilliant nature, the Dharmakāya. Second, realize that all thoughts, feelings, and emotions, all activities of the mind are energetic mind, the Sambogakāya. Third, realize that all appearances, one’s body and objects, luminous reflections are the Nirmaṇakāya. The first is the ultimate mind’s nature. The last two are the luminous display of the ultimate nature and its

⁸⁸ Personal instructions to Lama Yongdu.

⁸⁹ An excerpt of a teaching by Gampopa, where the fifth part, dedication is not described here but is, according to the translator, Tony Duff (see fn 19), mentioned explicitly in other places. From, Five-Part Mahamudra by Padma Karpo, translated by Tony Duff, Padma Karpo Translations, Kathmandu, 2008.

physical manifestation, respectively; the Rūpakāya. As images are perfectly, yet illusory reflected in a pond or a mirror, so too, no matter what occurs to experience, it is essentially the same process. This is a step towards recognizing that all appearances are reflective expressions of the Buddha wisdoms, analogous to the movement of clouds being a manifestation of the sun's energy; noting that the thermal currents are generally invisible and unknown to the untrained observer. To be able to recognize and skillfully use appearances to tame and awaken beings is a hallmark of a great bodhisattva. Fourth is the inseparable unity of all three, called the Svābhāvikakāya. These four stages are in fact, the four Empowerments and the self-initiation of Guru-yoga and sādhanā.

Drikung Kagyu, emphasize (as do other Kagyu traditions) that all stages of sādhanā and the two phases (creation and completion) and attendant yogas are to be practiced as the Mahāmudrā: as the nature of mind, luminous/clarity-emptiness, no matter what happens or is occurring – settled or active.

Lho Bongtrül Rinpoche wrote,

Furthermore, it is explained that if one knows how to practice the preliminaries of the liberating instructions, the entire Five-Fold Mahāmudrā is included in this. This is the key profound point of uniting sutra and mantra.⁹⁰

The practice of Mahāmudrā, the completion phase or Great Perfection, must be highly elevated by 'capping' both the beginning and end of a session with what one needs to bring about the realization of both compassion and wisdom.

The word 'formless' can be understood as 'without support for the mind'. Contrary to entering the jhanas (Skt. dhyana) (the eight meditative absorptions), there is no 'hook' for consciousness to focus on, or attach too. The Ven. Namgyal Rinpoche instructed: 'no object in particular is focused on.' Sufficient tranquility has already been established. Now we learn to let go of clinging to objects of mind, including all concepts; even concepts of no-self, transience, being tranquil or enlightenment. Thus the gaze is open, relaxed, vivid, yet not staring. The gaze is straight ahead or slightly elevated. The object of the meditation is the essence-nature of awareness or mind's natural state. Moreover, this is no object, in particular, no object fixity or a way of looking without making fabrications. We reveal the awareness that is not born, does not cease and has only the nature of śūnyatā. It is the essential nature of all objects

⁹⁰ P. 5. Bongtrül Tendzin Nyima Rinpoche (2008). *A Feast for the Minds of Fortunate Ones: A Record of How to Practice the Outer, Inner, and Secret Approach and Accomplishment of the Innermost Profound Intention of the Sublime Dharma*. Translated by Eric Fry-Miller.

and mind – in fact all phenomenal reality. This is the Mahāmudrā or reality. All phenomena are ‘sealed’⁹¹ with this essence nature.

The capping of the Mahāmudrā practice from both sides is called the Five-fold Mahāmudrā. It is a transmission of a format passed on from Je Gampopa to his heart disciple Phagmo Drupa and then through the Drikung Kagyu lineage to all Kagyu lineages. Though Phagmo Drupa was already a highly accomplished yogin and teacher when he met Gampopa, it was through this transmission that Phagmo Drupa attained great Awakening. In this way, a complete session of Mahāmudrā is with and without support and has all the key elements of the sādhanā’s creation and completion stages. Phagmo Drupa said:

First, meditate on enlightenment mind; Meditate on the yidam deity; Meditate on the holy guru; Meditate on Mahāmudrā; Afterwards, seal it with dedication.⁹²

1. First, meditating on the enlightenment mind is practicing all the normal preliminaries, such as Refuge, the four immeasurable, etc., summed up here with the word ‘bodhicitta’. This is the “essence of the cause” (for realizing Buddha-nature). The Sūtra vehicle.
2. Second is the arising of the Yidam (self and front) and the practices of the channels and winds and some mantra recitation. This corresponds to the creation stage, which is the “essence of practice” (for realizing Buddha-nature). [It includes the dissolution of the Yidam and the mandala into the vajra nada (the flame-like tip of the seed-syllable) and resting the mind in non-referencing, non-effort equipoise, the essence of tantra, method and wisdom.] Tantric vehicle.
3. Third is Guru Yoga the “essence of qualities” (for realizing Buddha-nature). The Guru in the form of the Yidam is above one’s head and so forth, and one receives the blessings of the four Empowerments. The creation phase, the essence of tantra, is method and wisdom. The blessings by which all the other four methods are brought to fruition. Tantric vehicle.
4. Fourth is the practice of Mahāmudrā, the “essence of meaning” (for realizing Buddha-nature). This is penetrative Insight, in union with calm abiding and discovering the unfabricated, luminous clarity as the innate nature of all phenomena. When we recognize discursive thought, all afflictive emotions (six poisons)

⁹¹ Thus the meaning and translation of Mahāmudrā as ‘the great seal’, referring to the great (Maha) seal (mudra) of śūnyatā.

⁹² p. xiv of the Introduction, by Tony Duff (Translator), *Gampopa’s Mahamudra, The Five-Part Mahamudra Practice Taught to Phagmo Drupa by Gampopa*. Padma Karpo Translation Committee, Kathmandu. 2008.

and all experience as luminosity, all appearances are recognized as the wisdom mind of Buddha-nature. Then we genuinely take the poisons as the path. This is completion phase – here, without specific support for consciousness, often called formless – is wisdom focused but derives its strength through method and wisdom. The Tantric vehicle. The word ‘formless’ can be understood as ‘without support for the mind’. No object, in particular, is focused on, as my Lama Ven. Namgyal Rinpoche taught. Thus the gaze is open, relaxed, vivid, yet not staring. The gaze is straight ahead or slightly elevated. The object of the meditation is the essence-nature of awareness or mind’s natural state. Moreover, this is no object, in particular, no object fixity or a way of looking without making fabrications: we reveal the awareness that is not born, does not cease and has only the nature of śūnyatā. It is the essential nature of all objects and mind – in fact all phenomenal reality. This is the Mahāmudrā or reality. All phenomena are ‘sealed’⁹³ with this essence nature.

5. Fifth is dedication, the “essence of method” (for realizing Buddha-nature) by which we seal the cycle of practice. The first three are the accumulation of merit, and the fourth section, the accumulation of wisdom – thus dedicating the merit of one’s practice for the liberation of all sentient beings. The Sūtra vehicle.

Conduct

What is the conduct of Mahāmudrā? It is the conduct of the Victors’ (Buddhas’) children, the bodhisattvas. In the most unelaborated form, it is the inseparability of the view and meditation of Mahāmudrā. The elaborate form is also essential. We must keep our ethics of body, speech and mind impeccably clean and untainted from harm and unwholesome motivation. We practice at minimum the Five Precepts and the Bodhisattva Vow or whatever training precepts we have committed to, such as monastic vows or the fourteen root Tantric precepts.

Further, how does one lay the basis for the realizations and qualities of a bodhisattva? By practicing⁹⁴ in the manner by which bodhisattvas live their realizations. From the *The Jewel Cloud*:

⁹³ Thus the meaning and translation of Mahāmudrā as ‘the great seal’, referring to the great (Maha) seal (mudra) of śūnyatā.

⁹⁴ Practicing includes: hearing, studying, discussing, reflecting, contemplating, meditating and the conduct of Dharma.

Thus bodhisattvas are masters of using every exhalation and inhalation in virtuous ways for the benefit of sentient beings.⁹⁵

And Kyobpa Jigten Sumgön, founder of the Drikung Kagyu stated,

27. The thirty-seven factors of enlightenment are present in the core of a Sugata.^{96,97}

Then there is the conduct of gaining certainty of the View and Meditation of Mahāmudrā: self-awareness of the innate nature. Confidence in the natural mode free of conceptual contrivance is *the* conduct. When thoughts arise, there is no need to banish them, for, upon recognition, they will dissolve on their own. This dissolves doubt about one’s real nature and the Dharma; a rain of glorious gifts, both relative and ultimate, for all sentient beings.

Having unshakable confidence in the lineage blessings and the blessings and instructions of one’s gurus is also the conduct.

Colophon

These teachings and instructions are gleaned from precious instructions from my jewel-like Gurus, especially the Ven. Dorje Namgyal Rinpoche (b. 1931– d. 2003) a great master of the Mahāmudrā, the glorious H.H. the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa (b. 1924 – d. 1981), the torch of wisdom and compassion that was H.E. Chogye Trichen Rinpoche (b. 1920 - d. 2007), the kind, wise and auspicious master H. E. Lho Ontul Rinpoche and the written words of the Buddha and other great masters of the Mahāmudrā lineages. This short outline of the glorious Mahāmudrā is intended to be combined with one’s Lama’s living instructions, so you can work together to unfold a certainty of genuine recognition.

This lineage of Five-Fold Mahāmudrā teaching comes from oral instructions given by Je Gampopa (1079–1153) to his heart son Phagmo-drupa then to Jigten Sumgön

⁹⁵ 1.274. *The Jewel Cloud, Ratnamegha, The Noble Great Vehicle Sūtra “The Jewel Cloud”*. Toh 231 Degé Kangyur, vol. 64 (mdo sde, wa) Folios 1.a–112.b. In Skt.: *Āryaratnameghanāmamahāyānasūtra*. Translated by Dharmachakra Translation Committee under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

⁹⁶ Sugata (Skt.) a term used in Vajrayana. Sugata is another name for the Buddha, meaning ‘gone to bliss’. Bliss as used here means the great bliss (Skt., *mahāsukha*), naturally present with the non-conceptual freedom of mind.

⁹⁷ p. 14. Kyobpa Jigten Sumgön. *Gongchig the Single Intent, the Sacred Dharma*. With the Commentary: The Lamp Dispelling the Darkness by Rigdzen Chokyi Dragpa. Otter Verlag. 2009.

(1143-1217), the founder of the Drikung Kagyu. This vital teaching flows unbroken to Lama Yongdu's teacher the Ven. Lho Ontul Rinpoche.

Composed by Lama Yongdu Chokyi Gyaltzen, one who has some faith in the Dharma, in Antigua, Guatemala, 27 May 2016, for students attending a weekend of teachings on Mahāmudrā and re-edited 22 June 2016, for a retreat in Nanaimo, British Columbia. May the bright torch of the un-declined teachings of Mahāmudrā reach and fully unfold in the hearts of countless sentient beings, so there is an unwavering confidence in the Dharma essence. Any errors or omissions are from the author; may they be forgiven by the wisdom-display manifestations of the Dharma.

My deep appreciation to Trudy Gold for her fine editing skills and suggestions to make this text a clearer read. And many thanks go to Ron Dupuis, who in 2020 made excellent edits throughout the text and Laurel Jacobson for clarifications to the introduction.

May all be an ocean of auspicious blessings.

Five-Fold Mahamudra Study Guide to proofread 22 Jun (LMW 10 Apr 2019, 26 Sept 2016 & 15 May 2018) (RD-Nov 28-2020-Jan 23, Feb 13-2021)

Appendix I

Five Hindrances (Pāli. *pañca nivāraṇa*):

1. *kāmacchanda*: having sensory desire, especially in meditation when one hankers for meditative experience. A general type of wanting that seeks happiness through any of the six senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, physical feeling and mind.
2. *vyāpāda (byāpāda)*: ill-will, low to high-level anger, irritation and frustration. Especially in meditation, not getting meditative results and not being stimulated by the five senses. And all kinds of thoughts related to wanting to reject, feelings of hostility, resentment, hatred and bitterness.
3. *thīna-middha*: sloth-torpor, dullness of mind and heaviness of body. Can be fleeting or one can suddenly fall over into sleep and dullness of mind. Can even feel like depression or the 'blues'. Everything can feel like thick molasses or jelly.
4. *uddhacca-kukkucca*: restlessness-worry, flightiness of mind, nothing settles and one finds no calm. General or specific agitation or anxiety in the body-mind.
5. *vicikicchā*: doubt, from minor to major, distrust or lack of conviction. It can start with doubting the meditation (whether it is the right one), one's experiences, then the retreat, oneself and abilities, then the teacher, the lineage or even the Dharma. One can flee the retreat (often with a logical pretext) or simply get up from meditation and not return for some time.

Appendix II

Nagarjuna's Mahamudra Vision

Homage to Manjusrikumarabhuta!

1. I bow down to the all-powerful Buddha
Whose mind is free of attachment,
Who in his compassion and wisdom
Has taught the inexpressible.

2. In truth there is no birth -
Then surely no cessation or liberation;
The Buddha is like the sky
And all beings have that nature.

3. Neither Samsara nor Nirvana exist,
But all is a complex continuum
With an intrinsic face of void,
The object of ultimate awareness.

4. The nature of all things
Appears like a reflection,
Pure and naturally quiescent,
With a non-dual identity of suchness.

5. The common mind imagines a self
Where there is nothing at all,
And it conceives of emotional states -
Happiness, suffering, and equanimity.

6. The six states of being in Samsara,
The happiness of heaven,
The suffering of hell,
Are all false creations, figments of mind.

7. Likewise the ideas of bad action causing suffering,
Old age, disease and death,
And the idea that virtue leads to happiness,
Are mere ideas, unreal notions.

8. Like an artist frightened
By the devil he paints,
The sufferer in Samsara
Is terrified by his own imagination.

9. Like a man caught in quicksands
Thrashing and struggling about,
So beings drown
In the mess of their own thoughts.

10. Mistaking fantasy for reality
Causes an experience of suffering;
Mind is poisoned by interpretation
Of consciousness of form.

11. Dissolving figment and fantasy
With a mind of compassionate insight,
Remain in perfect awareness
In order to help all beings.

12. So acquiring conventional virtue
Freed from the web of interpretive thought,
Insurpassable understanding is gained
As Buddha, friend to the world.

13. Knowing the relativity of all,
The ultimate truth is always seen;
Dismissing the idea of beginning, middle and end
The flow is seen as Emptiness.

14. So all samsara and nirvana is seen as it is -
Empty and insubstantial,
Naked and changeless,
Eternally quiescent and illumined.

15. As the figments of a dream
Dissolve upon waking,
So the confusion of Samsara
Fades away in enlightenment.

16. Idealising things of no substance
As eternal, substantial and satisfying,
Shrouding them in a fog of desire
The round of existence arises.

17. The nature of beings is unborn
Yet commonly beings are conceived to exist;
Both beings and their ideas
Are false beliefs.

18. It is nothing but an artifice of mind
This birth into an illusory becoming,
Into a world of good and evil action
With good or bad rebirth to follow.

19. When the wheel of mind ceases to turn
All things come to an end.
So there is nothing inherently substantial
And all things are utterly pure.

20. This great ocean of samsara,
Full of delusive thought,
Can be crossed in the boat Universal Approach.
Who can reach the other side without it?

Colophon

The Twenty Mahayana Verses, (in Sanskrit, Mahayanavimsaka; in Tibetan: Theg pa chen po nyi shu pa) were composed by the master Nagarjuna. They were translated into Tibetan by the Kashmiri Pandit Ananda and the Bhikshu translator Drakjor Sherab (Grags 'byor shes rab). They have been translated into English by the Anagarika Kunzang Tenzin on the last day of the year 1973 in the hope that the karma of the year may be mitigated. May all beings be happy!⁹⁸

⁹⁸ <http://keithdowman.net/mahamudra/nagarjunas-mahamudra-vision.html>

Appendix III

Tsele Natsok Rangdrol, from his text, the *Lamp of Mahamudra*⁹⁹:

Resting one's mind without fabrication is considered the single key point of the realization of all the countless profound and extensive oral instructions in meditation practice such as Mahamudra, Dzogchen, Lamdrey, Cho, Zhije and so forth. The oral instructions appear in various modes due to the differences in ways of human understanding.

Some meditators regard meditation practice as simply a thought-free state of mind in which all gross and subtle perceptions of the six senses have ceased. This is called straying into a dull state of shamatha.

Some presume stable meditation to be a state of neutral dullness not embraced by mindfulness.

Some regard meditation as complete clarity, smooth bliss or utter voidness and cling to those experiences.

Some chop their meditation into fragments, believing the objective of meditation to be a vacant state of mind between the cessation of one thought and the arising of the next.

Some hold on to such thoughts as "The mind-nature is dharmakaya! It is empty! It cannot be grasped!" To think, "Everything is devoid of true existence! It is like a magical illusion! It is like space!" and to regard that as the meditation state is to have fallen into the extreme of intellectual assumption.

Some people claim that whatever is thought or whatever occurs is of the nature of meditation. They stray into craziness by falling under the power of ordinary thinking.

Most others regard thinking as a defect and inhibit it. They believe in resting in meditation after controlling what is being thought and tie themselves up in fixated mindfulness or an ascetic state of mind.

In short, the mind may be still, in turmoil as thoughts and disturbing emotions, or tranquil in any of the experiences of bliss, clarity, and nonthought. Knowing how to sustain the spontaneity of innate naturalness directly in whatever occurs, without having to fabricate, reject or change anything is extremely rare."

⁹⁹ Tsele Natsok Rangdrol, *Lamp of Mahamudra: The Immaculate Lamp, that Perfectly and Fully Illuminates*. Translated by Erik Pema Kunzang, Ranging Yeshe Publications, Hong Kong, 1997.