

*An Introduction to  
Mahamudra Meditation*

*By*

*The Venerable Khenchen  
Thrangu Rinpoche  
Geshe Lharampa*

**Translated by  
Yeshe Gyamtso**

**Transcribed by  
Annelie Speidelsbach**

Copyright © 2001 by Thrangu Rinpoche

All rights reserved. No part of this book, either text or art, may be reproduced in any form, electronic or otherwise, without written permission from Thrangu Rinpoche or Namo Buddha Publications.

Namo Buddha Publications  
P. O. Box 1083  
Crestone, CO 81131  
Phone: (719) 256-5367  
Email: [cjohnson@ix.netcom.com](mailto:cjohnson@ix.netcom.com)  
Thrangu Rinpoche's web site: [www.rinpoche.com](http://www.rinpoche.com)

These teachings were given in  
Edmonton, Canada  
June 25 - 27, 1999

### *Note*

We have italicized the technical words the first time that they appear to alert the reader that their definition can be found in the Glossary.

To assist the practitioner the Tibetan words are given as they are pronounced, not spelled in Tibetan.

### *Acknowledgments*

We would like to thank Yeshe Gyamtso for translating these teachings and for Annelie Speidelsbach who transcribed these teachings.

# Chapter 1

## *Mahamudra Meditation*

Generally speaking, when I travel I give many teachings on meditation. I try to talk mostly about the practice of *Mahamudra* meditation. My hope is that by doing so I will give people something that will actually help them work with their own mind.

The reason I teach Mahamudra is that when the Sixteenth Karmapa came to the West, and was asked what practice would be appropriate for present western culture, he said that he felt the most appropriate meditation practice to pursue was Mahamudra.

### THE 84 MAHASIDDHAS

Since dharma practitioners have innumerable varieties of lifestyles, the practice that they engage in needs to be something that can fit into any lifestyle. If we look at the history of the practice of Mahamudra in India, the appropriateness of Mahamudra meditation becomes evident.

During the flourishing of the Mahamudra teachings in India (in the 8th to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries) there were innumerable people who practiced Mahamudra and who then attained realization through this practice. Of these, 84 individuals became very famous and were called the 84 *mahasiddhas*. If we study their lives, we will see that they had a vast variety of lifestyles, occupations, and social positions. Some were extremely wealthy, influential, and busy. But even in the midst of that lifestyle, they could still practice Mahamudra, and benefit themselves and others.

An example of this was king *Indrabodhi*, who, was very wealthy and very busy governing his kingdom. Nevertheless, while he continued to fulfill his responsibilities as a monarch, he was able to practice Mahamudra and attain awakening or enlightenment.

Another example of the 84 mahasiddhas was the great scholar and teacher, Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna was a teacher and composed a great number of scholarly works at a time when India was full of a variety of different religious or spiritual traditions. To clarify the position of Buddhism in respect to all these different traditions, he composed a lot of books. These books are still studied today and are considered eminently trustworthy. They are so influential in their exposition of the dharma, that reading them can actually change how we think. He too was very busy with all of his teaching and writing, but nevertheless found time to practice Mahamudra and attained awakening.

A very different example of the 84 mahasiddhas was the siddha Tilopa, who was a commoner. He was neither a great king nor a great scholar. He made his living by grinding sesame seeds to make oil. Nevertheless, while doing this menial task, he was able to practice Mahamudra meditation and attained realization while doing so.

If we look at the lives of the 84 mahasiddhas of India, we find that some were merchants, some were laborers, and some were simply wanderers. What they all had in common was that they were all able to attain *supreme siddhi* or realization through the practice of Mahamudra. The point is that regardless of what our particular responsibilities and work may be in this life, the practice of Mahamudra will be effective in achieving realization. It is for that reason that this form of meditation was recommended by the Sixteenth Karmapa.

Among all of the meditation practices found in Buddhism, Mahamudra is the most convenient to practice. There are many other instructions, of course, many of which are extremely profound, but their implementation requires great austerity or a strict retreat situation. In short, many of these meditations simply don't fit into our lives. But Mahamudra is basically the cultivation of mindfulness and alertness of our mind and doesn't require tremendous austerity or a particularly strict retreat. It simply fits into our life just as it is. The most important thing in our lives is for our mind to do well. So, working with our mind makes it calm and peaceful, which starts to fill us and our life with joy. This reduces the stress and anxiety which would otherwise lead to both mental disturbance and physical

## *Mahamudra Meditation*

illness, and a joyful mind also makes it possible for us to accomplish whatever we are trying to do successfully.

### THE MIND AS A WISH-FULFILLING JEWEL

We basically have two parts to ourselves: our body and our mind. Because we can see and feel our body, we tend to think that it is more important. But actually, if we look at our experience closely, we'll see that our mind is, in the end, more important. It has been said that our body is really like a servant who is employed by the mind and our mind is like a monarch. When our mind is happy, we experience a well-being that extends to our physical body. Also when our mind is in a positive state, our physical and verbal actions will automatically be positive as well. And when our mind is aware and clear and lucid, our actions will be more effective.

So, working with our mind to make it happy and positive and lucid is extremely important. There is basically no other way to do this than working with the habits that accrue in our mind. We're constantly developing habits of doing things that may be positive or negative. The way to work with the mind is to cultivate positive and constructive habits, and to abandon the negative and destructive ones.

The ultimate result of meditation practice is described in our tradition as Buddhahood, or awakening. And when we talk about Buddhahood, or the achievement of a Buddha, it sounds like we're talking about some kind of god. But this is not what it means at all.

The word Buddha simply means "to wake up." For example, in the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word, Buddha, is the two syllable word *sangje*. The first syllable, *sang*, means to purify or remove. This is to transcend or let go of all of the problems that otherwise afflict our mind: sadness, regret, aggression, jealousy, arrogance, ignorance, apathy, and so on. The second syllable in Tibetan is *je*, which means to expand or flourish. So *sangje* means that when we can let go of all the problems that have afflicted our mind, then all of our innate qualities which have been bound or restricted can flourish freely. These innate qualities that have been suppressed are: wisdom, awareness, compassion, kindness, love, and so on.

Now, the source of these two aspects of awakening—removal of afflictions and the natural flourishing of good qualities—is the practice of meditation.

When we start to practice meditation, we often doubt the possibility of transcending all of the problems and defects which we experience. And we also doubt the possibility of achieving what seem to be unlimited good qualities. But these things can actually be achieved, and the reason they can be achieved is explained in a line from a *spiritual song* composed by the great mahasiddha Saraha.

In the first line of this song says, “I pay homage to the mind itself, which is like a jewel that grants all one’s wishes.” Normally we would expect that he would begin his spiritual song by paying homage to the Buddha, the dharma, or the sangha. But here, he doesn’t and simply pays homage to the mind.

Now, our mind is often filled with things that we regard as unpleasant: a lot of suffering, misery, fear, anxiety, anger and so on. But these things, as unpleasant as they are, are not in fact an integral or intrinsic part of our mind. These negativities are not who we are. At the same time, we often doubt our own value and our own capabilities. We think, “I have little wisdom,” “I have no intelligence,” “I’m not very compassionate,” and so on. But it is never the case that these positive qualities we think we don’t have are intrinsically not there. They are there within us, but they are hidden.

For this reason in the Buddhist tradition the basic nature of everyone is called *Buddha-nature*. We all possess within ourselves the potential for the development of all possible qualities. And it’s for that reason that in his spiritual song Saraha refers to one’s mind as like a *wish-fulfilling jewel*.

Now, if you possess a jewel that is worth a great deal of money, but you don’t know what it is, you naturally don’t take care of it, and you just put it in the garbage, and you obviously aren’t going to get much use out of it. But if, recognizing it for what it is, you clean it off and use it appropriately, it could lead to great profit. In the same way, if you take hold of your mind, you can actually achieve tremendous qualities. If you don’t take hold of your mind and just let it remain in a state of misery, all of the qualities within you will never be revealed.

## *Mahamudra Meditation*

### TRANQUILLITY AND INSIGHT

There are two main aspects to meditation: *tranquillity* (or Shamatha) and *insight* (or Vipashyana) meditation. These terms are used in several spiritual traditions, but mean different things in these traditions. In fact, we could say that any spiritual tradition that has emerged from India will at some point use these terms to describe their practice of meditation. For example, in the Hindu tradition, the terms Shamatha and Vipashyana are used, but they are different from the meditation techniques which are described in the Mahamudra tradition. The reason these same terms are used by different traditions is simply that both Hinduism and the Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism arose in India, and therefore both used Sanskrit words for the types of meditation.

Similar terms are also used in both the Buddhist *Theravada* and Zen traditions. But again, these refer to slightly different techniques or instructions. In the Theravada tradition, the terms “Shamatha” and “Vipashyana” in Sanskrit mean tranquillity and insight. Because of that, we may think that the Theravada approach, the Zen approach, and the Mahamudra approach are identical. Nevertheless, the instructions that each of these traditions and the methods are somewhat different.

The particular value of the Mahamudra approach to Shamatha and Vipashyana is that it is an approach which is easy to understand, and therefore appropriate to practice in daily life.

In essence the basis of all practice of *Buddha-dharma* is taking hold of your mind, and by doing so, clearing away the problems which afflict your mind, and thereby allowing your good qualities to develop.

### THE RESPONSIBILITY OF HUMAN BEINGS

But even nonBuddhist have the basic responsibility which all beings share, of taking care of oneself. The best way to take care of yourself is to take hold of your mind, and remove the problems which inhibit and afflict you, and allow your innate qualities and wisdom to

flourish. This more than any other single thing will improve the quality of your life.

Whether a Buddhist or not, a male or female, whether rich or poor, educated or not, you will have the same basic responsibility which underlies all distinctions or particularities of your life, of taking care of yourself. This has to include taking care of, and getting hold of your mind, for which Mahamudra practice is very useful.

You might think that meditation is very good, but very difficult to actually practice. In fact, it's not really that difficult, because meditation is working with your own mind, and by definition your mind is yours. It's right there. It belongs to you. It is very much at the center of your experience and your world.

Or, you might think that the limitations and problems which inhibit and inflict your mind are solid. But in fact, when you start to work with them, you see that they are not solid at all. You might think that enlightened qualities are very difficult to develop, but as you start to work with your mind, you discover that they are innate. Taking hold of the mind, is therefore something anyone can do if they wish to. It's very much yours to take hold of.

If you tried to take hold of somebody else's mind, you might have a problem, but your own mind is definitely yours to take hold of and take care of. But it's entirely up to you. Whether or not you control your mind and take responsibility for your mind is not a decision that anyone else can make for you. If you decide not to take control of your own mind, then whatever happens will happen. But if you do take control of it, you can definitely change the state of your mind completely.

It is for these reasons that I encourage people so strongly to practice meditation. Because the bottom line of our lives is that we must treat ourselves well. To really treat ourselves as well as we can, we need to practice meditation.

Now, we might react to that, thinking, "I don't know how." But we do know how, because it's working with our own mind, which is right there. Someone might think, "Oh, I can't." But you can. It's just your mind. And someone else might say, "Well, I don't need to." But you do need to. You need to take hold of your mind, in order to take care of your mind, in order to increase the innate qualities. Without

## *Mahamudra Meditation*

consciously taking hold of your mind, these qualities will not increase. Therefore, with all the effort I can, I try to encourage people to meditate.

### THE SEVEN DHARMAS OF VAIROCANA

We have to begin meditation with tranquillity, or Shamatha meditation. And the reason we have to begin with tranquillity meditation, because normally our mind is not at rest. It is agitated by regret, by misery, by anxiety, and by all kinds of thoughts which disturb us. So, the first thing we need to do, is to calm our mind down, so our mind develops a healthy stability.

We have a lot of thoughts arising in our mind all the time. Some of these thoughts are positive, some are negative, and others are just neutral. But if we look at the thoughts that run through our mind, we see that most of them are pretty negative, which is the reason we need to practice meditation.

Some of the thoughts that arise in our mind take hold of us and make us happy, and others take hold of us and make us miserable. But, if you look at the thoughts that arise in our mind, we'll see that more of them make us miserable and anxious. This is unnecessary, because by practicing Shamatha or tranquillity meditation, the thoughts that make us miserable will decrease and our mind will become happy and workable.

In the practice of Shamatha meditation, usually short sessions will bring the greatest benefit, but occasionally it is acceptable to lengthen the sessions. In any case, the practice of Shamatha involves two aspects. The first is posture, and the second is what you do with the mind.

The posture which is used for meditation is called, in the Mahamudra instructions is called, the *Seven Dharmas of Vairocana*, meaning a physical posture has seven aspects which encourage mental clarity. If the position of the body is correct, it will calm an agitated mind, cheer up an unhappy mind, and produce clarity in a torpid mind.

The first of the seven points of posture is to sit down, to sit on some kind of cushion. The reason why you sit to meditate is that if you attempt to meditate while walking around, your mind simply

will not come to rest as easily as it does when you're sitting. Sometimes it's fine, of course, to practice walking meditation, but for the most part it's done while sitting down. You might ask, why don't we lie down to meditate? Well, lying down might bring the mind to some kind of rest, but it will tend to make it lethargic and sleepy. So, it's best to meditate sitting.

If you are flexible, you can sit in the *vajra posture*, which is usually known in the West as the lotus posture. But if you're not that flexible, or you find this posture uncomfortable, don't worry about it. If you find that you can't sit cross-legged at all, and you need to sit in a chair, don't worry about it. Don't feel that it will harm or inhibit your meditation, to simply sit in a chair. In any case, the first of the seven points of posture is to sit down.

The second point is what to do with our hands. This is important because our hands are like tools for us. We use them all the time, and therefore, movement and positioning of our hands tends to cause us to think more. What we do with our hands, is to place them evenly. This is sometimes understood as referring to the left hand being placed palm up in our lap and the right hand is place palm up in the left. But it can also simply be understood as keeping our hands at the same height, so that we're not lifting our left hand up and lowering our right hand to the ground, or vice versa. So, we can simply just place our hands palm downward on our thighs just behind the knees in what is called *the earth pressing gesture*. The function, in any case, is that by placing the hands evenly and at rest, your mind comes to rest.

The third point of posture is that our spine be as straight or erect as possible. This is quite important because by keeping our back straight, we straighten out the *subtle channels* within our body through which our *subtle winds* or energies flow.<sup>1</sup> If these channels are bent, such as if our back is bent, these channels will be bent. But if our back and channels are straight, then the winds or energies will flow properly, which will allow our mind to relax naturally, and become calm.

The fourth point is that the shoulders should not be caved in towards the chest, but that the shoulders be pushed back a little bit. Here the shoulders are really just an example. It means that all parts

## *Mahamudra Meditation*

of our body are held in a proper and wakeful posture, so that they are relaxed, but not so relaxed that the posture becomes sloppy.

The fifth point is that our neck be bent like a hook, which means that our chin be brought back in and down. This should happen naturally simply by straightening our back, but the reason it's mentioned separately is that if our chin sticks out to the front, this will cause our mind to become more conceptual.

The sixth is to touch your tongue to the palate. The reason for this instruction is that when our mind starts to relax, a great deal of saliva will flow and fill our mouth, making us have to swallow every few seconds. But if our tongue is touching the palate, this won't happen.

The seventh and final point of posture is the gaze, which is what we do with our eyes. This is important because our thoughts tend to follow our gaze, or our eyes. Some people for this reason find it helpful to meditate with closed eyes, which is okay. Other people find that this makes their mind torpid and sleepy. If so, we should meditate with open eyes, and not move the eyes left or right. We simply let your gaze remain, looking straight-ahead.

### THE MENTAL ASPECT

After the physical aspect of Shamatha meditation, there is what to do with the mind. This is how to keep the mind free of distraction. First we must not to prolong the past meaning that when we're meditating, we don't think about the past, we don't engage in recollection, and so forth. Second we don't beckon the future, which means not to speculate, plan, or think about the future. Now, of course, we have to do this in post-meditation, but in meditation sessions, we don't think about the future.

This leaves the present. In meditation practice, we experience whatever we experience directly in the present moment, because our mind's experience will not stop simply because we're not thinking about the past or the future.

These instructions of dealing with past, present, and future are the principle instructions of Mahamudra meditation. But if we find that's not enough, then we can supplement this by using the breath as an anchor for our mind. There are different ways this can be done.

## *An Introduction to Mahamudra Meditation*

We can count the breaths, or we can simply follow the breath with your mind. In any case, as was said by the Buddha, “When there are a lot of thoughts, follow the breath.”

### CULTIVATING LOVE AND COMPASSION

In addition to basic Shamatha meditation it is necessary to cultivate love and compassion which is essential for our Buddhist practice. Obviously, being loving and compassionate helps us and it obviously helps others as well. We really have no choice but to develop these qualities, simply because in this world we must live with others. Living with others, we have to contact with others, if we can get along with them it helps everyone. When we cannot get along, it hurts everyone. So, we definitely need love or the wish that others be happy. We need compassion, the wish that others will be free from suffering.

Because all humans possess Buddha-nature, we have the innate desire to help others. However, our love and compassion tends to be limited or partial. We have love and compassion for some beings, but not others. What we have to do is expand these until they are unlimited. To begin cultivating love and compassion, we begin by cultivating unlimited impartiality, which is being free of so much attachment for some that we have aversion for others. Once we’ve cultivated impartiality, then we can cultivate love and compassion.

When based upon unlimited impartiality, we are able to start to cultivate unlimited love and unlimited compassion. This leads to a tremendous joy and equanimity, which is called unlimited joy. So these *four immeasurables* of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity can also be cultivated to supplement Shamatha practice.

### TAKING AND SENDING PRACTICE

In addition to cultivate love and compassion in meditation practice, we can practice of *taking and sending*, or *tonglen*. This practice is designed to reverse a tendency we have to be self-centered.

When we consider it, we find that we want to be happy, but we are so concerned about our own happiness that we don’t particularly care whether other beings are happy or not. We find that as long as

## *Mahamudra Meditation*

we are free from suffering, it's perfectly okay with us if everyone else is suffering.

In the practice of taking and sending we seek to reverse this tendency by cultivating the willingness to take on the suffering of others, and giving our happiness away to others. In the practice of meditation this is done by imagining as we breathe out that all of our happiness and all of the causes of happiness, such as our prosperity goes out with our breath and we are given to all other beings. As we breathe in, all of the suffering of other beings, and every cause of that suffering, leaves those beings who become free of it, and it dissolves into us.

This practice scares some people who think, "If I imagine giving away all of my happiness and taking on all of the suffering of others into myself, suppose it really happens. What will I do then?" But in fact the practice of taking and sending is not dangerous because we can't catch anything by doing this practice, because all of these things arise as a result of our previous actions or karma.

We might then ask, if we can't literally take away the sufferings of others and give away our happiness, then what is the point of visualizing doing so? The point is that it changes our mind. It cultivates a readiness to put others before us and that serves greatly to pacify our own attachment and aggression. In fact it does more than that. While it may not immediately affect others that much, because it changes our attitude so much, it will change how we act, which affects others beneficially. So, there's nothing to be afraid of in the practice of taking and sending and we should not think that it is pointless or not useful.

***The Nine Levels of Stability of Meditation\****

1. Resting the mind  
(One places one's mind on an object for a brief duration.)
2. Resting the mind longer  
(One places one's mind on an object and it wanders and then one places it back again on the object.)
3. Continuously resettling the mind  
(One keeps placing one's mind, but there are still thoughts such as "this is important" or "I like this" which prevent complete placement.)
4. Intensely settled mind  
(The mind appears to be vast and the thoughts appear only as small intrusions on this vast space.)
5. Taming the mind  
(One feels joy, enthusiasm, and relaxation in one's meditation.)
6. Pacification of the mind  
(The mind appears tame, but it still wanders because we are still attached to these wanderings.)
7. Complete pacification of the mind  
(Whatever the distraction that appears in mind, one immediately applies the right antidote.)
8. One-pointed mind  
(One can place the mind almost completely, but it still requires some exertion.)
9. Resting in equanimity  
(Mind rests simply and naturally in its own nature.)

\*These nine ways were first given in the *Ornament of Clear Realization* by Maitreya.

## Chapter 2

### *Shamatha Meditation in Mahamudra*

#### FOUR ORDINARY PRELIMINARIES

The practice of Mahamudra meditation has two parts: the preliminaries practices and the actual practice. There are two kinds of preliminaries: the ordinary and the extraordinary preliminaries.

The ordinary preliminaries are in essence the four contemplations that motivate we to practice dharma. The first common preliminary is remembering we have had a precious human birth. Having encountered dharma, we are very fortunate. The purpose of contemplating this is that it inspires us not to waste our human life, but encourages us to cultivate spiritual practice. The second contemplation, is the recognition that although we are very fortunate to be human and to have access to spiritual teachings, there are many adverse conditions that can at any moment cause our lives to end. So this is a contemplation of the impermanence of human life. This inspires us not only to practice, but also to practice quickly.

Third, there is the contemplation of the results of actions, which inspires us to base our practice of dharma on the undertaking of virtuous actions and the abandonment of unvirtuous actions. Fourth is the contemplation of the defects of samsara which reminds us of the ultimate purpose of dharma practice, which is to free ourselves and others from both the causes and the results of samsara.

To practice dharma we need to have enthusiasm for dharma. These four ordinary foundations help us develop this diligence.

The most important contemplation is the contemplation of impermanence, which is initially, somewhat depressing. It's something we want to avoid thinking about, let alone meditating

on. But it's extremely useful. As the Buddha said, "Contemplation of impermanence provides the first inspiration to practice dharma." The recognition of impermanence is what inspires us in the beginning to appreciate and take delight in dharma. After that, impermanence spurs us to diligence. Sometimes we are involved in practice, it's difficult for us to apply ourselves to it, but the contemplation of impermanence helps us transcend that. So the contemplation of impermanence, regular or occasional, is always helpful.

How do you actually meditate on impermanence? You simply look at the world around you. If you look at things, places, people and their activities, you see that all of these things are impermanent in the sense that these things are constantly changing. So the recognition of impermanence comes basically from looking at your own experience of life and the world.

As was said by *Milarepa*, "My books are all that appears and exists. I have never studied that which is found written in ink on paper." If you look at your own and other people's lives, you see the changes that occur all the time in life, and you will come to recognize impermanence, which will inspire you to diligence in practice. So, far more important than attempting formal meditation on impermanence is to look around you.

#### THE FOUR SPECIAL PRELIMINARIES

In addition to the four common preliminaries, there are the *four special preliminaries*, which are taking refuge, the Vajrasattva meditation which purifies obscurations and wrongdoing, the offering of the mandala which gathers the accumulations, and the guru yoga in which you supplicate the root and lineage gurus. If you can do these four practices one after another, it will very helpful to your practice of meditation. But you should not think that if you can't or don't do them, it means you can't meditate. Of course you can practice meditation without doing these practices, it's just that they're very helpful.

*Shamatha Meditation in Mahamudra*

RELYING ON AN EXTERNAL SUPPORT

After the preliminary practices comes the practice of Shamatha or tranquillity meditation. There are two aspects to Shamatha: the physical posture of the Seven Dharmas of Vairocana and the mental technique.

The mental technique can be taught in different ways depending upon whether we are practicing alone or in a group. When we are practicing alone, different techniques are given for the daytime and the nighttime meditation. The beginning meditation requires some kind of external support to get hold of our mind.

The daytime practice consists of placing a small object of visual focus, such as a pebble or very short stick, in front of you where you can see it easily. The object should not be a bright white, because if it's too bright, it will hurt your eyes. The technique is simply to look directly at the object and relax your mind, without losing track of it. You're not attempting to think about the object in any way. You're not trying to analyze the object's color or shape, or anything like that. You simply use the object as a focus for your attention, and you do so very lightly and in a relaxed way, so that you don't lose track of the object. That is the daytime technique.

If you are meditating at nighttime and can't see the object very well, you can visualize a tiny sphere of white light the size of a pea between your eyebrows, and direct your attention to that visualized support or sometimes you can visualize a sphere of black light the size of a pea directly below you.

The daytime and the nighttime support are classified as neutral objects. The second type of support is what is called a sacred object, using the form of the Buddha. For this technique you visualize the body of the Buddha in the space in front of you, and you make this quite small. Then you simply rest your mind on this so that you don't lose track of it or forget it. In general, we are taught to cultivate faith and devotion for the Buddha, including the Buddha's form, but in this technique, we're merely using the form of the Buddha as a support for resting the mind. So if faith and devotion arise, that's okay, we don't have to try to get rid of them. But we don't intentionally

try to create faith and devotion. We simply rest our mind on the form.

So in summary, there are three techniques for Shamatha with an external support: the daytime technique, the nighttime technique, and the sacred technique. You can apply these in alternation as you see fit.

#### RELYING ON THE BREATH

The next technique of Shamatha meditation, using an external support is using the breath. Because this is the main technique of Shamatha practice, there are many variations on it and two will be presented here.

The first is following the breath meaning, not losing track of, or not becoming distracted from, simply being aware of breathing. So we follow, or experience the breath going out, and we follow the breath coming in. Of course, we are always breathing, but normally we are unaware of it. And here we are simply using awareness of breathing as a support for resting the mind. The idea is not to lose track of the breath. If we find, however, that our mind becomes particularly wild, we can take a short rest or break from the technique and then start fresh.

The second technique of Shamatha based on breathing is holding the breath. This simply means allowing our mind to come to rest in the interval between breathing in and breathing out. A distinction needs to be made between two different ways of holding the breath which have two entirely different purposes. There is one technique of holding the breath which is done when attempting to work with the subtle channels, winds, and drops called "vase breathing." In that style, the breath is held with much more effort and much more exertion. Here we are simply using the technique of holding the breath as a technique of Shamatha or tranquillity, so it's very relaxed.

The technique begins with expelling the stale air from your lungs nine times. The first three times, you block your right nostril with your fingers, and breathe out through your left nostril. The first time you breathe out very, very gently. The second time, it starts out gentle, but becomes more forceful. And the third time, starting out gentle and becoming more forceful, it

### *Shamatha Meditation in Mahamudra*

ends with expelling all the stale air you possibly can, through your left nostril. Then you repeat the same thing, except you block the left nostril and expel the stale air gently, more strongly, and then completely through the right nostril. For the third round, you repeat it without blocking either nostril, so that you expel the stale air from both nostrils simultaneously. After that you simply breathe in gently, and rest your mind while the breath is inside, before you breathe out.

Now, when you hold the breath in this technique, you do not hold it in your chest. Try to hold it in your belly, which means you bring the air you've breathed in down as far into your body as you can, and you have the feeling that it's actually dissolving into your belly. Then you simply rest your mind in that. And as soon as you become uncomfortable, you breathe out gently. And then you breathe in and repeat the process, and so on.

Those of you who know about the ways of holding the breath that are used when meditating upon the channels, winds, and drops should be careful not to confuse this technique with that one. The physical posture and style of holding the breath when working with the channels and winds is entirely different in method and purpose from what I've explained here.<sup>3</sup>

Holding the breath in a Mahamudra context simply rest the mind. It's done extremely gently, so that, for example, when you breathe in, you let the breath remain inside as long as it will stay there naturally. And then you let it out, and you breathe in again, and so on. You are doing this in order to be able to rest your mind in the interval between breathing in and breathing out. Now, if even this becomes tiring, then simply watch the breath dissolve as you breathe out, and try to remain undistracted from that.

But undistracted in all of these techniques does not mean attention that is exclusive. It means simply that your mind does not lose track of the focus, for example the out breath, in a very relaxed way.

#### RESTING IN THE CLARITY OF THE EIGHTH CONSCIOUSNESS

The next step of Shamatha practice is not relying upon the breath or upon an external support. This is a technique that is basically

designed for someone who has gained some stillness of the mind through working with the breath, and other techniques discussed.

To understand this technique, we need to look briefly at the faculties of mind that actually perform the act of meditation. Generally speaking, the functions of mind can be grouped into either the *six or eight consciousnesses*. Of these, the first six are easier to detect because they are fluctuating functions. The seventh and eighth consciousness are constant and unfluctuating, and therefore harder to notice.

The first five consciousnesses are the consciousnesses of the five senses. The first sense consciousness is the visual consciousness, which functions based upon the eye, and experiences images, that is to say, shape and color and so forth. Usually we say, "I see with my eyes." But in fact we don't see with our eyes. Our eyes don't see. Our eyes are matter. Our visual consciousness sees relying upon the support that is the eye. The second consciousness is the auditory consciousness, which relies upon the ear and experiences sound. Then there is the olfactory consciousness, which relies upon the nose and experiences smells. Then the gustatory consciousness, which relies upon the tongue and experiences tastes. Finally, there are the tactile consciousness which relies upon the sensitivity of the nerves of the whole body, and experiences tactile sensations.

Now, the five sense consciousnesses do experience their particular objects, but they do that and only that. The sense consciousnesses experience their objects directly, but are not capable of thinking about the objects they perceive. The sense consciousnesses themselves do not generate thoughts, such as, this is beautiful or this is ugly and so forth. In the Abhidharma and texts on valid cognition (Skt. *pramana*), the sense consciousnesses are classified as non-conceptual consciousnesses. Therefore, while a sense experience continues while we are meditating, it is not the sense consciousnesses themselves that perform the act of meditation. One reason for this is that they can't because as they are non-conceptual. The other reason is simply that there is no need for them to, because as non-conceptual direct experiences, the sense consciousnesses do not harm or obstruct the act of meditation.

### *Shamatha Meditation in Mahamudra*

The sixth consciousness, however, is another matter. The sixth mental consciousness is the faculty of thinking, and it functions based upon, either the sense consciousnesses or itself. The sixth consciousness produces thoughts—this is good, this is bad, and so on—either about the objects of the sense consciousnesses or what is experienced by the five senses, or about its own previous thoughts. It is the sixth consciousness that produces thoughts and feelings of joy and misery, and so on. So basically, almost all of the mental activity of which we are aware of is produced by the sixth consciousness and it is the sixth consciousness that produces thoughts. So the cognitive clarity of this sixth consciousness is actually the faculty used in meditation.

The seventh and eighth consciousnesses are unfluctuating, which makes them more difficult to observe in direct experience. The seventh consciousness is called the *klesha or afflicted consciousness*. In general, mental afflictions or kleshas are characterized as negative, but the seventh consciousness itself is not considered negative, but neutral. The klesha which arise in this seventh consciousness are not the usual kleshas of attachment, aggression, and ignorance, but a fundamental fixation on a self, that underlying assumption of “I.”

The eighth consciousness is called the fundamental, or all-ground *alaya consciousness*, and it is called that because it is the foundation of the functions which make up the other seven. As such, it is unceasing cognitive clarity,<sup>4</sup> or cognitive capacity. While the eighth consciousness is an unceasing cognitive clarity, it is not really the consciousness which performs the acts of meditation. Rather it is the consciousness that is experienced in meditation.

The practice of meditation consists of working with thought. As thoughts arise they are the natural display of the mind, and we simply do not follow them. By not following them, we also don't try to stop them or get rid of them. By not following the thoughts, the thoughts will lessen, and we will begin to experience that underlying cognitive clarity, without thought. This is the clarity of the alaya consciousness,<sup>5</sup> and in Shamatha practice, we simply rest in that.

### *An Introduction to Mahamudra Meditation*

In order to be able to rest in this consciousness free of distraction, we need to apply two faculties, which are *mindfulness* and *alertness*. Mindfulness is simply not losing track of or forgetting your intention to meditate without distraction. Alertness is recognizing what is happening in your mind, for example, whether or not you have become distracted. So meditation in the context of Shamatha consists of not following the thoughts which arise for the sixth consciousness, but resting in the basic clarity of the eighth consciousness.

#### MEDITATING WITHOUT A SUPPORT

We have just discussed the technique of resting the mind in Shamatha without a support. The actual practice is done as follows:

The physical posture of the seven dharmas of Vairocana, is the same, but the mental technique is that there is no object to focus on. We are not using a visual object such as a pebble or breathing to focus on, rather we simply experience the unceasing cognitive clarity of the sixth consciousness, which arises as the display of that consciousness in the form of thought.

Now, sometimes the display of the sixth consciousness will take the form of thinking about the past, and you don't follow that. Sometimes it will take the form of thinking about the future, and you don't follow that either. Sometimes it will take the form of thinking about how things are now, about this thing and that thing, and so on. You don't follow that either. You simply rest in the direct experience of the present moment. When you are beginning this technique you need very short meditation sessions and then these can be gradually lengthened.

In order to do this you need to apply mindfulness and alertness. When thoughts arise, you recognize that a thought has arisen, and you simply don't follow it. This does not mean that you have to regard that thought as a problem and try to get rid of it. If you simply don't follow the thought, it will dissolve, and then you can return to a state of stillness. If this leads to a state of lucid stillness, this is good Shamatha.

THE OBSTACLES OF AGITATION AND LETHARGY

But sometimes problems will arise, such as wildness of the mind, regret, doubt, feeling aggression, and so on. But basically, all of the problems that occur in meditation can be divided into two types of problems. The first is agitation where your mind simply does not come to rest, where your mind will not be still. The second is lethargy where your mind is unclear and murky.

In the practice of Shamatha, when these defects arise, you need to recognize them and let go of them. Most types of agitation that arise in Shamatha practice can be counteracted by simply by relaxing your mind. In other words, if you recognize that agitation is occurring, if you just relax your mind, that will take care of it.

An exception to this is a particular type of agitation that is produced by thoughts that you enjoy so much that you're holding onto it. In that case, even though you may temporarily chase that thought out, it will come right back again. When this occurs you have to remind yourself that you are attempting to meditate and holding onto this interesting thought is interfering with the act of meditation. Acknowledging this will enable you to let go of the thought and it will dissolve.

In the case of lethargy, usually just recognizing that your mind is murky and unclear will produce some clarity.

Finally, there are specific techniques for dealing with agitation and lethargy. A specific technique for dealing with agitation is called "vase breathing" in which we gently hold our breath below the abdomen for a while. A specific technique for dealing with lethargy is called "dispelling bad air" in which we exhale all the old air in our system.

This technique of meditating without any support requires a strong application of mindfulness and alertness. There are two main techniques—effort and relaxation. You sometimes need to increase the amount of effort you're putting into the meditation. For example, if you have a lot of wild, uncontrolled thoughts running through your mind, or alternatively, if your mind is extremely unclear, you may need to increase your effort. You

need to increase your mind's innate clarity through a more forceful application of mindfulness and alertness.

This application of particularly forceful if concentrated mindfulness and alertness is done for a very brief time. Then you relax your mind, and allow your mind to rest. Then you reapply the forceful faculties of mindfulness and alertness, and then relax the mind, and so on. This alternation of the forceful application of these two faculties and letting the mind rest will produce the most clarity in the mind. So, it's done repeatedly for very short times.

You may feel that this is somehow inadequate, because you cannot prolong the period of intense mindfulness. But nevertheless, this is acceptable. While the intensity of the mindfulness can't be prolonged indefinitely, the alternation does lead to the promotion of clarity.

The second technique is relaxation, and this is to be applied once you've established a stable faculty of mindfulness and alertness, that is, once you have been able to generate sufficient clarity in meditation. At that point you have to let go, or relax meaning letting go of the fixation on the contents of meditation. Because you have applied a strong or intense mindfulness and alertness with the hope of generating a state of stillness, you will have also generated some hope or investment in the mind being still, and be disappointed when it is not. So at this point you have to let go of that tendency to be happy or delighted when the meditation is going well, and disappointed when it is not. Letting go of mindfulness and alertness. You maintain them in a relaxed way, and this is sufficient, provided that there is a recognition of the arising of thoughts.

The potential problem with relaxation is that you may experience an undercurrent of thought. This is what occurs when you only become aware of a thought long after it has arisen. In other words, it's been going on as an undercurrent for awhile. Working with the undercurrent takes some care and attention. Generally speaking, this experience indicates that the faculties of mindfulness and alertness are weak not being intense enough. So if you find when you are applying the technique of relaxation that you only become aware of thought some time after it has

## *Shamatha Meditation in Mahamudra*

arisen, then you need to put more effort, energy and clarity into mindfulness and alertness.

### STAGES IN THE CULTIVATION OF STILLNESS

Practicing Shamatha without an object as described will result in three stages of the cultivation of stillness.

The first stage is when you are practicing meditation and there seem to be more thoughts than you had before you began to practice. This is called "*the stillness which is like a waterfall.*" When you experience the presence of so many thoughts, you're apt to think that things have gotten worse than they were before. In fact, you are not thinking more than you were before, rather what has happened is that previously there were innumerable thoughts running through your mind, but you weren't aware of their presence because you hadn't developed any mindfulness and alertness to recognize them. Now, because you are meditating and applying the faculties of mindfulness and alertness, and applying mental clarity, you recognize the arising of thought. So the stillness which is like a waterfall is not really the experience of an increase of thought, but an experience of the recognition of the presence of thought. Therefore it's good and it is actually the first stage of the attainment of Shamatha.

If you continue to practice after that, there will be a change, which is that your thoughts will gradually slow down. As they slow down, you attain the second stage of stillness, which is like "*a large, slow-flowing river.*" There are still thoughts arising, but the speed of thought has lessened, and so the thoughts do not necessarily distract you.

If you continue to practice further, eventually the speed of thoughts will be reduced to where your mind becomes like "*an unmoving ocean or lake.*" This is the true attainment of Shamatha or tranquillity. For this stillness the faculties of mindfulness and alertness are extremely important, because without these, your mind and your meditation remains very unclear, so you are unaware of what's happening, and therefore cannot progress. That is why it is said that you need mindfulness and alertness that is sharp, intense and clear. Because this clarity is necessary to recognize whether or not you are distracted, the

faculty of clarity which is expressed as mindfulness and alertness here is necessary to develop stillness.

## ***Questions***

**Question:** If I understood correctly, our attitude should begin with a sort of impartiality before we try to cultivate compassion and love. I wonder if that would be as applicable in the western world where we tend to be very individualistic, and not really care about anybody else very naturally.

**Rinpoche:** It's not that you cannot work with love and compassion from the very beginning, it's just that at the same time, if you can work on equanimity, you can start to pacify your aversions to some people and your obsession with, or attachment to others, which will be very helpful.

**Question:** Do you mean we should practice taking and sending as a means to reach tranquillity, or should we try to reach some tranquillity in our meditation first, and then practice taking and sending?

**Rinpoche:** Taking and sending is not really a method of Shamatha or tranquillity meditation. Tranquillity meditation is a practice done just to allow your mind to come to rest. Taking and sending, is concerned with the cultivation of benevolence. The order of practice is up to you. If you first practice Shamatha and develop a mind that is restful and stable, it will be good to go on and practice taking and sending and cultivate benevolence. On the other hand, if you first cultivate benevolence through the practice of taking and sending, that will make it easier for you to cultivate a mind that is calm and stable.

**Question:** You spoke of 84 mahasiddhas. Can you tell us of some of the accomplishments of attainment, the experiences of some of the people who have these accomplishments.

**Rinpoche:** They all practiced Mahamudra, and they all attained what in this tradition is called supreme *siddhi*, which is awakening. And that basically is what they were all about. If you want to know their individual lives and experiences, there are at least two translations of the collected biographies of the 84 mahasiddhas in English, which you can read.

## *Chapter 3*

### *Vipashyana Meditation in Mahamudra*

#### EGOLESSNESS

Previously, I talked about Shamatha meditation and now I'm going to talk about Vipashyana. The function of Shamatha, as we saw, is to develop mental stability, or stillness. The function of Vipashyana, or insight, is to look at the nature of your mind, and by doing so, to see the nature of phenomena.

The Buddha presented the nature of phenomena in the sutras by first presenting this nature as selflessness. Then he went on and presented it as emptiness. The reason he presented selflessness in the beginning is that, immersed in samsara, we have a lot of different kinds of suffering, and we want to get rid of this suffering. But we cannot just abandon suffering. To get rid of suffering, we need to abandon the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is the disturbing emotions, such as attachment, aversion, and apathy. If we eliminate those disturbing emotions, we will automatically be free from suffering, which is the result. But we cannot directly abandon the disturbing emotions either. We have to eliminate their cause, and the cause of the disturbing emotions is the apprehension or a belief in a self.

We can't get rid of a belief in self by suppressing it. We can, however, get rid of it by disproving it logically. Because the self does not exist, we can, by proving its nonexistence, get rid of the belief of it. So, the approach of Mahamudra is to come to recognize selflessness, which will lead automatically to relinquishing the false belief of an existent self. That is why the first thing the Buddha taught was selflessness.

If we meditate on selflessness, we will definitely come to realize it, and that begins the path which will lead to the attainment of what is called arhatship. An *arhat* is literally

someone who has defeated the enemy, and of course, the enemy is whatever we are afraid of. Here, of course, enemy refers to samsara, the kleshas, and suffering. An arhat is therefore someone who has defeated the cause of suffering, and therefore is victorious over suffering itself. So, the result of meditating upon selflessness, which here means primarily the selflessness of persons, we achieve a state free of any fear whatsoever, which is the state of arhatship. So there is great benefit in realizing the selflessness of persons.

There are two aspects to the egolessness of self: The belief of self as a solid thing and the belief of “mine” which is what pertains to this self.

It’s easier to analyze the fixation on “mine,” because our definition of “mine” is constantly changing. Sometimes “mine” refers to what we own such as “my house.” Sometimes it’s much less than that as in “my body.” Sometimes it’s much greater than this as in “my country.” And there is no benefit in any of this identification with territory or possessions because it merely causes us suffering. For example, if you’re in a store that sells watches, and you see a watch fall off the counter, land on the ground and break, you will notice it, but you won’t particularly suffer as a result of it. But if an identical watch which you think of as “my watch” and falls off your wrist and falls on the ground and breaks, you suffer. You’ll think, “My watch is broken!” But if you look at the two watches, they’re physically identical. If you analyze your watch, you won’t find the “my” anywhere in it. All you’ll find is “watch.” So, that the “my” is a mental concept or a mental imputation which is unreal. Nevertheless we fixate so much on this concept of “mine” that we cause ourselves suffering.

Initially you come to recognize that what you call “mine,” does not exist. Then, on the basis of that, you come to recognize that even the self to which these things belong also does not exist. You can prove this to yourself, basically, by showing that which you call the self changes from minute to minute. For example, we talk about our bodies saying “my body.” Well, if your body belongs to you, then it is not you, it is a possession of you. By saying “my body,” it shows that at that moment you don’t think of the body as the self, but as a possession of the self.

### *Vipashyana Meditation in Mahamudra*

If that is true, then the self must be your mind. But in other moments you will say, “my mind today doesn’t feel good,” and so on. Well, if you can call this your mind, then your mind also is not the self. In which case, on that day the self must be the body. But you’ve already indicated that the body is a possession of the self, and not the self itself. And as well, the body is not a unit. You can break up the body. In discussion you can say, “my head,” “my hands,” and so on. So, none of these things are the self. They all belong to the self.

When you pursue this analysis exhaustively, you discover that there is no self aside from it being an imputation based on all of these things taken together as an aggregate. By mistakenly taking all of these things to be inherently unitary, we develop an attachment to this imputed self, we become aggressive in order to defend it, and we develop disinterest towards that which doesn’t seem to affect the self. And all of this, of course, leads to all of the suffering of samsara. If you realize that there is no self, you will have no fear and no suffering, and will be in a state of extreme tranquillity and happiness. And it’s for that reason that the Buddha first taught how to meditate upon the egolessness of persons.

The Buddha’s early students practiced this, and innumerable numbers of them became arhats. But is not enough because beyond that, there is more to be realized. Beyond this is called either the egolessness of phenomena, or emptiness. And this was presented by the Buddha when he taught the *Prajnaparamita*.

### EMPTINESS

Emptiness usually brings to mind an image of nothingness, which we think of as an undesirable state. But in fact emptiness does not mean nothingness. It means that all of these appearances to which we cling and fixate on, are in themselves without any substantial existence. The problem we face with appearances and all of the suffering we experience as a result of appearances is not because of the appearances themselves, but because of our fixation upon them. It is our fixation upon appearances which turns appearances into our enemies. Because these appearances are just appearances, they are just what

appears to us; so if we have no fixation on them, they will not bring any suffering. For example, as beautiful as a rainbow is, it never causes anyone to suffer, because we recognize that it is utterly insubstantial, and so we don't fixate on it. Another analogy is the reflection of the moon in a still body of water. We do not want to possess that image in the body of water because we recognize it as insubstantial. In the same way all of the appearances that arise to us are empty in their nature. But failing to recognize that, and taking them as substantially existent, as they appear to be, we turn our own appearances, or our own experiences, into our enemies. But if we recognize appearances as being what they are, they will not harm us. Now, this is not pretending that things or phenomena don't have substantial existence. It is recognizing that the nature of things is emptiness, and that if we recognize it, we can directly experience it.

When we think about emptiness we're apt to think of it as something that is very far away from us, in the sense that it is something we can only realize after a very long period of meditation. It seems emptiness is the ultimate result of that path, simply because when we look at things they seem so solid to us. But emptiness can be directly realized through the practice of meditation, and it can be understood through logical analysis. For that reason the Buddha taught emptiness in two ways: the path of the sutras, and the path of tantra, or Vajrayana.

In the sutra path one engages in inferential valid cognition, or logical analysis, in order to prove that emptiness is the nature of things. And by doing so one generates a conceptual certainty of this. In the Vajrayana approach, on the other hand, through meditation, one develops a direct experience of emptiness, which leads to the full realization of it. The presentation according to the sutras leads to a clear understanding, so I'll explain that first, before we discuss the actual practice of emptiness according to the Vajrayana.

#### THE ANALYTICAL ANALYSIS OF EMPTINESS

According to the sutras, emptiness means interdependence, which is simply that nothing exists independent of other things. Nagarjuna composed a great many treatises, and in them are

many proofs of emptiness, but the easiest to understand and the most all-encompassing is what is called the great argument of interdependence, which is simply that things exist only as interdependent appearances.

A very simple example of this which I use in order to explain it is of the physical imputations of long and short. Now, these things seem real to us. If I hold up a 4-inch and a 6-inch stick of incense, everyone can tell the difference between a longer stick of incense and a shorter one. Therefore the greater length of the one and the lesser length of the other seem like they are characteristics inherent in the objects themselves. So when you look at these two sticks of incense, you would agree that the 6-inch is long and the 4-inch stick is short. But if I exchange the 6-inch stick with a 2-inch stick, the stick of incense we were calling the short one has become the long one. And the other one, which is even shorter than the formerly short one, is now just the short one. The point of this is that all of our imputations about the substantial characteristics of things are relative to the appearance of substantial characteristics of other things.

So long and short are relative imputations. They have no inherent existence, nor are they part of an inherent identity on the part of the objects themselves. This is true of many other concepts as well: great and small, pleasant and unpleasant, self and other, here and there, and so on. All of these are relative imputations. These things do not exist in and of themselves. Rather we create them with our mind.

Now you might respond to that by saying, “Well, that may be true for some of our comparative concepts, but there are some things that we experience that are just simply physically real.” Take my hand as an example. We would agree that my hand is what I would conventionally call my hand, and no doubt all of you can look at my hand and agree that it is my hand. But “hand” doesn’t exist. There are five fingers there, there is flesh, there are bones, and so on, and all of these things together, considered as a unit but not really existing as a unit are what I call “hand.” We might say, “Well, a ‘hand’ is defined as a collection of fingers.” But if I take any one part of the hand, for example, my forefinger, then I have to say it has three joints and it’s made up of flesh and bone, and nerves and muscles, and so

on, but forefinger doesn't exist either. And you can do this with anything that you take to be an inherently unitary phenomenon. For example, my left hand, my right hand, my left foot, my right foot, my head, and so on. None of these things have unitary existence. They are aggregates, a grouping of many things that we fixate on as a unit because of a concept that we have developed about that aggregate. But nevertheless, it is this fixation on aggregates as units that produces the sufferings of samsara and all of our fear. If we recognize the emptiness of these aggregates, there will be no fear or suffering.

It is for this reason that the Buddha in teaching the *dharani* of the *Prajnaparamita* explains it the way he did, of GATE, GATE, PARAGATE, PARASAMGATE, BODHI SWAHA. *Gate* means "to go," and *paragate* means "to go beyond," to go to the other side of something. And *parasamgate* means "to completely go beyond," or to completely go to the other side of something. So the Buddha is saying that in the realization of emptiness, the emptiness of all things, one has completely gone beyond, or transcended the causes, and therefore the results of samsara, and reached a state of abiding tranquillity. That state is itself enlightenment or awakening, and therefore the dharani ends *bodhi swaha*, meaning that this is the actual attainment of awakening, removal of all defects and the full ripening of all qualities.

#### THE UNCOMMON INSTRUCTIONS

The realization of egolessness of self and phenomena is peace, which means it is a state of happiness beyond suffering. But the cultivation of this conventionally involves the development and affirmation of a logical certainty that emptiness or selflessness is the nature of things. It involves logically proving this. But this is a conceptual certainty, not direct experience. However, if it is cultivated, it will eventually lead to awakening, or Buddhahood. But because one is attempting to strengthen a conceptual certainty, and because it is somewhat indirect, it was taught by the Buddha that the path of the sutras takes three periods of innumerable eons during which one must ceaselessly gather the accumulations in order to attain Buddhahood.

## *Vipashyana Meditation in Mahamudra*

Now the accumulation of virtue was taught by the Buddha, but elsewhere the Buddha taught that the Vajrayana path can lead to that same Buddhahood in one lifetime. Well, one might ask if the Vajrayana path can lead to Buddhahood in one lifetime, what is all this about gathering the accumulations for three periods of innumerable eons? And if we need to gather the accumulations for three periods of innumerable eons, what is this business in Vajrayana about attaining Buddhahood in one lifetime in one body?

In fact both are true. The reason that the path of the sutras takes so long is that there are no direct or practical instructions in the sutras for cultivating the direct experience of emptiness, whereas in the Vajrayana there are these uncommon instructions for gaining direct experience.

For example, the biography of Milarepa tells of an occasion in which his disciples came and said to him, “Judging by the way you were extraordinarily diligent in the beginning of your practice of Buddha-dharma, and by your attainment—your miraculous abilities, your super-cognition, and so on—it seems evident that you are the emanation of a buddha or bodhisattva. Would you please tell us which buddha or bodhisattva you are? Telling us this will increase our devotion.”

In response Milarepa answered, “Your thinking that I am the emanation of a buddha or bodhisattva is an indication of your great devotion for me. But it also indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the dharma, because I am not the emanation of a Buddha or bodhisattva. I began this path as an ordinary being, in fact, I was an evildoer. Yet by meeting an authentic teacher, Marpa, and receiving authentic instructions, those of Mahamudra and the *Six Yogas of Naropa*, I was able to attain this result. The fact that I attained this is not due to my having been special from the beginning. It is due only to the special qualities of the dharma that I practiced. So your asking this question indicates that you do not yet understand the power of dharma, because the instructions of Vajrayana can bring the state of *Vajradhara* in one lifetime and one body.”

What are these extraordinary instructions of the Vajrayana? Essentially the concept of emptiness in the Vajrayana is the same as that taught by the Buddha in the sutras. The only difference is

*An Introduction to Mahamudra Meditation*

the method which is used in the Vajrayana. In the Vajrayana method of Mahamudra we do not worry about external appearances because external appearances, such as mountains and buildings are not our problem, nor do they particularly help us. In fact, they are empty as is logically proven in the sutras, but we don't meditate on them. Nor do we particularly meditate upon the emptiness or insubstantiality of the body.

In the Vajrayana we meditate upon that which is most important, which is the nature of our mind because it is the mind that creates pleasure and pain, it is the mind that gives rise to experience, it is the mind that experiences everything. It is the mind that generates disturbing emotions, it is the mind that generates faith and devotion. So the mind is most important. Therefore in Vajrayana, in the practice of Mahamudra, we look at the nature of mind rather than attempting to look at the nature of appearances.

Another reason for directly looking at mind is that it is very difficult to experience the emptiness of external appearances, but it is not difficult to directly experience the emptiness of the mind. The mind has always been obviously empty, but it is just that we've never looked at it. So, because the nature of the mind is easier to recognize and more beneficial to realize, it is the object of meditation in Mahamudra.

LOOKING AT THE MIND

To discover the emptiness of mind, you begin by taking the Seven Dharmas of Vairocana posture. You begin by practicing Shamatha, which is to say you let thoughts dissolve until finally your mind comes to rest, and you experience stillness. Now, even in the midst of stillness, your mind still has a cognitive capacity, it still has awareness, so you will recognize the stillness. You will actually experience it, and that is the state of Shamatha. Then you look to see exactly what this stillness consists of, that is, what it means to say my mind is at rest. If you look, then the clarity or lucidity that is there will emerge. And you can experience what your mind is, and what your mind is like, and what your mind is doing, without needing to infer by deduction. Because you can simply, directly experience your

own mind, nothing about it has to be deduced or inferred in any way.

So within that state of Shamatha, you look at your mind, and you look to try to see what is resting. By saying your mind is at rest, we mean that it is free of thought. If the mind has some kind of substantial existence; then it must be at rest in some particular way in some particular location. If the mind is something, then it will be at rest somewhere. For example, if a car is parked, we can say this car is parked in this place.

But when your mind is at rest or parked, you can't find it anywhere. You don't find anything placed anywhere. Even if you try to go through the parts of your body to find where your mind is located, or where your mind is at rest when you're not thinking, you won't find it, no matter how finely you divide your body. And if you try to find the substantial characteristics of the mind, such as a color or shape, or even if it lacks those—some kind of evidence of substantial existence—you won't find anything. Now substance, for example a car, has all sorts of definite characteristics. The car could be parked facing east or west, or it could be parked wrong sticking out in the middle of the street. Nevertheless, even though your mind is somehow parked, your mind is still, you don't find it anywhere. It doesn't point anywhere. It doesn't rest anywhere. And yet, your mind is at rest, and you can experience that. This indicates that the nature of your mind is emptiness. The nature of the rest, is also emptiness; and the location of your mind at rest, is also emptiness.

In that way, when you meditate on the nature of your mind, you don't find the mind anywhere. Not finding anything, you initially think that you have somehow failed. Either you misunderstood how to look, or you just haven't looked enough. But in fact this is not true. The reason you didn't find anything is that the nature of your mind is utter insubstantiality, which is why, according to the Buddha, it is empty. To thoroughly comprehend this emptiness, we need to experience this directly in meditation.

The emptiness of mind is not nothingness like empty space which is a mere absence of substance. The mind's emptiness is not a mere absence of substance, but it is a vast openness, which

*An Introduction to Mahamudra Meditation*

means that while the mind is empty of substance, the mind still knows and experiences. While the mind experiences, it knows, it is empty. Although it is empty, it experiences. Therefore, the way the mind exists is often referred to as the *unity of luminosity and emptiness*, which is to say simply that the mind can know, and yet is empty. As this innate luminosity (which is the defining characteristic of mind) increases through the practice of meditation, it eventually becomes wisdom, and finally it becomes *wisdom of the true nature of phenomena* and the *wisdom of the variety of phenomena*. But the nature of this wisdom itself is emptiness. Therefore the nature of mind is also called the unity of emptiness and wisdom. So emptiness is not a voidness like the voidness of space.

LOOKING AT THOUGHTS

When you meditate on mind's true nature or essence, you will discover the nature of your own mind. But while this is going on, thoughts will continue to arise: positive thoughts, negative thoughts, and neutral thoughts. When these thoughts arise, you will think that something has gone wrong with your meditation. But rather than rejecting a thought and attempting to suppress it in some way, simply look at the nature of the thought, looking directly at the thought itself and try to see where the thought has come from. Has this thought arisen within your body or outside the body, and if so exactly where? Then look at the substance of the thought: Does it have a color or a shape? Then look at its content: Does the thought have a particular style of attachment, or anger, or faith, or devotion? But does the thought have substance? Does thought have a location or a substance so it won't be hidden from you? But when you look for the location and substance of thought, you don't find anything. Even when you look to see how the thought arose, you can't say that the thought arose gradually or suddenly. You don't find anything at all.

Although we tend to regard thoughts as a problem for meditation, they are not a problem in and of themselves, because their nature is the same as the nature of mind. Their nature is that same emptiness: that absence of location, or origination, or

### *Vipashyana Meditation in Mahamudra*

substance. Therefore thoughts in themselves are not inherently harmful.

While we are doing this, it often seems as though our mind and thoughts are two entirely different things. But if we look at them directly, we'll see that they have exactly the same nature. As long as we regard them as different and want our mind to be at a state of stillness, free from thoughts, the thoughts will actually obstruct the practice of meditation. But once we recognize that thoughts and mind have the same nature, we see that this is no longer the case.

While we often tend to feel that we need to get rid of thoughts, as though thoughts are thieves, or our enemies, in fact thoughts are not a problem. When we are meditating and a thought arises, if we look at its nature, we see its nature, which is the nature of our mind. And if a thought does not arise, and we look directly at the nature of our mind, we see that same nature. So the arising or non-arising of thought is not an issue in the practice of Vipashyana meditation.

This is really the difference between Shamatha and Vipashyana. With Vipashyana there is an intelligence or prajna present, which is the recognition in direct experience of this nature of mind. That recognition is itself Vipashyana. Therefore the meditation on egolessness of self that was taught by the Buddha really comes down to this.

When we determine with direct experience that the mind has no substantial characteristics, we then lose our incorrect belief of a self. All the benefits which result from meditation on emptiness come from this. The emptiness on which we meditate is not something far away or something requiring great theory or logic. It is the insubstantiality of our own mind. When we look at our mind, we discover using with direct experience that there is no substantial entity to be apprehended, and that is the direct experience of emptiness. So the benefits of the meditation upon egolessness of a self, and meditation upon emptiness taught by the Buddha really come from recognition of, and meditation on, the nature of our mind.

In addition to meditation on the nature of the mind, we also perform the other practice of Vajrayana, which is called the *generation stage*. This is the visualization of the various deities, such as Avalokiteshvara or Tara is called *yidam* practice. Sometimes we visualize these deities in front of ourselves as objects to supplicate with faith and devotion and sometimes we visualize ourselves as being the deity.

In the beginning meditation on a deity may seem somewhat strange. Generating a clear visualization of the form and color, costume and scepters of a deity seems to be not only difficult, but may seem basically pointless. In fact it is not pointless at all. It is very useful. And that is why Vajrayana consists of what are called the two stages: the generation stage, which is meditation upon deities, and the *completion stage*, which is meditation upon the nature of mind.

In general the practice of Shamatha consists simply of trying to keep your mind undistracted, and this is very difficult. But as you cultivate the practice of the generation stage, your mind is kept undistracted by having to visualize the color, the scepters, the costume, and so on, of the deity. This brings your mind to rest, which enhances your practice of Shamatha.

The function of the generation stage is to change our outlook or perception. Normally we live in a world of our own impure perception and we generate an impure outlook. In the practice of the generation stage, we learn to perceive the world, our body, and our mind as pure. Now if things were really inherently impure, then trying to see the world as pure would have no function. But because things are in their nature fundamentally pure, visualizing the world as pure is productive. By seeing our body as the yidam, by seeing our mind as the wisdom of the yidam, by inviting the actual *jnanasattva*, or wisdom deity itself to abide within us, we come to gradually experience the inherent purity of phenomena. In fact, this is the best way to do so. So, in the Vajrayana tradition we do the generation stage practices, which involve visualizing ourselves as deities, and in some practices visualizing them in front of us.

### *Vipashyana Meditation in Mahamudra*

For this reason the meditation on the generation stage of the yidams is very beneficial and important. Nevertheless beginners tend to see the value of Shamatha and Vipashyana, but they don't see the value of the generation stage practice simply because it seems to be some kind of pretense. This attitude on the part of beginners is not particularly ignorant but it's actually an intelligent attitude, because the generation stage does look like pretending to be something other than you are. Pretending to be a deity appears to be futile, but in fact it is very useful and appropriate because our fundamental nature is what we call Buddha-nature. So we have within us this innate potential for experiencing a pure world and pure appearances. The reason we don't normally perceive this world as pure is that we are obscured by our disturbing emotions. Nevertheless, if this innate potential is cultivated, pure appearances will definitely be an object of our own direct experience. Therefore, these visualizations of the palaces and forms of deities are very useful and appropriate.

There are differences among individuals with regard to their subtle channels and so forth, and therefore for some people these visualizations become very clear very quickly, while for others, they do not. Of course, if one has a clear visualization, that is excellent; but if one doesn't, it's not something to worry about. Any visualization is a simulation of visual experience that is performed by the sixth consciousness, the mental consciousness. As a simulation, it is basically an abstraction of visual experience and it is not going to be as clear as physically seeing an object. But as one's mind, one's sixth consciousness becomes more and more used to the act of visualization, it will become clearer. And so how much benefit one gets out of one's visualization is not based on how clear one's visualization is.

## **Glossary**

*We try to include a Glossary of technical terms in all of Thrangu Rinpoche's works to help those who may not be very familiar with Buddhist terminology.*

**alaya consciousness** According to the Chittamatra or Yogacara school this is the eighth consciousness and is often called the ground consciousness or store-house consciousness because it stores residual latencies (Tib. *bag chag*) of sensory experiences.

**bardo** (Tib.) Literally, bardo means “between the two.” There are six kinds of bardos, but here it refers to the time between death and a rebirth in a new body.

**bodhichitta** Literally, the mind of enlightenment. There are two kinds of bodhichitta: absolute bodhichitta, which is completely awakened mind that sees the emptiness of phenomena, and relative bodhichitta which is the aspiration to practice the six paramitas and free all beings from the suffering of samsara.

**Buddha-nature** (Skt. *tathagatagarbha*) The original nature present in all beings which when realized leads to enlightenment. It is often called the essence of Buddhahood or enlightened essence.

**Buddha-dharma** The teachings of the Buddha.

**clarity** (Tib. *selwa*) Also translated as luminosity. The nature of mind is that it is empty of inherent existence, but the mind is not just voidness, completely empty because it has this clarity which is awareness or the knowing of mind. So clarity is a characteristic of emptiness (*shunyata*) of mind.

**completion stage** In the Vajrayana there are two stages of meditation: the development and the completion stage. The completion stage is a method of tantric meditation in which one attains bliss, clarity, and non-thought by means of the subtle channels and energies within the body.

**consciousnesses, sensory** These are the five sensory consciousnesses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and body sensation.

**consciousnesses, eight** These are the five sensory consciousnesses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and body sensation. Sixth is mental consciousness, seventh is afflicted consciousness, and eighth is ground consciousness.

**dharmata** Dharmata is often translated as “suchness” or “the true nature of things” or “things as they are.” It is phenomena as it really is or as seen by a completely enlightened being without any distortion or obscuration so one can say it is “reality.”

## The Glossary

**disturbing emotion** ( Skt. *klesha*, Tib. *nyön mong*) The emotional obscurations (in contrast to intellectual obscurations) which are also translated as “afflictions” or “poisons.” The three main kleshas are (passion or attachment), (aggression or anger); and (ignorance or delusion). The five kleshas are the three above plus pride and (envy or jealousy).

**egolessness or selflessness of person** This doctrine asserts that when one examines or looks for the person, one finds that it is empty. The person does not possess a self (Skt. *atman*, Tib. *bdag-nyid*) as an independent or substantial self. This position is held by most Buddhist schools.

**egolessness or selflessness of phenomena** This doctrine asserts that not only is there selflessness of person, but when one examines out phenomena, one finds that this external phenomena is also empty, i. e. it does not have an independent or substantial nature. This position is not held by the Hinayana schools, but is put forth by the Mahayana schools, particularly the Chittamatra school.

**Eight consciousnesses** See consciousness, eight

**Emptiness of phenomena** See egolessness of phenomena

**four ordinary foundations** This is meditation on the four thoughts that turn the mind towards dharma which are the precious human birth, impermanence, samsara, and karma.

**four special foundations** (Tib. *ngöndro*) These are the four *ngöndro* practices of doing about 100,000 each of taking of refuge with prostrations, doing Vajrasattva purification mantras, making mandala offering, and doing guru yoga supplication practice.

**generation stage** In the Vajrayana there are two stages of meditation: the development and the completion stage. This is a method of tantric meditation that involves visualization and contemplating deities for the purpose of realizing the purity of all phenomena. In this stage visualization of the deity is established and maintained.

**Karmapa** The title of seventeen successive incarnations of Dusum Khyenpa who heads the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.

**klesha** (Tib. *nyön mong*) The emotional obscurations (in contrast to intellectual obscurations) which are also translated as “disturbing emotions” or “poisons.” The three main kleshas are (passion or attachment), (aggression or anger); and (ignorance or delusion). The five kleshas are the three above plus pride and (envy or jealousy).

**klesha consciousness** (Tib. *nyön yid*) The seventh of the eight consciousnesses. See consciousnesses, eight.

**Lucidity** see clarity

**mahasiddha** A practitioner who has a great deal of realization. These were particularly Vajrayana practitioners who lived in India between the eighth and twelfth century and practiced tantra. The biography of some of the most famous is found in *The Eighty-four Mahasiddhas*.

**Milarepa** (1040-1123 C.E.) Milarepa was a student of Marpa who attained enlightenment in one lifetime. His student Gampopa founded the (Dagpo) Kagyu lineage.

**Nagarjuna** An Indian scholar in the second century who founded the Madhyamaka philosophical school which emphasized

**nirvana** Literally, “extinguished.” Individuals live in samsara and with spiritual practice can attain a state of enlightenment in which all false ideas and conflicting emotions have been extinguished. This is called nirvana.

**Prajnaparamita** The Buddhist literature outlining the Mahayana path and emptiness written mostly around the second century.

**samsara** Conditioned existence of ordinary life in which suffering occurs because one still possesses attachment, aggression, and ignorance. It is contrasted to nirvana.

**salwa** Tibetan for luminosity. In the Vajrayana everything is void, but this voidness is not completely empty because it has luminosity. Luminosity or clarity allows all phenomena to appear and is a characteristic of emptiness (shunyata).

**Saraha** One of the eighty-four mahasiddhas of India who was known for his spiritual songs about Mahamudra.

**Selflessness** Another word for egolessness of person. See egolessness of person.

**Shamatha** or tranquillity meditation (Tib. *shinay*) This is basic sitting meditation in which one usually follows the breath while observing the workings of the mind while sitting in the cross-legged posture. The main purpose of Shamatha meditation is to settle or tame the mind so that it will stay where one places it.

**Six consciousnesses** See consciousnesses, eight

**six yogas of Naropa** These six special yogic practices were transmitted from Naropa to Marpa and consist of the subtle heat practice, the illusory body practice, the dream yoga practice, the luminosity practice, the ejection of consciousness practice, and the bardo practice.

**six yogas of Naropa** These six special yogic practices were transmitted from Naropa to Marpa and consist of the subtle heat practice, the illusory body practice, the dream yoga practice, the luminosity practice, the ejection of consciousness practice, and the bardo practice.

## *The Glossary*

- subtle channels** (Skt. *nadi*, Tib. *tsa*) These refer to the subtle channels which are not anatomical ones but ones in which psychic energies or “winds” (Skt. *prana*, Tib. *lung*) travel.
- sutra** These are the Hinayana and Mahayana texts which are the words of the Buddha. These are often contrasted with the tantras which are the Buddha’s Vajrayana teachings and the shastras which are commentaries on the words of the Buddha.
- Tilopa** (928-1009 C.E.) One of the eighty-four mahasiddhas who became the guru of Naropa who transmitted his teachings to the Kagyu lineage in Tibet.
- Vajradhara** (Tib. *Dorje Chang*) The name of the dharmakaya Buddha. Many of the teachings of the Kagyu lineage came from Vajradhara.
- Vajrayana** There are three major traditions of Buddhism (Hinayana, Mahayana, Vajrayana) The Vajrayana is based on the tantras and emphasizes the clarity aspect of phenomena and is mainly practiced in Tibet.
- Vipashyana meditation** Sanskrit for “insight meditation” This meditation develops insight into the nature of reality (Skt. *dharmata*). The other main meditation is Shamatha meditation.
- wish-fulfilling jewel** A jewel said to exist in the naga or deva realms which gave the owner whatever he or she wanted. Now used mostly metaphorically.
- yidam** (Tib.) A tantric deity that embodies qualities of Buddhahood and is practiced in the Vajrayana. Also called a tutelary deity.
- yidam meditation** (Tib.) A tantric deity that embodies qualities of Buddhahood and is practiced in the Vajrayana. Yidam meditation is the Vajrayana practices that use the visualization of a yidam.

## **Notes**

1. In Tibetan Buddhism there are subtle channels (Tib. *tsa*) which are like meridians in acupuncture. These channels are not anatomical, but through these go “winds” or energy that do various functions such as aiding in digestion and in thinking.
2. These are often called the four ngondro practices and they involve doing about 100,000 prostrations to the lineage tree, 100,000 Vajrasattva mantras for purification of negative karma, 100,000 mandala offerings to develop generosity, and 100,000 guru yogas which involves supplicating the guru.
3. What Thrangu Rinpoche is describing here is a very gentle form of vase breathing which dispels the “old” air. Vase breathing generally refers to a yogic practice in which one inhales a breath very deeply and tries to hold this breath below the diaphragm so that it can enter the central subtle channel. This latter practice should only be done under the close supervision of a guru.
4. Clarity also called luminosity as used here refers to the Tibetan *salwa* which is not mental clarity such as having a clear mind, but rather it refers to the active, thinking, aware quality of the mind. Even though the mind is empty, the emptiness of mind has this thinking quality which makes it different from the emptiness of, for example, space.
5. There are eight consciousnesses in the Mind-only school of Buddhism and this consciousness has two main functions. First it is a store-house of all the karmic or latent imprints so that if one does something positive, it leads to good thoughts and events, and if one does something negative, it leads to bad thoughts and outcomes. The second aspect is that this consciousness hold together all the other seven consciousnesses so it is a kind of unifying force for the mind which is made up of many smaller parts. This whole area is described in detail in Thrangu Rinpoche’s *Transcending Ego: Distinguishing Consciousness from Wisdom* (Namo Buddha Publications, 2001).