

# What is Mahāmudrā

## Traleg Rinpoche

The Mahāmudrā tradition encompasses many key Buddhist terms and presents them in a unique light. The Sanskrit word *mahāmudrā* literally translates as “great seal,” or “great symbol,” which suggests that all that exists in the conditioned world is stamped with the same seal, the seal of ultimate reality. Ultimate reality is synonymous with the quintessential Buddhist term *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*), which describes the insubstantiality of all things—the underlying groundlessness, spaciousness, and indeterminacy that imbues all of our experiences of the subjective and objective world. In the Kagyü tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, the word *mahāmudrā* is also used to refer to the nature of the mind. The nature of the mind is a pivotal concept in this tradition. The essential quality of the mind is emptiness, but it is described as a luminous emptiness, for the mind has the inherent capacity to know, or to cognize. When spiritual fulfillment is attained, this luminous emptiness is experienced as pervasively and profoundly blissful, and enlightenment is characterized as luminous bliss.

The Tibetan term for Mahāmudrā is *chag gya chen po*. The word *chag* denotes wisdom; *gya* implies that this wisdom transcends mental defilement; and *chen po* verifies that together they express a sense of unity. At a more profound level of interpretation, *chag gya* suggests that <4> our natural state of being has no origin, because we cannot posit a particular time when it came into being, nor can we say what caused it to come into existence or what it is dependent upon. Our natural state of being is self-sustaining, self-existing, and not dependent upon anything. It was Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (1079–1153), the founder of the Tibetan Kagyü school, who coined this expression for the meditative approach of Mahāmudrā. He defined it in these words:

*Chag* is the intuitive understanding that all that appears and is possible, Samsara and Nirvana, do not go beyond the sphere of the ultimate which is unoriginated.

*rGya* means that all that appears as something and can become something does not go beyond that which alone is genuine.

*Chen pa* means that this happens because of the intuitive understanding that the ultimate is free in itself.<sup>1</sup>

Mahāmudrā is also associated with the concept of nonduality, which refers to the possibility that samsara and nirvana can be experienced in a nondual way without denying the relative existence of either. As Saraha, the eighth century Indian master who is credited with being the actual originator of the Mahāmudrā tradition, states in his *Song to the People*, “As is Nirvana, so is Samsara. Do not think there is any distinction. Yet it possesses no single nature, For I know it as quite pure.”<sup>2</sup> *This is because samsara and nirvana emerge together from emptiness. When the term nonduality is used in the context of Mahāmudrā experience, it does not suggest that two things come together as one; it implies that two seemingly opposite things have the same underlying nature—the nature of emptiness. Mahāmudrā is therefore a “seal” in the sense that it transcends all dualistic concepts and encompasses both samsara and nirvana. As such, it cannot be limited to any philosophical view.*

Mahāmudrā, then, refers to reality itself and encompasses all opposites, because within it everything exists in its own perfection. Whatever experiences we have in terms of virtue and vice, happiness and unhappiness, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, subject and object, being and nonbeing are inseparable within the realm of emptiness. Emptiness can be compared with space, because space does not discriminate between things that are repellent and things that are enticing; space accommodates everything. This is also the nature of the mind. Again Saraha explains: <5>

*Space is designated as empty,*

*Yet its exact nature cannot be verbalized.*

*Similarly the mind is designated as luminously clear,*

*Yet its exact nature is empty, with no ground for definition.*

*Thus the self-nature of mind is and has been*

*From the very beginning like that of space.<sup>3</sup>*

### **The Origins of the Kagyü Mahāmudrā Tradition**

Mahāmudrā is a specific practice of Tibetan Buddhism, a practice inherited from its forebears, the *mahasiddhas* (*maha* denotes “great” and *siddha* denotes “saint” or “adept”) of India, such as Saraha, Savaripa (eighth century), Tilopa (988-1069), and Maitripa (1010-1087). Although other Tibetan Buddhist schools always practice Mahāmudrā in Conjunction with Tantrism, in the Kagyü tradition it is treated as a separate path to

enlightenment, one that in fact transcends tantric methods and techniques, emphasizing the concept of self-liberation as opposed to the tantric idea of self-transformation. This tradition is unique to the Kagyü school.

The distinction between the Mahāmudrā of the Kagyü school and the tantric practices of the other Tibetan schools is not well understood by Western Buddhists. It may be useful to provide a brief overview of the historical context of Tantrism in Buddhist thought. The Buddha lived and taught in the fourth century BCE, and his doctrine of individual salvation predominated in Indian Buddhist spiritual life until the first century CE, when the doctrines of the Mahayana began to supersede them. Tantrism was not yet on the scene, arriving later in northeast and northwest India from around the fifth century onward.

The Mahayana movement was fueled by an altruistic ideal that transformed the Buddhist goal of individual salvation into a spiritual vision that embraced the welfare of all beings. It began somewhere around 200 BCE in India and emphasized the two related virtues of compassion (*karuna*) and wisdom (*prajna*). The Mahayana vision was innovative on a number of fronts: its inclusion of the laity; its expanded concept of enlightenment into something that transcends both samsara and nirvana (rather than positing it *as* nirvana, in opposition to samsara); its emphasis on the notions of emptiness, compassion, and skillful means; and its detailed exposition of the paths and stages of the bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is a being (*sattva*) who develops greater and greater enlightened qualities (*badhi*) as a result of his or her increasingly selfless ability to benefit all beings.

Mahayana ideas were based upon a number of newly emerging texts, some of which are collectively known as the *Prajnaparamita* (transcendental actions of wisdom) sutras, along with other key sutras such as the *Ga;idhavyulia-sutra*, *Sarnad/urajasuiva*, and *Laiikavatarasuira*. These in turn gave rise to the philosophical schools of Madhyamika and Yogachara (the Yogachara also drawing on sutras related to the subject of *tataghatagarba*, or buddha-nature, of which more will be said in chapter 7). These philosophical schools were founded by Mahayana masters such as Nagarjuna (ca. 100-250 CE), Aryadeva (ca. third century), Asanga (ca. fourth century), Vasubandhu (ca. 330-400), and Chandrakirti (ca. seventh century). These developments took place within a predominantly monastic culture, eventually giving rise to a Buddhist orthodoxy increasingly intent on maintaining and defending the established doctrine. Huge monastic universities were established for devotional practices and the study and dissemination of Buddhist ideas.

A lay movement, largely meditative in focus, was quietly emerging alongside the monastic culture. It combined a unique system of yogic techniques with Buddhist ideas in order to effect the transformation of the practitioner's body, speech, and mind from those of an ordinary being to those of a buddha. The texts of this movement were known as

tantras, a term that expresses the idea of a continuity of enlightened qualities as somewhat present in beings already, in potential form, rather than being brought about through linear causal development.

There was in fact a tantric tradition in both Buddhism and Hinduism in the first millennium of the common era. Tantra was controversial for its claim that adherents could attain enlightenment in a single lifetime, rather than the three measureless eons espoused by Mahayanists. It retained the Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva, however, and assimilated ideas from Madhyamaka and Yogachara as well as the idea of tathagatagarbha. In tantric Buddhism, adherents used their esoteric practices (*sadhana*) as an aid for acquiring enlightenment, not just to acquire supernatural abilities (*siddhi*). They used tantric practices to clear psychophysical blockages within the psychophysical energy system of the body. The ultimate goal, or culmination of their practice, was to realize the luminous bliss of the awakened mind.

The term *mahāmudrā* was used to describe the highest teachings of the Buddhist tantras that predominated in northwest India during the Pala period (750-1150). The practitioners of Tantra at the time, the mahasiddhas, were not monks and nuns but serious lay practitioners of both sexes and all castes (in open defiance of India's rigid caste system). Comprising some ex-monks, this lay tradition was easily distinguished by its unconventional methods of spiritual instruction, bohemian lifestyle, and critical dissension from the social conventions of its time. In the tantric system of Buddhism, the practitioner is known as a *sadhaka*, who then engages in the tantric practices known as *sadhana* in order to attain the tantric realizations known as supernatural abilities or *siddhis*. When these *siddhis* are attained, one becomes a *siddha*, and eventually a great *siddha*, or Mahasiddha. A detailed description of the great Indian *tantrikas* (practitioners of Tantra) can be found in the work of the renowned scholar Jonangpa Taranatha, who had a special connection to the Mahasiddha lineage. His work *The Seven Instruction Lineages (Kabab dunden)* has been masterfully translated and edited by David Templeman, who accounts for their lives with scholarly finesse, and Keith Dowman, who presents a condensed but colorful version of their period. The original *Lives of the Eighty-four Mahasiddhas* by Indian scholar Abhayadatta (ca. twelfth century), which has also been translated by James B. Robinson, depicts the *siddhas*, yogis, and yoginis as members of a nonmonastic, noncelibate movement. Abhayadatta lived some two hundred years after many of the figures portrayed in his book and, while modern scholars doubt the historical accuracy of his record, there is no doubt that such mahasiddhas did live in India and lived the kinds of lives that Abhayadatta describes.<sup>4</sup>

It seems that Tantra developed in India alongside orthodox monastic culture for many centuries before emerging as a popular form of Buddhism in the eighth century. Some modern historians surmise that Tantra became part of the Buddhist tradition just prior to the sixth century, because it was already established in some of the Hindu sects of India

by that time. Tibet's renowned seventeenth century historian, Jonang Taranatha, claims the tantras appeared shortly after the spread of the Mahayana teachings in India, becoming quite prevalent by the fifth century. 5 In any case, most of the major tantras had been revealed by the eighth and ninth centuries.

From about the eighth century onward, we start to see numerous examples of Indian mahasiddhas repudiating traditional tantric methods and advocating instead a direct perception of the nature of the mind as the quintessential method for realizing enlightenment. According to the well known Tibetan author and translator Go Lotsawa (ca. 1392-481), "the great brahman Saraha was the first to introduce the Mahamudra as the chief of all paths" Takpo Tashi Namgyal (ca. 112-1587), another prolific Tibetan master from the Kagyü tradition, records that siddhas such as Saraha, Savaripa, Tilopa, and Maitripa did not follow conventional tantric practices. Discussing Maitripa, he states:

Maitripa, also, having been dissatisfied with his proficient knowledge of the sutras and tantras followed [the mystic teacher] avarivara and received the illuminating instructions on the quintessential great seal, which was not based on the tantric teachings. Maitripa then achieved spiritual liberation.'

*The situation arose where some mahasiddhas continued to promote Mahamudra as the apex of tantric practices and conventions, while others, such as Saraha and Maitripa, began to disassociate themselves and their Mahāmudrā teachings from Tantrism. Saraha decisively criticizes the tantric path in his dohas (songs) claiming, "Mantra and Tantra, meditation and concentration, they are all a cause of self-deception." He criticizes monastic Buddhism for perpetuating endless doctrinal disputes, and tantric practitioners for further binding themselves to subtle fixations and dualistic concepts with their methods. He maintained that enlightenment can be more readily obtained by simply resting in the nature of the mind. In another doha, Saraha says this of Mahainudra:*

**It is empty of any mandala. Empty of devotees who make burned offerings, Detached from any mantras, mudras, and the visualization of deities. It cannot be realized through tantras and shastras. This indestructible awareness, which is our own natural state of being, is perfect in its natural state.**

A synopsis of this historical evolution of Mahāmudrā in relation to the Kagyü tradition may be more useful here. The Kagyü tradition was founded by Marpa the Translator (ca. 1012-1097), a student of the Indian tantric mahasiddha Naropa (ca. 1016-1100), who had attained enlightenment with his guru Tilopa. The Mahāmudrā tradition that Marpa

inherited was systematized and made popular by Gampopa, a student of the famous Tibetan yogi-poet Milarepa (ca.1040-1123).

It was not until the eleventh and twelfth centuries that Mahāmudrā doctrine attained a distinct position within the Kagyü school, after Gampopa formally introduced the approach into the mainstream Buddhist practices of his lineage. For even though Marpa had received the Mahāmudrā teachings on the nature of the mind from his gurus Naropa and Maitripa, he also received and transmitted all the tantric teachings from the Indian mahasiddha tradition and passed them on in turn to his student Milarepa. Milarepa too taught Mahāmudrā mainly in relation to tantric practices. It was only Gampopa, toward the end of his life, who began to emphasize a practice of Mahāmudra independent of tantric practices and empowerments that became a separate practice unto itself. As Takpo Tashi Namgyal explains in his famous Mahāmudrā manual:

The teachers of this meditational lineage up to Milarepa meditated mainly on the key instructions of the Mantrayāna mysticism [Tantra] while at various times incorporating vital instructions on mahāmudrā from the discourses on the yogas of inner heat and lucid awareness tantric practices]. Yet, the great master Gampopa, having been moved by immeasurable compassion, expounded mainly on the quintessential instructions on Mahāmudra. As a result it became widely known as the single path for all predestined seekers.

Go Lotsawa also mentions that, prior to Gampopa, the Mahāmudra teachings were exclusively given as a highly secret instruction to practitioners who had received tantric initiation. Gampopa was revolutionary in this matter as well. Not only did he extract the Mahāmudrā practice as a self-sufficient doctrine; he also significantly liberalized its dispersion by giving instructions outside of the tantric environment. While Milarepa did not teach Mahāmudrā separate from the tantric teachings, Gampopa began to give tantric initiations to select students and Mahāmudrā teachings to all the rest without giving them tantric initiations. He thus initiated a widespread practice of separating the Mahāmudrā cycle of teachings from their tantric origins.

Gampopa preferred to teach this simple, direct insight into the nature of the mind. At one point in the record of his teachings, he commented on his decision to give these normally secret teachings of Mahāmudra so freely. In a dialogue with his student Dusum Khyenpa, the first Karmapa (ulo-1193), Gampopa remarks:

“I have broken the command of my master by teaching Mahāmudra freely.”

“In what way?” inquired Dusum Khyenpa

“By expounding the teachings of Mahāmudrā to people.”

Then, on another occasion he remarked to the same student, “I have obeyed the command of my master Milarepa.”

“In what way is that?” inquired Dusum Khyenpa. “By devoting my entire life to practice,” came the response.<sup>7</sup>

Here Gampopa is acknowledging his teaching style to be very different from Milarepa’s, for Milarepa was deeply steeped in tantric teachings and practices. It is thanks to Milarepa’s perseverance that the advanced tantric practices of the Kagyü tradition are still preserved. At the same time, Gampopa felt people could learn to realize their true nature directly, through the use of the more simple methods of the Mahāmudrā teachings.

## DIFFERENT VEHICLES FOR THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Mahāmudrā meditation is a particular type of Buddhist practice, so it is important to know where it stands in relation to Buddhist teachings generally. The fundamental aim of Buddhist practice is to achieve enlightenment, to emulate the Buddha, who became known as “the awakened one,” or “the enlightened one.” Through our spiritual practice we aim to become more aware, conscious, and integrated. By so doing we are able to eradicate ignorance (*avidya*) and replace it with wisdom (*prajna*). Buddhist practice is about learning how to perceive ourselves in a genuine and authentic fashion so that we are no longer in conflict, with dark subconscious corners of the mind constantly acting on our conscious awareness and disturbing its peace. Everything that is going on in the mind has the potential to become conscious, so that nothing is hidden any more. Overcoming ignorance, then, is being able to perceive ourselves in a completely authentic fashion by removing the conflicting emotions of the mind. Buddhism offers a multitude of approaches to achieving this kind of liberation. Even the Buddha himself frequently varied his teachings in order to benefit people of different predispositions, interests, and needs. Consequently, it is impossible to derive any kind of fixed dogma from what the Buddha taught.

The Tibetan tradition usually divides the different historical and philosophical approaches to Buddhist practice into three vehicles (*yanas*). These are the Hinayana (small vehicle), the Mahayana (great vehicle), and the Vajrayana (indestructible vehicle). Sometimes a fourth vehicle is also included in Tibetan literature, as noted by some twentieth century Indian historians. This is the Sahajayana (the vehicle of coemergence). Sahaja literally denotes “being born (*ja*) together with (*stilia*)” and was applied to the teachings and dohas of many of the Indian mahasiddhas who are associated with the Indian Mahamudra lineage. Therefore the Mahamudra approach can also be described as the Sahajayana (the vehicle of sah,ja) as opposed to Tantrayana (the vehicle of Tantra). It

might be useful to use the notion of the Sahajayana here to emphasize that the Mahāmudrā teachings are a unique and separate vehicle in their own right.

*The Kagyü tradition extends this classification further by identifying four fundamental approaches to enlightenment: renunciation, purification, transformation, and self-liberation. Each approach corresponds to one of the four vehicles. The Hinayana corresponds to the approach of renunciation, the Mahayana to the approach of purification, the Vajrayana to the approach of transformation, and the Sahajayana (or Mahāmudrā) to the approach of self-liberation.*

*We shall add one further overarching typology to those above. All the Buddhist teachings can be divided into exoteric, esoteric, and mystical categories. In general terms, these three could be said to correspond respectively to codified orthodoxies, secret teachings given only to initiates, and mystical teachings that transcend the reference points of most worldly activities. The Hinayana and Mahayana fill into the general category of an exoteric approach, the Vajrayana (tantric) is the esoteric approach, and the Mahāmudrā tradition is the mystical approach. This schema of exoteric, esoteric, and mystical will be used throughout this book. The following descriptions provide a brief overview of this classification system.*

#### *Renunciation (Exoteric)*

The approach of renunciation is taken by the Hinayana teachings. It is important to bear in mind that while Hinayana denotes “small vehicle,” it does not refer to the Theravada tradition of early Buddhism. *Hinayana* is a term coined by Mahayana practitioners to refer to Buddhist schools that no longer survive in India or elsewhere. For the purposes of understanding the yana system, however, we can safely understand Hinayana to include the fundamental doctrines of the Buddha, including the Four Noble Truths, selflessness, dependent origination, karma and rebirth, and individual salvation within nirvana. When we are on this spiritual path, there are many things that we might notice within ourselves that we do not like, want, or need—excessive anger, excessive jealousy, extreme forms of selfishness, self-centeredness, violence, hatred, and so forth. In order to rid ourselves of these things, to displace them from our consciousness, we renounce them in favor of a more caring attitude.

#### *Purification (Exoteric)*

*The Mahayana teachings relate to negative mental states and emotions in a more open and accommodating manner, aiming to reconcile and purify these emotions rather than attempting the more aggressive eradication of the Hinayana approach. The main methods employed here are the practices of wisdom and compassion, two complementary qualities developed through cultivating the six transcendental actions*

*(paramitas) of generosity, patience, ethical conduct, perseverance, meditation, and wisdom. These actions help propel us along the bodhisattva paths and stages toward the ultimate goal of complete enlightenment.*

In this approach, we start by recognizing that we are subject to conflicting emotions. We then make an effort to deepen our insight into the nature of these emotions themselves. Instead of trying to escape from them, we begin to see that the nature of negative mental states is ultimately the same as the nature of the positive mental states we are trying to develop. In other words, we no longer think about things in a strictly dualistic fashion, regarding negative thoughts and emotions as intrinsically bad and positive thoughts and emotions as intrinsically good. From the point of view of ultimate reality, *there is no difference between the two states, because both are imbued with the same reality—the reality of emptiness. There is a difference between these two realities on the relative level; ignorance is not wisdom, and defilement is not liberating. Nonetheless, on a deeper level, ignorance and wisdom have the same underlying reality. It is this reality that we are trying to realize directly through the practices of compassionate action and through gaining meditative insight into emptiness.*

#### *Transformation (Esoteric)*

Transformation describes the Vajrayana or tantric approach that is the signal inheritance of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions. The main techniques and methods of this system are the visualization of deities, recitation of mantras, chanting, and various other rituals and physical gestures. What is emphasized here is the transformation of our defiling mental states and emotional conflicts. According to the tantric teachings, transformation occurs through learning to associate our psychic tendencies and states, like confusion for instance, with the visualization of peaceful deities, wrathful deities, and deities in sexual union. Through associating these negative habits with their enlightened counterparts, we are able to employ active imaginative processes to transform them into their opposite qualities. In this way, what was once disturbing to our minds becomes a source of liberation. As the *Hevajra Tantra* states, “*The things that bind us can actually be the source of liberation when we have the necessary skills.*”

Instead of thinking that liberation must come from a source other than our defiled minds, we come to recognize that the very things that afflict and torment us can be the source of our emancipation. Although strong emotions have the unmistakable and harmful effect of clouding our judgment and compelling us to act irrationally, it is not the emotions themselves that are the source of our mental anguish and pain. This pain itself has to be attributed to our lack of clear and distinct insight into the true nature of these emotions. To attain such insight, practitioners of Tantra will typically engage in visualization practices, psychophysical yogas, special breathing exercises, and so forth,

all of which are designed to transform the very emotions that harm us into transcendental wisdoms that can free and transform us.

### Self-Liberation (Mystical)

True Mahāmudrā practice is the approach of self-liberation. With this approach, we are not attempting to renounce, purify, or transform anything at all. Instead, the idea is to ***allow our negativities and conflicting emotions to become self-liberated. As long as we are trying to renounce, purify, or transform, we are trying to do or contrive something. This involves seeing ourselves as fundamentally flawed, because we have no control over our strong emotions. We feel if we are ever going to become a better human being and be spiritually redeemed, we must do everything in our power to dispose of these undesirable states of mind. In the Mahāmudrā view, by deliberately trying to eradicate conflicting emotions, the source of our conflicting emotions, we are perpetuating a negative view of these things. Ultimately these emotions and conflicting emotions have no intrinsic nature, and the Mahāmudrā method incorporates this premise from the outset. In so doing, it is*** designed to cut through conflicting emotions rather than wear them out, eliminate them, or transform them.

Rather than going through this long process of elimination, purification, and transformation, we simply enter immediately into our own spiritual being or rest in our natural state, as it is said, if we can do this, liberation is automatic. Mahāmudrā is sometimes described as the sudden approach to enlightenment. This does not necessarily indicate that we can become enlightened instantly but rather that the conflicting emotions that obstruct our enlightenment can become self-liberated naturally. Self-liberation is called rangdrol in Tibetan-‘rang’ is “self” and drol is “liberation.” Self-liberation is achieved through recognizing our innate state of being, or the nature of the mind, according to the Mahāmudrā teachings. Self-liberation comes through resisting the temptation to deliberately try to create a particular state of mind. Instead we allow ourselves to be with whatever arises in the mind. When we allow things to come and go without fixating on them and without trying to solidify, correct, or react to them, everything can become self-liberated. It is simply a matter of maintaining our awareness (sanmpajanya).

### GROUND MAHĀMUDRĀ

The Mahāmudrā view is based on the underlying metaphysical concept of the nature of the mind, a term used interchangeably with the terms ground Mahamudra and ground of being. It is said that this ground has been pure right from the beginning because it has not been caused to come into existence but is spontaneously established. It is also atemporal, because we cannot talk about it in relation to the past, present, or future. We cannot attribute any form of action to it by saying it has come into being or has gone out of

existence, and so on. We cannot speak about using our normal reifying concepts of existence or nonexistence, permanence or impermanence, good or evil, sublime or degraded, and so forth. It is even completely devoid of notions of samsara, nirvana, or a spiritual path. While it is the source from which all samsaric and nirvanic experiences arise, it is not subject to causes and conditions, nor is it something that can be affirmed or negated. It is free from all the limitations of our ordinary empirical consciousness. This aspect of Mahāmudrā reality is called ground Mahamudra because it is the innate existential condition in which we all find ourselves. In his Mahāmudrā Song, the great Kagyü master Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye (1813-5899) describes the ground Mahāmudrā in these terms:

“As for ground Mahamudra: There are both things as they are and time way of confusion. It does not incline toward either samsara or nirvana, And is free from the extremes of exaggeration and denigration. Not produced by causes, not changed by conditions, It is not spoiled by confusion Nor exalted by realization. It does not know either confusion or liberation.”

Ground Mahamudra is an open state of being that is identical to our authentic condition. It is the ground from which all our experiences originate. Our liberating experiences arise from it, as do our experiences of imprisonment, constriction, and constraint. It is completely impartial in terms of both samsaric and nirvanic experiences—pain, pleasure, happiness, unhappiness, and so on. Our authentic condition is totally open and undifferentiated. As soon as we speak of our own authentic condition as being this or that, as inclining toward nirvana and away from samsara, we introduce a dualism that simply does not exist in reality.

This authentic condition is present in ordinary sentient beings as well as enlightened beings. In other words, there is ultimately no real difference between the two. The only difference is that enlightened beings have recognized their authentic condition, whereas ordinary sentient beings have not. This non-recognition of our true condition is called ignorance, which is the reason we wander about in the cyclic existence of birth, death, and rebirth.

Mental fabrications of every conceivable kind have to be put to rest when we contemplate our natural state of being. If we try to conceptualize about it, we will think things like: “Does it exist or not exist? Does it favor our effort to realize nirvana and disfavor our samsaric tendencies? Is it permanent or impermanent?” One should resist forming ideas entirely. The point is not to develop ideas but to learn to rest in the natural state of being through the practice of Mahāmudrā, which we will discuss in the following chapters.

In Buddhist logic, it is said that all concepts are based upon exclusion. As soon as we affirm something by saying, “It is this,” we automatically exclude so many other things it

might have been. By imposing a conceptual limitation we fabricate an idea. The suggestion here is that it is just an idea-it is not an open experience. The thrust of Mahāmudrā meditation is to allow our mind to be open so that we can ease into a more natural state of perceiving and being. This does not imply that we should not have ideas at all but that we really need to be skeptical and careful about getting overly fixated on any descriptions of the qualities of our original state *of* being.

A great Mahainudra master known as Jowo Gotsangpa said that we need three things in order to stay with the correct view-the correct view here being “the view of no view;” because it is a view that subverts or undercuts all views. The first thing we need is a decisive understanding of our original being. The second is no bias toward samsara and nirvana. The third is conviction, because once we have attained conviction, we cannot change our minds back again. Gotsangpa claims that this view is like a spear that shoots through open space.

Mahamudra uses the expression *ordinary mind* (*‘tha ma! gyi shepa* in Tibetan) to describe the nature *of* the mind as the mind we already have. The nature of the mind is not lurking somewhere underneath our normal empirical consciousness. Rather, we gain insight into the nature *of* the mind by gaining insight into this ordinary mind. If we avoid judgment *of* our thoughts, we will be able to attain the luminous bliss of the nature of the mind, which is the ordinary mind itself. Making this point, Jamgon Kongtrul says in his *Mahāmudrā Song*:

*Like the center of a cloudless sky,  
This self-luminous mind is impossible to express.  
It is wisdom of non-thought beyond analogy,  
Naked ordinary mind.*

## PATH MAHĀMUDRĀ

Ground Mahamudra is referred to as the basis of purification. The ground itself does not require any form of purification. However, even though the ground, the nature of the mind, is unsullied and pure, adventitious mental conflicting emotions have arisen. This is precisely the reason we need a path, a method to alleviate our condition. The objects of purification, then, are the adventitious mental conflicting emotions; the means *of* purification is the practice of Mahamudra meditation; and the fruit of purification is the realization of the ground of being-the luminous bliss of the inherent nature of the mind, in other words, the nature *of* the mind does not need to be purified. The ground Mahamudra and fruition Mahamudra are in actuality one and the same thing. Once the adventitious mental conflicting emotions have been purified, there is nothing to stand in the way of our realizing our own true nature.

### *Tranquility Meditation*

Path Mahāmudrā consists of the practices of tranquility meditation (shamatha) and insight meditation (vipashyana). First, tranquility meditation is used to still the mind. We do not-as is done in more conventional forms of Buddhist meditation-attempt to tame the mind. In other meditative traditions, the mind is compared to a wild elephant, and meditation techniques are compared to the implements an elephant tamer uses to tame an elephant. That image is not applicable here. Rather, in tranquility meditation, the mind is allowed to subside naturally of its own accord, using the method of self-liberation (which will be explained in later chapters). Mindfulness is present, but there is no artifice or contrivance at all. In Mahāmudrā, the thoughts themselves are allowed to settle of their own accord; there is no need to force them into submission. The third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, had this to say about tranquility meditation in his *Prayer of Mahāmudrā*:

*“Not adulterating meditation with conceptual striving, Unmoved by the wind of worldly bustle, Knowing how to rest in the spontaneous, uncontrived flow, Being skilled in the practice, may I now continue it.”*

### *Insight Meditation*

Insight meditation involves an intimate and methodical examination of what the mind is. During this form of meditation, we ask ourselves questions like: “What is the mind? What is a thought? Where is a thought? What is the nature of thought? What is the nature of emotion?” Persistent analysis of this sort will reveal that the mind is not an entity or a substance. In the Mahamudra tradition, this is viewed as a supreme realization. As Savaripa, the eighth-century Indian mahasiddha stated:

*In the process of searching for all that manifests as mind and matter There is neither anything to be found nor is there any seeker, For to be unreal is to be unborn and unceasing In the three periods of time. That which is immutable Is the state of great bliss.”*

By analyzing every experience that we have in this fashion, we come to realize that even our own confused thoughts-those we normally see as the very source of our mental disturbances-have the same nature as the mind itself. In this way we realize the ground Mahāmudrā. In Mahāmudrā insight meditation, everything that we experience is regarded as having the potential to reveal our true nature. Our disturbing thoughts and negative emotions are not something we try to abandon; we simply need to develop an understanding of their nature. Through the methods of the Mahāmudrā teachings, we can learn to use our thoughts to attain a meditative state.

## FRUITION MAHĀMUDRĀ

Mahamudra practice culminates in the four yogas of Mahamudra: the yoga of one-pointedness, the yoga of non-conceptuality (simplicity), the yoga of one flavor (one-taste), and the yoga of non-meditation. Each yoga represent the fruition of a certain level of meditative practice. Je (Jomchung, an important Kagyü Mahāmudrā master, explains:

*To rest in tranquillity is the stage of one-pointedness;*

*To terminate confused thoughts is the stage of nonconceptuality;*

*To transcend the duality of accepting and rejecting is the stage of one flavor;*

*To perfect experiences is the stage of non-meditation.*

The yoga of one-pointedness essentially denotes recognizing the nature of the mind. One has attained this stage with the first taste of luminous bliss while in a state of deep, undisturbed meditative equipoise. The fruition is the ability to maintain meditative luminosity (*prabhasvara*). *The yoga of non-conceptuality is attained by realizing that the mind has no root and is devoid of enduring essence. Not only is the nature of the mind devoid of essence, but everything that occurs in the mind is also devoid of essence, including the confused thoughts and disturbing emotions. If we look for where these thoughts and emotions arise, persist, and dissipate, we will find nothing. Therefore, while the first yoga is concerned with gaining insight into the luminous quality of the mind, the second yoga is concerned with insight into emptiness. The yoga of one flavor refers to the experience of non-duality. The division between the mind and the external world, subject and object, and all other dualistic notions are overcome at this level. Everything, including the liberation of nirvana and the bondage of samsara, is equalized in this state of one flavor. The yoga of non-meditation signifies the genuine, ultimate fruition of path Mahamudra. It is inseparable from the ground Mahāmudrā, the departure point of the spiritual journey. The yoga of non-meditation has nothing to do with not meditating per se; it simply means that the meditation state has become the natural state to be in, rather than something that we need to pursue. Therefore, there is no division between the meditation and post-meditation states.*

## OVERVIEW OF THE PATH

The next five chapters of this book will discuss the importance of developing a correct view as the basis for making the spiritual journey. The notion of undeluded states of mind will also be introduced as part of an overview of the spiritual path, including important preparatory practices known as the four preliminaries and the four immeasurables.

These chapters appear to focus on practices of self-transformation rather than the self-liberation method of Mahāmudrā, but this is done only to demonstrate that the esoteric Buddhist techniques of self-transformation are complementary to the mystical technique of self-liberation. The two approaches are not incompatible in essence.

This manual should be used as a supplement to the instructions of a qualified meditation instructor. If you genuinely wish to follow this meditative tradition you should first find a qualified instructor, as a book can never be a substitute for oral instructions. Begin each meditation session by chanting the Kagyü lineage prayers or whatever prayers your teacher has given you. The prayer by Padma Karpo included at the end of this book would also be beneficial.

Although they are not directly related to the practice of Mahāmudrā, these other methods are regarded as essential aids for our development of tranquility and insight meditation. The general approach of the Kagyü Mahāmudrā tradition is to begin each meditation session by contemplating the subjects of the four preliminaries, which reinforces our desire to be vigilant in our practice. Contemplation of the four immeasurables of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity is also necessary because it encourages us to stay connected to our world and to develop the kind of wholesome emotional states that will empower us to express our full potential as human beings.

The meditation exercises in this book are structured so that contemplation of the four preliminaries should take five minutes, the four immeasurables five minutes, tranquility meditation twenty minutes, and insight meditation five minutes. That is why each session in the chapter on insight meditation begins with the preliminaries, immeasurables, and tranquility meditation. This is a fairly new innovation in the context of traditional practice, but as time is scarce it is necessary to approach our practice in this way unless you are undertaking weekly or monthly retreats.

Chapters 7 through 11 follow the outline of ground Mahāmudrā, path Mahāmudrā, and fruition Mahāmudrā. Ground Mahāmudrā is discussed in terms of our own true condition, or buddha-nature. Path Mahāmudrā uses the meditation practices of tranquility and insight in order to realize the nature of the mind directly. Fruition Mahāmudrā is the ultimate realization of the nature of mind as having three qualities: it is empty, it is luminous, and it is the experience of bliss. When the emptiness of physical and mental phenomena is directly experienced as a subjective reality and the mind is stable and able to maintain awareness, the luminous clarity of the mind gives rise to a sense of well-being that transcends both happiness and unhappiness. This is the experience of all-pervasive bliss, the goal of Mahāmudra practice. When we no longer fixate on our thoughts and emotions but let them arise without interference and without hope and fear, our minds will become blissfully clear.