



## See the true nature, then let go and relax in that

The interview with Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche that turned into a Mahamudra teaching on the spot

Photographs by Andy Karr

**Melvin McLeod:** Rinpoche, you are one of the leading teachers of Mahamudra, the highest philosophy and practice of the Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism. Would you describe the Mahamudra view of the nature of mind?

**Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche:** In Mahamudra there are three traditions: sutra Mahamudra, mantra Mahamudra and essence Mahamudra.

The sutra tradition of Mahamudra encompasses both the second and third turnings of the wheel of dharma [the teachings on emptiness and buddhanature, respectively]. According to the second turning of the wheel, the true nature of mind is beyond conceptual fabrication. That means it can-

not be described as being existent or nonexistent, as being something or nothing, or as being permanent or impermanent. Mind cannot be described or conceptualized in any of these ways: the nature of mind is beyond all conceptual fabrication. Then, according to the third turning of the wheel of dharma, which are the teachings on buddhanature such as the *Uttaratantrashastra*,<sup>1</sup> the true nature of mind is described as luminous clarity. This is the

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<sup>1</sup> One of the five treatises said to have been dictated to Asanga (circa fourth century C.E.) by the bodhisattva Maitreya, the *Uttaratantrashastra* is one of the main texts to lay out the understanding of buddhanature. In 2000, it was published with commentary by Jamgön Kongtrul the Great and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso under the title *Buddha Nature*.

enlightened essence of the buddhanature, completely free from any stain, completely free from any imperfection or flaw. This luminosity is inseparable from emptiness. So the true nature of mind is described as the union of clarity and emptiness.

The mantra tradition of Mahamudra explains that the true nature of mind is bliss and emptiness inseparable. This is something that one meditates on after having received empowerments, *abhishekas*, to do so. By receiving the empowerments and putting the methods into practice, one can realize this bliss-emptiness, which is the true nature of mind.

Finally, there is the tradition of essence Mahamudra, in which the true nature of mind is called *thamel gyi shepa*, or ordinary mind, which means that there is no need to change anything about the mind. One doesn't need to fix it in any way. One doesn't need to stop anything from happening or make anything new happen. The true nature of mind is beyond artifice and fabrication.

The essence tradition of Mahamudra does not depend on the scriptures or reasonings of sutra and mantra Mahamudra. In the essence tradition, the teacher points out the nature of the student's mind, based on the student's own experience and how the student is relating to appearances at the time. It's a direct transmission. Just reading it in a book isn't enough. You have to have great faith in the teacher, and then the teacher can point out the nature of mind. So if somebody wants to examine the nature of their mind and have it introduced to them, they should request instructions from a teacher in whom they have great faith. Then the lama will give them the pointing-out instruction,

and it's possible that they'll recognize the nature of mind.

If the student develops certainty that the mind is free from coming and going, free from arising, abiding and ceasing, then the student is said to have recognized the nature of mind. That doesn't mean that the student has direct realization experience; in this context realization means to have certainty.

If people read the story of Milarepa's encounter with the shepherd boy, Repa Sangye Kyap [see page 29], they will have an idea of what the pointing-out is like between the student and the teacher.

*Aside from direct transmission from teacher to student, what are the methods or meditations used to realize the nature of mind?*

If people want to learn how to investigate the nature of their mind, they should understand that there are different ways to do it. For example, in the sutra tradition of Mahamudra, there is the way of investigating the nature of mind that is in harmony with the second turning of the wheel of dharma and the way that is in harmony with the third turning of the wheel.

If you wanted to learn about investigating the mind according to the second turning, then you should read *The Sun of Wisdom*.<sup>2</sup> All of the methods for investigating emptiness that are taught in that book can be applied to the mind. The difference

<sup>2</sup> *The Sun of Wisdom*, published in 2003, is Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso's commentary on the classic second-century Madhyamaka text by Nagarjuna, the *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. He uses Mipham the Great's commentary as a guide.

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**Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche** was born in eastern Tibet in 1934. After completing his early study of Mahayana texts he roamed the charnel grounds and caves of central Tibet for five years practicing Chöd. He received pointing-out instructions from the sixteenth Karmapa and stayed in the caves around Tsurphu for a year, continuing his Chöd practice and receiving teachings from Dilyak Drupon Rinpoche, the retreat master of Tsurphu. Later, while he was in retreat south of Lhasa, a group of nuns asked for his help dealing with the Chinese. Subsequently he led the nuns to safety in India; many of them still study with him today.

In India, Khenpo Tsultrim received the khenpo degree from the Karmapa and the geshe lharampa degree from the Dalai Lama, recognizing his high attainment in debate and logic. In the late 1970's he traveled to Europe at the request of the Karmapa, and since then he has traveled and taught tirelessly, becoming renowned for his skill in debate, his spontaneous songs and his ability to present the most profound teachings of Vajrayana Buddhism in a clear, accessible and lively way.

This interview was translated by Ari Goldfield.



The mantra tradition of Mahamudra explains that the true nature of mind is bliss and emptiness inseparable.

is that the meditation that follows is in accord with Mahamudra. The investigations are the same, but the way you meditate once you've done the investigations is in accord with the Mahamudra instructions on how to meditate.

When you investigate according to the third turning of the wheel of dharma, what you determine is that the true nature of mind is luminous clarity, free from any stain. There is a verse in the *Uttaratantrashastra*, the treatise on the buddhanature, which says, "The true nature of mind that is luminous clarity is unchanging like space. There are fleeting stains, but these are only temporary and not existent in the essence of mind."

That's the whole key to the third turning—to see that the basic nature of mind is luminosity and emptiness, which is not made imperfect or obscured in its essence by anything. The only things that prevent us from seeing the true nature of mind are fleeting stains. They are not truly existent; the stains have no essence of their own and therefore they can be removed.

After analyzing according to either the second or third turning, the way to meditate is the same: that is, to rest and relax in your own basic nature. According to the second turning, you determine that the true nature of mind is free from conceptual fabrications and you just let go and relax within that. According to the third turning, you determine that the true nature of mind is luminosity and emptiness, and you just let go and relax within that.

*That looks quite enjoyable, if Rinpoche's expression is any indication.*

If it is enjoyable, there is still no attachment to that enjoyment. If there is relaxation, there is no attachment to that relaxation.

*Many Western Buddhists of all traditions have read the songs of Milarepa. We've been inspired and fascinated by them, but do not necessarily see them as teachings that we can apply to our own practice. You teach extensively on the stories and songs of Milarepa; you've even had them retranslated and set to Western-style music. Among all the sources from the Tibetan tradition available to you, why do you emphasize the teachings of Milarepa?*

Milarepa was the greatest siddha in Tibet. Out of all the realized masters who lived in Tibet, Milarepa was the greatest. He attained buddhahood in one life with one body: he purified the stains of *nadi*, *prana* and *bindu*<sup>3</sup> and attained perfect enlightenment.

Milarepa was called the *pandit*, the learned one. What was he learned about? The definitive mean-

<sup>3</sup> According to advanced yogic understanding, in the illusory body, mind-consciousness rides on the *prana* (literally, "wind"), which travels through pathways, or *nadi*. The *bindu* ("drop," as in dew-drop) is understood as mind's nourishment. When these three are impure, it signifies that one is caught in the duality of subject and object. When they are purified, body, speech and mind are completely synchronized and emerge in their indestructible (*vajra*) nature.

ing, which he expressed in his songs. So when you use his songs as a basis for listening, reflecting and meditating, you have a profound and subtle support for developing your knowledge.

Before we used to sing individual songs, but now we sing the songs together with their stories. We have about eleven or twelve chapters translated, and a lot of them are about Milarepa's encounters with his students, particularly his female students, who became realized themselves. These chapters are all wonderful aids for our practice. These days, people like to study and to meditate, but they also need teachings that are concise. The great thing about these chapters is that they each tell the complete story of Milarepa and one particular disciple or group of disciples. They give the whole path from beginning to end, from when the students first meet Milarepa, describing what their encounter is like, to what happens as they practice and as Milarepa gives them more and more instruction. So in each chapter there is a complete path. And the songs are so profound. Look at just one song, like "An Authentic Portrait of the Middle Way" [see page 31], and see how much is actually in there. It's amazing.

As we sang last night, "*E ma*, the phenomena of the three realms of samsara, while not existing they appear, how incredibly amazing." It's only two lines, but if you know the meaning of those two lines, their application is vast.

*The translations of these songs and stories that we're generally familiar with are couched in high philosophical language. One of the things I find interesting—and effective—is that you've had them translated into straightforward, colloquial language. Because when you think about it, these songs were often sung to illiterate people and in the popular tunes of their day.*

Yes, that's right. That's how Milarepa actually sang them, in words that were easy and that people could understand. And actually singing the songs gives special power, because Milarepa himself sang them. When we sing them we are relating to them in the same way that Milarepa and his own students did. That brings the power of blessing and the power of connection.

*It seems to me that you are devoting yourself to trying to establish a genuine and complete Buddhist yogic tradition in the West. What is the essence of the path of the tantric yogi?*



The essence of the yogic tradition is that disturbing emotions and suffering are not to be abandoned; rather, one should meditate on their true nature. In that way, they are self-liberated, because suffering and the disturbing emotions are self-arisen and self-liberated. Therefore, one needs to train in the understanding of what it means to be self-arisen and self-liberated, in the meditation that is self-arisen and self-liberated, and in the conduct that is self-arisen and self-liberated. That's the whole point. Do you understand?

No. [Laughter.] What does "self-liberated" mean?

The analogy is often used of a wave coming up and dissolving back into the ocean. That's a good analogy, but you have to experience for yourself how it actually is. As one master said, "When you see a beautifully bright, clear ocean, with waves coming up and going back down into the ocean, don't you know that this is the lama teaching you that thoughts are dharmakaya?" Self-arisen and self-liberated means that when the thought arises, it's like a wave coming up from the ocean of luminous clarity. And it dissolves back into that luminous clarity. It never leaves being of the nature of luminous clarity, just like a wave never leaves the ocean.

That means, basically, that whatever appears is always luminosity. For example, your thoughts don't come from anywhere and they don't go any-

If you are very tired and your mind is heavy and dark, you don't abandon that. Instead you sleep and meditate on the true nature of sleep, which is luminosity.



Fear is great because it gives you a very sharp awareness of the self-arisen and self-liberated. It gives you a wonderful opportunity to meditate on the true nature of mind.

where. But, at the same time, they appear and they manifest. So that appearance, that arising, is called self-arising and self-liberation because it's nothing other than luminosity itself that's liberated.

[Sings:] "Thoughts don't come from anywhere and they don't go anywhere, so how could they be anything other than self-arisen and self-liberated? Just like waves on the ocean." That's how it is.

Milarepa said that the thoughts and appearances of demons are self-arisen and self-liberated. The way he said that was, "What appears as, is perceived as, and is thought of as a ghost—whenever these appear, from the yogi they appear, and whenever they dissolve, into the yogi they dissolve."

*Well, the question then is how one trains in that.*

To understand the principle of self-arisen and self-liberated, you must train in the profound view of Mahamudra, the profound meditation of Mahamudra, and then connect everything you do with that.

For example, if you are very tired and your mind is heavy and dark, you don't abandon that. Instead you sleep and you meditate on the true nature of sleep, which is luminosity. The great sidha Lavapa meditated by sleeping on the side of the road for twelve years, and in that way realized Mahamudra. The whole time he was sleeping he was actually meditating in luminous clarity.

If you have certainty in the profound view of Mahamudra, you'll know what self-arisen and self-liberated means, and you'll delight in meditating. When you gain direct experience, direct realization, then you are really a yogi or a yogini. Then you actually manifest as self-arisen and self-liberated.

*So the principle is that there are specific techniques by which every state of mind can be meditated upon and brought to the path.*

That's right. When you are skillful and use the methods, then all states of mind can be your friend. All states of mind can be your friend in realizing that the true nature of mind is self-arisen and self-liberated—that all states of mind are actually the same—self-arisen and self-liberated.

*You place a strong emphasis on study, particularly on the reasonings of Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti and the other philosophers of Madhyamaka. How does that kind of thinking lead to realization that is ultimately non-conceptual?*

One does not need to abandon thoughts. One does not need to make thoughts go away, because thoughts in their essence are self-arisen and self-liberated. According to the second turning of the wheel of dharma, just as thoughts arise, they are nothing other than the freedom from conceptual fabrications. Their true nature is beyond concept—as they appear and as they are liberated, their true nature is beyond concept. According to the third turning, as thoughts arise, they are the nature of luminous clarity. Just as they arise and just as they are liberated, they are of the nature of luminous clarity. And according to mantra Mahamudra, as thoughts arise, their nature is bliss-emptiness, and as they are liberated, their nature is bliss and emptiness.

The mistake comes when we hear the word "nonconceptual" and think there is some difference between conceptual and nonconceptual. Then you think you have to eliminate thoughts, but that's a mistake. The point is to realize the true nature of thoughts. The point is to bring thoughts to the path. Thoughts are the friend of your practice when you can meditate on their essential nature. If you can't do that you're in trouble, because you think you need to get into a nonconceptual state, but thoughts are going to keep arising.



## MILAREPA'S SONG to the SHEPHERD BOY

[AFTER THE SHEPHERD BOY Sangye Kyap received teachings on shamatha meditation with a supporting visualization and had a deep experience] Milarepa gave him teachings on how to train as an upasaka, on karmic cause and result, and finally on connate union. Perfectly pure meditation dawned in his mindstream, which greatly pleased the lama, who then sang him this song of realization:

*The lord who's blessed by glorious Naropa and Maitripa  
Is Marpa the Translator, at his feet I bow.*

*The great teachers who only have the dharma in their speech  
Are expert at explaining things in an extensive way.  
But when it's time for body and awareness to part ways,  
Their dharma verbosity dissolves into the sky.  
Luminosity's shining door is obscured by ignorance,  
And they cringe in their fear of the dharmakaya that shines  
at death.  
They spend their whole life studying large baskets of  
the teachings,  
But when body and mind part ways that does not help at all.*

*The great meditators who meditate in shamatha  
Have powerful experiences, so brilliant and clear.  
They think that it's vipashyana and rest their minds at ease,  
But when vipashyana is needed at the point of death,  
Luminosity's mother and child they cannot bring together,  
And so the shamatha they've practiced does not help at all.  
In fact, has it not made them take birth as an animal?  
Now son, supreme protector,<sup>1</sup> straighten up and listen here:*

*When you place your body right and rest yourself in equipoise,  
And concepts stop and then appearances all shut down too,  
Your shamatha has sunk deep down into a darkened state,  
So rouse yourself with mindfulness and it will be like this:  
Just like a candle flame, mind will illuminate itself,*

*Like a flower, it will naturally be so vivid and clear,  
And like when you look up into a sky that's clear and bright,  
Awareness-emptiness is naked, open clarity.*

*When free of thoughts, your mind settles so luminous and clear,  
That is called the dawning of the shamatha experience.  
Now take that experience and make it your foundation,  
Then supplicate the precious jewels and do as you've  
prayed you would:*

*Listen to and reflect on dharma with supreme precision,  
Then use vipashyana to understand selflessness well.  
Tie to this<sup>2</sup> the sturdy rope of powerful shamatha,  
And with the mighty strength that's found in love and  
compassion,*

*For the benefit of sentient beings, give rise to bodhicitta,  
And with the energy and force that bodhicitta brings,  
Use aspiration prayers so pure to start hauling on that rope,  
And pull it straight to the pure path of seeing<sup>3</sup> directly.  
Vipashyana will realize purity that can't be seen,  
And then you'll see mind's hopes and fears for what  
they really are.*

*Without going anywhere, you'll arrive at the Buddha's ground.  
Without looking at anything, you'll see dharmakaya.  
Without achieving anything, you'll naturally reach your goal.  
My son, Genyen Sangye Kyap, work with mind like this.*

The Jetsun took Genyen Sangye Kyap as his attendant, and bestowed empowerments and practice instructions on him in a completely perfect way. Sangye Kyap then went on to meditate, and brought experience and realization to perfection. He came to be known as Repa Sangye Kyap, heart son of Milarepa. Thus is the story of Milarepa's meeting with Repa Sangye Kyap during the Jetsun's later visit to Rag-ma.

— From *Stories and Songs of Milarepa*, translated by Ari Goldfield under the guidance of Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche.

1 Milarepa is making a play on the shepherd boy's name, Sangye Kyap, which means "Protector Buddha."

2 "This" is the vipashyana referred to in the previous line. It is called "approximate vipashyana" because at the stage of ordinary sentient beings, it is still a conceptual understanding of the true nature of reality.

3 The path of seeing is the third of the five paths. On it one directly realizes the true nature of reality and becomes a noble bodhisattva.

Of all the realized masters who lived in Tibet, Milarepa was the greatest. He purified the stains of nadi, prana and bindu and attained perfect enlightenment in one lifetime.

The whole point of Mahamudra is to see the true nature of the thoughts. That's what Mahamudra is—it's nothing other than the true nature of thoughts. When you can see that, then thoughts are your friends.

Mahamudra is the practice of not abandoning thoughts, not abandoning appearances, not abandoning disturbing emotions, not abandoning suffering, but bringing all these to the path and realizing that their true nature is self-arisen and self-liberated.

When I trained in Tibet, I did so mostly in mountain retreats, in caves and in charnel grounds. What I practiced when I was in charnel grounds was bringing thoughts and appearances of demons to the path. Sometimes at night I had thoughts of demons and saw frightening demons, so I meditated on the true nature of that and that became my path. When I was living in the caves in the mountains, I trained in the self-liberation of all thoughts. I trained in recognizing the true nature of the meeting of appearance and mind. In that way, the meeting of appearance and mind becomes self-liberated.

*Fear arises in us all the time—it is a fundamental building block of samsara—yet fear is not often addressed as a spiritual issue. How do we work with our fear?*

The way to work with fear is as follows: See that thoughts of fear neither come nor go. See that thoughts of fear neither arise nor cease. Then look at the essence beyond coming and going, beyond arising and ceasing; look at this essence and let go and relax. When I was sleeping in the charnel grounds and I was afraid of demons, I meditated on the true nature of that fear. Even now I send some students to the charnel grounds and I tell them to meditate like that. That's good.

If you don't realize its true nature, fear causes lots of problems. If you do realize its true nature, fear is great because it gives you a very sharp awareness of the self-arisen and self-liberated. It gives you a wonderful opportunity to meditate on the true nature of mind.

Anger is another one that is good, because anger is very strong and it gives your mind a lot of power. So if you meditate on the true nature of anger when it arises and recognize it as self-arisen and self-liberated, then your anger dissolves and you're left

in the true nature of anger, which is bright and clear luminosity. That's great.

In Tibet, there were yogis and yoginis who lived together and they fought a lot with each other. On the outside it looked like they were fighting, but actually what they were doing was using their interaction as a method to meditate on the true nature of anger.

*Many Western Buddhists are confused about how to react when they see their spiritual leaders fighting politically, or acting in other ways that don't seem to be in accord with the dharma. Your own Kagyü school has been riven by political struggle in recent years, but this is something no community or school of Buddhism is free of. How do students react to this so that their sense of devotion and faith is not weakened?*

In that situation people should know that what appears is just that—it's just an appearance. It's not the way things really are. In the true nature of reality there is no conflict. The true nature of reality transcends conflict, and therefore what appears is a mere appearance—like a dream, like a rainbow, like a moon reflected in the water. That's what people should know.

The heads of the lineages in Tibetan Buddhism are emanations [*tulkus*]. In fact, such an emanation is one of the examples the Buddha gave for appearance and emptiness, because emanations are not truly existent. So we should especially keep that in mind—that an emanation is the very example of appearance and emptiness, of an empty form.

So therefore when the emanation lamas fight, or appear to fight [laughs], we should know that it's just a mere appearance. Because they are emanations, they don't truly exist; they are appearance and emptiness. Therefore the fighting is appearance and emptiness. It is not real; it is dependently-arisen mere appearance.

When the great lamas fight, since it is just a fight among emanations, know that it has no inherent nature. Know that it is a superficial, relative reality, just a dependently-arisen mere appearance. There's nothing else you need to think about it besides that.

*Rinpoche, I thought I was going to do an interview, but I got a teaching on Mahamudra. Thank you very much.* **BD**



## AN AUTHENTIC PORTRAIT of the MIDDLE WAY

A vajra song of realization by Milarepa, the lord of yogis

*From the standpoint of the truth that's genuine  
There are no ghosts, there are not even buddhas,  
No meditator and no meditated,  
No paths and levels traveled and no signs,  
And no fruition bodies and no wisdoms,  
And therefore there is no nirvana there,  
Just designations using names and statements.*

*All animate, inanimate—the three realms,  
Unborn and nonexistent from the outset,  
No base to rest on, do not coemerge,  
There is no karmic act, no maturation,  
So even the name “samsara” does not exist.*

*That's the way these are in the final picture,  
But oh, if sentient beings did not exist,  
What would the buddhas of three times all come from?  
Since fruition with no cause—impossible!  
So the standpoint of the truth that's superficial*

*Is samsara's wheel, nirvana past all grief.  
It all exists, that is the Sage's teaching.*

*Then what exists appearing to be things,  
And their nonexistence, reality that's empty,  
Are essentially inseparable, one taste,  
And therefore there is neither self-awareness  
Nor awareness of what's other anywhere.*

*All of this a union vast and spacious,  
And all those skilled in realizing this  
Do not see consciousness, they see pure wisdom,  
Do not see sentient beings, they see buddhas,  
Don't see phenomena, they see their essence,  
And out of this compassion just emerges.  
Retention, powers, fearlessness and all,  
The qualities embodied by a buddha,  
Just come as if you had a wishing jewel—  
This is what I, the yogi, have realized.*

— Translated by Jim Scott