

# MAHAMUDRA AND THE KAGYU LINEAGE

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It has been some years since the Buddhist teachings have spread to the West, and in that time many people have engendered a deep faith and confidence in the teachings of the Buddha. For those with such great faith and confidence, the practice of Mahamudra is very appropriate because Mahamudra is a particularly convenient practice to do, and at the same time it is extremely beneficial. For students following the path of Mahamudra, it will be very helpful to know and understand something about the history of this lineage.

## **Three Lifestyles of Mahamudra Practitioners**

In terms of the history of Mahamudra practice throughout India and Tibet, and in particular in India, there are the renowned 84 mahasiddhas who were practitioners of Mahamudra. These 84 mahasiddhas, or great accomplished ones, led many types of lifestyles. For example, we can look at Indrabodhi, a great and powerful king of India who had a wealth of enjoyments and pleasures. He was also skilled at cultivating and sustaining his kingdom in a vast way. Even though he exerted himself at cultivating and sustaining his kingdom and enjoyed the many pleasures of a king, along with that, he meditated on Mahamudra. Due to his Mahamudra meditation, he attained great accomplishment.

If we look at a second category of practitioner, we can take the example of the great protector Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna was a great scholar and a wise master who was learned in all of the Buddhist reasonings. He had an extremely sharp intellect and a great ability to compose Buddhist texts and treatises. He also had an uncanny ability to refute all the wrong views of various philosophical systems and spiritual traditions of his time. He was able to affirm or establish the correct views from among all the different views that were being put forth. Even though he was an adept scholar, composer of texts, and teacher, even with all those activities, he engaged in the practice of meditation. And what did he practice? He practiced the meditation of Mahamudra. Through this profound practice, he was able to attain the supreme siddhi,<sup>1</sup> the supreme accomplishment that enabled his practice and his teaching activity to proceed unimpeded.

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<sup>1</sup> The term siddhi refers to the attainment of spiritual powers as the result of one's practice. There are taught to be eight worldly siddhis and one supreme siddhi. The worldly siddhis are powers such as clairvoyance, the ability to read others' thought, and the ability to fly. The supreme siddhi is the attainment of enlightenment.

We also have examples of those who took a much simpler approach to the path of Mahamudra, such as the mahasiddha Tilopa. Tilopa's main occupation was pounding sesame seeds and extracting their oil. Along with pounding sesame seeds, Tilopa was able to practice Mahamudra and sustain his experience and realization to the point where he gained great accomplishment.

All of these examples can apply to us in this era. These days, there are many people who have wealth and who enjoy material pleasures and comforts. If these people practice the teachings, then it is completely possible for them to attain accomplishment in Mahamudra. Conversely, you have people who are very intellectual and scholarly. They like to study and their faculties for learning are very sharp. These people can lead the lifestyle of Nagarjuna, and if they practice Mahamudra at the same time, they can also attain the accomplishment of Mahamudra. We also have people who like to lead very simple lives, lives that are free of complexities. These people too can not only practice Mahamudra, but also come to complete perfection.

When the teachings spread to Tibet, a host of accomplished practitioners emerged. So we can also look at the history of the Tibetan siddhas to see how they practiced Mahamudra according to their own individual propensities. From the perspective of our own tradition, the Kagyu lineage, we have those who are known as the three forefathers of the Kagyu lineage: Marpa, Milarepa, and Gampopa. If we look at these three examples, we can see the three different lifestyles that these practitioners embody. They are proof that we can practice Mahamudra in any of these three ways.

First, we have Marpa, who had a wife and children, as well as wealth and material comforts. Along with these, he practiced Mahamudra and attained perfection in that practice while not having to give up his worldly life at all. He could sustain all the aspects of his worldly life at the same time.

Next, we can look to the life of Milarepa for a very different version of how to practice Mahamudra. Milarepa's lifestyle was in sharp contrast to Marpa's. Milarepa enjoyed meditating in samadhi and practicing the dharma, and he enjoyed only those activities. Not only that, he was very reluctant to take on any involvement with the mundane or material world, not even with food and clothing. He subsisted on whatever he happened to find around him and made that into his nourishment. He wore only a simple cotton cloth as his garment and came to be known as a *repa*, or a "cotton-clad one." He completely abandoned all activities of the mundane world. He embodied what is known as an action-free yogi. He is a good example for those who have the same affinity, who are attracted to an ascetic path and can endure

hardships in practicing the dharma. If we can practice in the same way that Milarepa did, that is very, very good.

Finally, we can look at the life example of Gampopa, the third of the three main Tibetan forefathers of the Kagyu lineage. Again, Gampopa embodied a very different lifestyle from Marpa and Milarepa. While Marpa was a family man and farmer and Milarepa was an ascetic yogi, Gampopa, when he met Milarepa, was already a disciplined monk. The first indications for Milarepa that his lineage would be continued by monastics began in a dream. One night, Milarepa dreamt that he saw many yellow swans in the sky. They flew out in all directions, and he had sense that they were pervading the entire earth. Milarepa understood from his dream that, although he was a yogi, many of his disciples in future generations would be monastics. Thus, Milarepa prophesied that his lineage would be not only a lineage of yogis, but would also be carried on by monks and nuns. Gampopa was the foremost of Milarepa's monastic students. Through holding the monastic discipline, Gampopa practiced Mahamudra meditation and achieved full accomplishment. Therefore, Gampopa also serves as an excellent example for those who have affinity for the monastic path. If they can use that path as a support for practicing Mahamudra, that is an excellent way to proceed.

We can all take great joy in the fact that we have entered through the door of dharma and that we have the opportunity to hear the teachings of the Buddha; at the same time, we can rejoice that we don't have to worry about what kind of lifestyle we lead. We can be confident that, if we practice dharma with great respect in this way, then we, too, can definitely attain the result that dharma brings forth.

### **The Kagyu Lineage**

The Mahamudra lineage can be viewed from several different perspectives; for example, it can be classified according to the line of transmission from one lineage holder to the next. Within this system, there is a longer lineage, called the indirect lineage and a shorter lineage, called the direct lineage. The indirect lineage begins with Buddha Shakyamuni and passes from the mahasiddhas of India to the Tibetan line that begins with Marpa the Translator. The source of the direct lineage is Buddha Vajradhara, who transmitted the Mahamudra and Vajrayana teachings directly to the mahasiddha Tilopa. It can also be classified according to the style of Mahamudra practice; for example, there are the lineages belonging to sutra Mahamudra, mantra Mahamudra, and essence Mahamudra.

Chief among all of these is the lineage as represented in the *Supplication to the Takpo Kagyu*,<sup>2</sup> which begins: “Great Vajradhara, Tilo, Naro, Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa ...” and so forth. This is the Kagyu lineage that was passed down gradually through these individuals. It is this lineage that is our focus here.

### **Buddha Shakyamuni and Buddha Vajradhara**

As stated in this lineage prayer, the origin of all our pith instructions on Mahamudra is the Buddha Vajradhara. However, whenever we speak of the origin of the teachings we practice, we usually say that they came from the Buddha Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha. When we look at these two statements, we might get confused. We might have doubts and think, “How is it that we can say that the original instructions on Mahamudra came from Vajradhara, but we also say that Buddha Shakyamuni was the first teacher? Are these two beings the same or are they different?” It is possible for us to have doubts when we think about this.

In actuality, however, we can view the Buddha Vajradhara and the Buddha Shakyamuni as the same. That is because, when we speak of the perfect buddhas, the transcendent conquerors or *bhagavats*, we speak of them as possessing three different aspects: dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya.

The dharmakaya, also called the “truth body,” is the complete, unoriginated wisdom of the Buddha, which is beyond form. The Buddha Vajradhara is the dharmakaya Buddha, and this dharmakaya Buddha is the very root of all of the enlightened activity of all buddhas. Nevertheless, due to the karmic obscurations of ordinary beings, we cannot meet this type of buddha directly. That is why, out of compassion, the dharmakaya Buddhas arise and manifest in two form bodies, the sambhogakaya and the nirmanakaya, which are perceptible to different types of beings.

The sambhogakaya is a pure realm in which the sambhogakaya Buddhas manifest to highly realized beings, like the bodhisattvas on the great bodhisattva bhumis. Because they have purified their karmic obscurations to a great degree, these bodhisattvas have the karmic good fortune to be able to meet with and receive teachings from the sambhogakaya Buddhas in the pure buddha realms. Sambhogakaya can be translated as “enjoyment body,” and the Vajradhara we see in thangkas and in pictures, who is blue in color and holds a vajra and bell, is the Vajradhara who has arisen in sambhogakaya form.

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<sup>2</sup> Note on spelling: The Tibetan word “Takpo” can also be rendered as “Dakpo.” Thus, the title of this supplication refers to the Dakpo Kagyu lineage established by Gampopa

For those who have purified their karmic obscurations to a lesser degree, there is the nirmanakaya form, or emanation body, of the Buddha. Beings who have not purified their karmic obscurations to the same extent as the bodhisattvas can only perceive, meet with, and receive teachings from the nirmanakaya buddhas, who manifest in the world as ordinary beings. Buddha Shakyamuni, who was born into this world some 2,600 years ago, is the historical Buddha of this age.

Further, Buddha Shakyamuni falls into the category of the supreme nirmanakaya Buddha. The supreme nirmanakaya Buddha is the Buddha that displays the Twelve Deeds.<sup>3</sup> These deeds begin with the Buddha's Descent to Earth from Tushita Heaven, which is also a sambhogakaya realm, and include his attaining of enlightenment at Bodhgaya, his turning the Wheel of Dharma at Varanasi, and his passing into parinirvana at Kushinagar. The one who displays these Twelve Deeds is referred to as the supreme nirmanakaya Buddha—the most well known of the buddhas.

Buddha Shakyamuni passed away into parinirvana in the city of Kushinagar. However, when we say that the Buddha passed into parinirvana, we must understand that this refers only to the enlightened body, or physical form, of the Buddha. But in terms of the Buddha's enlightened heart or mind, which is of the essence of wisdom, that is something that knows no dying. It cannot pass away to anywhere. And this aspect of the Buddha is what is known as the dharmakaya, which is endowed with the qualities of abundant knowledge, abundant love, and abundant ability to help others. These are the qualities of the wisdom essence of the heart of the Buddha, and that heart doesn't go through any change. Since it doesn't go through any change, it is called indestructible, or *vajra*. This is the quality that is expressed in the name "Vajradhara." Thus, Vajradhara is venerated as the source, or founder, of the Kagyu lineage.

## **GREAT MASTERS OF THE KAGYU LINEAGE**

### **Tilopa**

The master Tilopa, by purifying his karmic obscurations, was able to meet with the Buddha Vajradhara and receive the pith instructions for Mahamudra directly from him. It is through that teaching that the Mahamudra lineage we practice today was passed down through the centuries. Therefore, the teachings

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<sup>3</sup> For a complete list of the "Twelve Deeds," by Thrangu Rinpoche, see: <http://www.simhas.org/teaching11.html>, or *The Life of the Buddha & the Four Noble Truths*.  
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descending from the supreme nirmanakaya Buddha Shakyamuni and the teachings descending from the Buddha Vajradhara are of the same essence.

## **Naropa**

Tilopa's main student was the great scholar, or *mahapandita*, Naropa. He was the guardian of the Northern Gate of the great Buddhist university in India, Nalanda University, although some people say it was Vikramashila University.<sup>4</sup> In any case, it was a famous center of learning in India. The position of guardian of the Northern Gate was a very important one. There were a total of six guardians appointed to various stations at the university, and they were the best scholars the university had to offer. There were guardians of the Northern Gate, the Western Gate, the Eastern Gate, and the Southern Gate, and in the center were the guardians of the two Central Pillars. The function of the guardians was to fulfill the needs of anyone who approached them at their station. For example, someone would come to one of the gates and wish to refute the philosophical views of the person guarding it; they wanted to debate with the guardian. Other people would come requesting oral instructions. So the job of the guardian was either to refute the person trying to debate them, or to fulfill the wishes of the person who was requesting a specific oral instruction. The Northern Gate was very important because it faced toward China and Tibet, and because a lot of clever people came to that gate. Therefore, Naropa's gate turned out to be the hardest one to guard.

One day, while Naropa was guarding the Northern Gate, he was reading a text and a shadow fell over the book. He looked up and there was an old woman standing before him. She asked him, "Do you know the words of this text or do you know the meaning?" Naropa was a great scholar, so he said, "Well, I know the words," and the old lady rejoiced. She danced around and laughed and was very happy. And Naropa thought to himself, "If she is this happy that I know the words, she'll be even more happy if I tell her I know the meaning." So he said, "I know the meaning too." When he said that, the old lady became very sad and started to cry. She also became angry. Naropa was confused and said, "Well, you liked it when I told you I knew the words, but you didn't like it when I said I knew the meaning. What's wrong?" And she said, "You're a scholar. Of course you know the words! But the truth of the matter is that you don't know the meaning, and that is why I got so sad. The person who knows the meaning is a relative of mine who lives in the south of India. His name is Tilopa." Upon hearing Tilopa's name, Naropa was overcome

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<sup>4</sup> Naropa started his career as an ordained monk but eventually became a scholar in Buddhist philosophy, unrivaled in his learning. He was honored for this accomplishment by being made the "Northern Gatekeeper" of Nalanda University and also Vikramashila University (according to some sources). He was also a teacher and one of the most well-known abbots of these institutions.

with faith and sought to meet Tilopa. Naropa went through many difficulties in seeking out Tilopa, but he finally he found him and received oral instructions. In the end, he attained siddhi.

After Naropa had attained accomplishment in his practice, Tilopa gave him a prophecy that one day, the one named “Mati” would dispel the darkness of ignorance. Mati, or *lodrö* in Tibetan, is the word for “intellect.” This word is part of Marpa Lotsawa’s dharma name: Marpa Chokyi Lodrö. Therefore, Tilopa prophesied that Marpa the Translator would be the next main holder of Naropa’s lineage; Tilopa was telling Naropa that Marpa would come. He would be able to dispel the darkness of ignorance, and Naropa should give him the oral instructions. In this way the lineage was passed on to Marpa from Naropa.

### **Marpa**

The Translator Marpa traveled from Tibet to India three times to meet and study with Naropa. It is said that if you add up all the time he spent in India with Naropa, it would total sixteen years and seven months. So Marpa spent sixteen years and seven months relying on Naropa, receiving Mahamudra instructions from him, and translating those instructions into Tibetan so that he could spread the oral instructions of Mahamudra in Tibet. As mentioned earlier, Marpa was a successful farmer and householder, who at the same time became a forefather of the Kagyu lineage.

### **Milarepa**

Marpa’s primary disciple was the yogi Milarepa, who had incomparable abilities and perseverance in practice. The stories about Milarepa’s life are so well-known that there is no need to say much about him. However, it would be good to read his life story and to remember his example.<sup>5</sup> Milarepa was renowned for enduring many hardships in order to practice the dharma. After a youth of hardships and accumulating much negative karma, he was filled with remorse for his negative actions and set out to find a lama, eventually seeking out Marpa the translator. Milarepa practiced diligently under Marpa’s guidance for twelve years and attained full enlightenment. At the age of forty-five, he left to continue his practice in several well-known, isolated caves, like White Rock Horsetooth cave. He composed many songs of realization that are still sung and cherished by students today. He is said to have had eight hearts sons and many other students.

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<sup>5</sup> See *The Life of Milarepa*, by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, and *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, by Garma C. C. Chang.

## **Gampopa**

Milarepa's chief student was Gampopa. In his early life, Gampopa was a highly respected doctor known as the physician from Dakpo, the region of his birth. After the death of his wife and children from disease, he became ordained in the Kadampa tradition and trained for many years. Eventually, hearing the name of Milarepa and experiencing great longing to meet him, he sought him out, became his student, and received the oral instructions from him. He was the founder of the monastic order of the Kagyu School known as the Dakpo Kagyu.

Gampopa had received profound oral instructions in a previous life as well. During the time of the Buddha, Gampopa had taken birth as the bodhisattva Dawa Shönnu, Youthful Light of the Moon. At that time, he received from the Buddha the teachings on the *Samadhiraja Sutra*, or the *King of Meditation Sutra*. After the teaching, the Buddha asked a question: "When the time comes that my teachings are starting to decline, who among you Bodhisattvas will take on responsibility for propagating this teaching?" And Gampopa stepped forth at that moment and said that he would propagate the *Samadhiraja Sutra*. After Gampopa accepted that responsibility, the Buddha gave him a prophecy that he would be born as a doctor in a land that was thick with mountains and forests, and that he would establish his seat near a river called the Brahmaputra, which in Tibet is called the Tsangpo River. The place that the Buddha prophesied became the location of Gampopa's main seat, Takla Gampo Monastery. The Buddha foresaw that, at this time, Gampopa would propagate the teachings of the *Samadhiraja Sutra*.

The king of all samadhis, or meditations, is the meditation of Mahamudra. So the meditation that Gampopa spread throughout Tibet was the Mahamudra that the Buddha taught in the *Samadhiraja Sutra*.

## **Dusum Khyenpa, the First Karmapa**

Gampopa's primary disciple was the First Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa. He was the first in the lineage of Karmapas, which continues up to the present day with the 17th Karmapa, His Holiness Ogyen Trinley Dorje. From the perspective of their different incarnations, we can count these Karmapas as seventeen in number, but from the perspective of the wisdom essence of their mind, there is only one wisdom heart of Karmapa. You can count them as seventeen if you like, but from the perspective of their wisdom mind, it is fine to count them as only one. In this way we will only have to be aware of these seven figures comprising our lineage right up to our present root guru of today: His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa.

Therefore, our lineage is:

- Vajradhara
- Tilopa
- Naropa
- Marpa
- Milarepa
- Gampopa
- Karmapa

This is a very direct lineage that is rich in pith instructions that have not lost any of their potency, that have not been stained by any defect. Naropa gave a prophecy to Marpa when he said, “Disciples of future generations will be even better than your own disciples.”

When we think of the succession of disciples in a lineage, we usually think that it starts off with a really good teacher, and then the disciples of that teacher would be a little bit worse, and their disciples would be even a little bit worse. We think that over time it just gets worse and worse and worse. But that is not how Naropa prophesied that things would work in the Kagyu lineage. He said that the disciples would keep getting better and better, and the reason for that is because of the abundant potency that is present within the oral instructions of Mahamudra.

For example, we can see how the lineage improved when Gampopa unified the traditions of Kadampa and Mahamudra into one. That was an activity for which Gampopa obtained great fame. He brought together the Kadampa teachings that he received from the master Atisha in the earlier stages of his life with the Mahamudra teachings that he received from Milarepa in a later stage of his life.

Further down the line the lineage improved still more with the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. Rangjung Dorje had a direct vision of Vimalamitra, the great Dzogchen master, and received from him the key instructions for the union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen. Examples like these illustrate how the disciples keep getting better and better.

This has been a brief description of the lineages in the Mahamudra traditions. The fact that we have come into a situation where we can enter through the door of these profound instructions, receive them, and put them into practice is one of extreme great fortune. We should remember how incredibly fortunate we are to receive these teachings and enter into the gateway of this cycle of teachings. We can engender great joy

and rejoice in that situation. And within this state of rejoicing and appreciation, if we practice, it will be very beneficial.

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