

# Mahamudra

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The Mahamudra experience and approach is perhaps the quintessence of all Buddhadharma. In order for this quintessential approach to be effective, we must have some understanding of the nature of the mind that we are attempting to discover through the Mahamudra techniques.

Mahamudra has three aspects: foundation, path, and fruition. Foundation Mahamudra is the understanding which is based on our appreciation of the nature of mind. This must be augmented by the process of path Mahamudra which is direct experience and acclimatization to that nature of mind through meditation. Finally, there is the fruition or result aspect of Mahamudra, which is the actualization of the potential inherent in the nature of mind. This actual aspect of transcending awareness includes the Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya as the facets of completely enlightened experience. It is not beneficial to speak of Mahamudra lightly; we must not ignore any of these three aspects of the Mahamudra approach.

Foundation Mahamudra implies a deep appreciation and understanding of the nature of mind. When we say that this is the correct view, we do not use the phrase in a casual sense. Very often, we say, "Well, in my view, such and such is the case," but this does not necessarily mean that we have understood it at all. We may say, "I believe in previous existences," or, "I don't believe in future existences," but very often our talk is not based on experience and appreciation, but merely on an idea to which we give lip service. What is meant in foundation Mahamudra is a thorough appreciation of the nature of mind itself, the mind with which we are working, and the mind which we are attempting to discover.

To get a deeper understanding of the nature of mind itself, we can quote the authority of enlightened masters of the lineage as a guide. The third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, wrote a prayer of aspiration for the realization of Mahamudra in which he said, "It is not existent because even the Buddha could not see it, but it is not nonexistent because it is the basis or origin of all samsara and nirvana." It does not constitute a contradiction to say that mind neither exists nor does not exist; it is simultaneously existent and nonexistent.

Let us consider the first part of the statement that the mind does not exist. We take into account that the mind is intangible. One cannot describe it or find it. There is no fixed characteristic that we normally ascribe to things which we can ascribe to mind. Consciousness does not manifest with any particular color, shape, size, form or location. None of these qualities has anything to do with the nature of mind, so we can say that the mind is essentially empty of these limiting characteristics.

Even the fully enlightened Buddha Shakyamuni could not find any thing that is mind, because the mind does not have identifying characteristics, This is what Rangjung Dorje meant when he said, "It does not exist because even the Buddha could not see it."

So, then, is mind nonexistent? No, not in the sense that there is nothing happening. That which experiences confusion, suffering, frustration and all the complexity of samsaric existence is mind itself. This is the origin of all unenlightened experience; it is within the mind that all unenlightened experience happens.

On the other hand, if the individual attains enlightenment, it is mind which is the origin of the enlightened experience, giving expression to the transcending awareness of the various kayas.

This is what Rangjung Dorje meant when he said, "One cannot say that it does not exist, because it is the basis for all samsara and nirvana." Whether we are talking about an enlightened state of being or an unenlightened one, we are speaking about the state of experience that arises from mind and is experienced by the mind. What remains if mind neither exists nor does not exist? According to Rangjung Dorje, this is not a contradiction, but a state of simultaneity. Mind exhibits, at one and the same time, qualities of nonexistence and qualities of existence. To state naively that mind exists is to fall into one error; to deny the existence of anything at all is to fall into another error. This gave rise to the concept of what is called the Middle Way or Madhyamika. Finding a balance between those two beliefs, where there is simultaneous truth to both, is the correct view, according to the Buddha's description of the nature of mind.

When we hear a guru make the statement, "Mind does not exist; mind does not *not* exist; but it is at the same time existent and nonexistent, and this is the middle view," we may say, "Fine, I can accept that," but that is not enough. It is an idea that may appeal to us, a concept with which we are comfortable, but that kind of understanding lacks any real spirit or depth. It is like a patch you put on your clothes to hide a hole. One day the patch will fall off. Intellectual knowledge is rather patchy in that way. It will suffice for the present, but it is not ultimately beneficial.

This is not to say that intellectual knowledge is unimportant. It is crucial because it is that which gives us the ability to begin to develop personal experience of what is being discussed. However, mere understanding on a superficial or intellectual level should not be mistaken for the direct experience. We can only arrive at that through meditation and the continued analysis of our own experience. The value of intellectual knowledge is that it is a springboard to deeper, more intuitive experience.

First, then, we say that mind is essentially empty, that is not describable as some thing. Other than using the label *mind*., there is no thing that could be further described in terms of form, shape, size, color or any distinguishing characteristic.

Beyond this essential emptiness, we can make the statement that mind is like space. Just as space is all-pervasive, so is consciousness. The mind has no problem conceiving of any particular place or experience. While we have attempted to describe the indescribable by saying that mind is essentially empty, that is not the complete picture. We are speaking of something that is obviously qualitatively different from simple space. We need to remember that when we are using these terms, we are attempting to describe something that is indescribable. However, that does not mean that it cannot be directly experienced. The person who is mute is still able to experience the sweetness of sugar without being able to describe it to anyone else. Just as the mute person has trouble describing the taste of sugar, we have trouble describing the nature of

mind. We search for examples and metaphors that will give us some idea of what is being experienced.

Another aspect of the nature of mind is its luminosity. Normally we think of this term in a visual sense. We think of a luminous body like the sun or the moon which shines and gives off light. However, this is merely a metaphor to give us some idea of what is being hinted at. To say that the mind is luminous in nature is analogous to saying that space is illuminated. For example, we can have empty space and there might be no illumination; then the space would be obscured. There is space, but no ability to see clearly; there is no direct experience possible in complete darkness. Just as there is clear vision in illuminated space, so in the same way, while mind is essentially empty, it exhibits the potential to know, which is its luminosity. This is not a visual experience per se, but the ability of mind to know, perceive and experience.

In our continuing attempt to describe the nature of mind, to describe the indescribable, we next speak of the unimpeded or unobstructed dynamic nature of mind. It will be useful to divide this element of unimpededness into a subtle and a gross aspect. The most subtle or fundamental level of the unimpeded quality is an awareness of the emptiness and luminosity of the mind. The mind is essentially empty and has this illuminating potential to know and experience.

The coarse or gross aspect of the unimpeded dynamic manifestation of mind is conscious experience, which does not depart from emptiness and luminosity, but is the experience of, for example, seeing and recognizing form as form, hearing and recognizing sound as sound, and so forth. This is the ability of mind to experience the phenomenal world, to make distinctions, to make value judgments based upon that discrimination.

We may utilize a metaphor here. The Emptiness of mind is the ocean; the luminosity of mind is the sunlit ocean; and the unimpeded dynamic quality of mind is the waves of the sunlit ocean. When we take the waves of the sunlit ocean as an event or situation, it is not as though we are trying to separate ocean from waves from sunlight; they are three aspects of a single experience. The unity of these three aspects forms the seed or potential for enlightenment. They are the pure nature of mind; the impurity of obscurations, ignorance and confusion overlays what is inherently the nature of mind itself.

There has always been the pure nature of mind and there has always been fundamental ignorance in the mind. The essential empty nature of mind has never been recognized for what it is; the luminous nature of mind has never been experienced for what it is; and the unimpeded or dynamic manifestation of mind, this consciousness, this awareness, has never been directly experienced for what it is. Because this level of ignorance is so subtle and so fundamental, and because it is co-existent with mind itself, it has been valid as long as mind itself has been valid. We speak of it as co-emergent ignorance.

Just as there are subtle and gross aspects to the dynamic awareness of mind that we noted earlier, there are subtler and coarser aspects to the ignorance of mind. We have already spoken of the fundamental level of co-emergent ignorance, the lack of direct experience of the empty, clear and unimpeded nature of mind itself, and this is the subtle aspect of co-emergent ignorance.

There is second level of ignorance that we might distinguish which is termed labeling ignorance; it is a more conventional or relative ignorance. Not only do we lack direct experience of the essential emptiness of mind, for example, but we substitute the self or ego for that experience. The individual mind as something ultimately real is a distortion that has taken place, due to a lack of direct experience, and this is an example of labeling or relative ignorance. Likewise, due to a lack of direct experience of the clarity and luminosity of mind, there is a projection of something other than the mind, an object other than the subject. This is again a relative level of ignorance. Rather than being a simple lack of direct experience, there has been a distortion into some *thing*.

So the second level of obscuration in the mind is the aspect of ignorance which begins to label things as I and other. Lacking direct experience, the distortion takes place on a coarser level of dualistic fixation between subject and object.

Once we have this dualistic framework, of course, emotionality develops and action takes place. Karmic tendencies are reinforced by actions based on the emotional confusion which springs from dualistic clinging. All of it is based upon the fundamental ignorance which is the lack of direct experience of the nature of the mind itself.

The nature of mind is like empty space, like the sky, which at present is filled with clouds and fog and mist and periodically has all kinds of activity such as hailstorms, snowstorms, rainstorms and thunder and lightning. This activity does not change the fact that the empty space is still present, the sky is still there. However it is temporarily obscured by all these activities. The reason the Buddha presented his teachings, which encourage basic moral choices between virtuous and non-virtuous actions and encourage the practice of meditation, is to eliminate the obscuring and confusing aspects of our experience. This permits the inherently pure nature of mind to become more obvious and be discovered, just as the sun becomes more obvious as the clouds begin to dissipate.

As the most effective means to bring about that transformation rapidly and directly, the Mahamudra approach has no equal. It gives us the most powerful methods to turn the balance, to eliminate obscurations and allow that manifestation to take place. Our present situation as unenlightened beings is due to the victory of ignorance over intrinsic awareness; Mahamudra speeds the victory of awareness over ignorance.

When we are concerned with foundation Mahamudra, then, we first and foremost need to be exposed to ideas. This should take place in the presence of a teacher who holds the transmission and can accurately introduce us to the concepts which are the theoretical underpinnings of the Mahamudra approach. After we receive the teachings and understand what is being said, we take them home with us and begin to apply them to our own experience. We say to ourselves, "Well, mind is empty, clear and unimpeded. What do I experience when I experience mind? Does it exist; does it not exist?" We check with our own experience. That is very beneficial for developing a kind of mental construct from which we can work, though it is not the ultimate experience. Conceptual understanding is only a springboard, because the theme of Mahamudra is spontaneity and uncontrivedness, and it is still a very contrived situation to *think* of the mind as being empty. To directly experience the nature of mind itself requires meditation.

So on this foundation level of Mahamudra, the analytical approach is followed by, and interwoven with, the more intuitive approach of relaxing the mind in its own natural state. The particular skill required is that it must be a state of total relaxation which is not distracted or dull. It is not an objective experience of looking for the mind or looking at the mind. On the other hand, it is not a blind process; we are not unaware. There is seeing without looking; there is dwelling in the experience without looking at the experience. This is the keynote of the intuitive approach.

While the mind is poised in the state of bare awareness, there is no directing the mind. One is not looking within for anything; one is not looking without for anything. One is simply letting the mind rest in its own natural state. The empty, clear and unimpeded nature of mind can be experienced if we can rest in an uncontrived state of bare awareness without distraction and without the spark of awareness being lost. The pure nature of mind calls to mind an image such as the sun or the moon, a luminous body. The unimpeded nature of mind permits the act of thinking of this form in the first place, and we can rest in the bare perception of that form without any further elaboration; we dwell in the bare awareness of that form.

Thus one's approach in developing the foundation aspect of Mahamudra is, at times, an analytical or conceptual approach of examining the mind from the point of view or trying to locate it, describe it or define it, and at other times an intuitive approach of dwelling in the experience of total relaxation of mind, an uncontrived state of bare awareness which allows the experience of the nature of mind to arise.

The third Karmapa wrote a prayer in which he said that confidence comes of clearly establishing the parameters of practice by defining the nature of mind precisely. Then the confidence of actually experiencing and appreciating it on an intuitive level completes the foundation. The prayer describes meditation as remaining true to that experience by refining through continual attention to and absorption in that experience. Path Mahamudra is the refining of and attending to the basic experience of the nature of mind and refine it, then at a certain point, an automatic quality arises; the experience happens without one generating it or discovering it. The mind is subject to very little distraction at all. When this occurs, one has entered into the level of path Mahamudra which is termed *one-pointedness* or focus on a single thing. In this case, the focus is on a single aspect of experience, the experience of mind nature. Traditionally there are three degrees of this one-pointed experience: a lesser degree of intensity, an intermediate, and a very intense degree.

As meditation continues, the next clearly definable stage is a certain spontaneity, where the experience is no longer the result of any particular effort; to think of meditation is to have the experience. One begins to discover the incredible simplicity of the nature of mind, absolutely free from any complication and this, in fact, is the name given to the second phase of experience, *simplicity*, the freedom from complication. Traditionally this phase also has three degrees of intensity; a lesser degree, an intermediate degree, and a very intense degree.

In the beginning, one is meditating for short and frequent periods of time rather than attempting long periods of forcing the mind. But as experience accumulates and simplicity arises, one's meditation naturally begins to be longer and longer duration. Soon the phase termed *one flavor*

arises, which is the experience of the essential quality of all aspects of phenomenal experience. Soon, seeing form, hearing sounds, smelling smells, tasting tastes, feeling textures, thinking thoughts, formless states of awareness and form states of awareness all have the same flavor. One perceives the underlying essential nature of these experiences, rather than being concerned with the superficial content. This is the third phase of the experience of path Mahamudra, the unique flavor of all aspects of one's experience, and again, it has different degrees of intensity forming a spectrum of experience, rather than clearly defined steps.

The spontaneity of the experience will take over completely so that there seems no need to meditate at all. The experience arises without there being any particular thought of meditating. This is a glimpse which intensifies further to become the actual experience of the nature of mind without there being any thought of meditation. The most intensive degree of this stage is that meditation and being become one. At that point there is no longer any distinction between meditating and not meditating because one is always meditating. The full experience of this is the most intense degree of the fourth phase of path Mahamudra which is termed *beyond meditation*. The sustained experience of this phase is the result of all one's efforts, Mahamudra. It is the quintessential experience, the pinnacle experience in terms of the attainment of enlightenment and realization.

It is important to identify the context of the Mahamudra experience. Tradition assures us that any approach, other than one's own efforts at purifying and developing oneself and the blessing that one receives from an authentic and qualified guru.(10), is stupid. Of course, at a certain point, the practice becomes spontaneous and the efforts to purify oneself and to develop devotion to receive blessings from one's guru become second nature. However, this does not become spontaneous until the intense level of the simplicity experience, the second phase of Mahamudra practice, when the practice of meditation becomes one's purification, one's development and the receipt of blessing from one's guru. The fundamental identity of the guru's mind and one's own mind begins to be directly perceptible; one's deepening awareness assures further development of merit and the further purification of obscurations and negativity; there is no necessity to formally supplicate one's guru, meditate upon one's guru or generate devotion in order to receive blessing, because the meditation practice carries one along.

Up to that point, however, the efforts that we make to purify ourselves, to develop our devotion and open ourselves to the guru's blessing are absolutely crucial. Only present exertions will convey us to the time when they are no longer necessary; the practice of meditation becomes the process of purification, the process of development and the process of receiving blessing.