

Mahamudra: The Great Seal

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By Dzogchen Ponlop, Excerpted from pp. 21-38

The essential nature of Mahamudra is like all-encompassing space; it rests nowhere and is free from all conceptions. The Mahamudra teachings come from the direct teachings of Lord Buddha Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha. The lineage of these Mahamudra teachings has continued from the time of the historical Buddha until now in an unbroken lineage. There is an oral transmission or "ear-whispered" lineage and a textual transmission lineage.

The Sanskrit term *mahamudra* is *chak gya chenpo* (*phyag rgya chen po*) in Tibetan. The meaning of *chak gya chenpo* is explained in many different ways in our tradition, one of the principal sources for these explanations being the *Mahamudratilaka Tantra*. Overall, *chak gya chenpo* traditionally comprises three aspects, found in the meaning of the syllables *chak*, *gya*, and *chenpo*.

The first syllable, *chak*, refers to emptiness or shunyata, and the experience of emptiness, which in the Mahamudra tradition must become personal and genuine. *Chak* thus stands for the innermost awareness or insight of shunyata, the realization of the inseparability of samsara and nirvana in their nature of emptiness.

The second syllable, *gya*, literally means "seal" or "symbol." In its deeper sense, *gya* refers to the unaltered, unfabricated, or unconditioned nature of wisdom: the experience of going beyond samsaric existence, of freedom from the subtle fetters of complexities. *Gya* signifies the intrinsic quality or abiding reality of all things, which transcends duality. It is the primordial purity that encompasses everything.

The third syllable, *chenpo*, means "great" or "pervading." The fundamental nature of mind is all-pervasive and the nature of everything. It is the union of emptiness and wisdom. *Chenpo* signifies this union and the realization that freedom is innate in the true nature of reality.

Therefore, literally speaking, Mahamudra means "great symbol" or "great seal." It also means "great gesture." The term *great seal* is used in the sense of an emperor's seal. When an emperor signs a constitutional decree, at the end there is a seal that carries the full weight of this authority. Until it is sealed, the law means nothing, but once it has been sealed, there is nothing that is beyond that law. In this case, the seal is the nature of all reality. In other words, there is no other nature or reality that exists beyond this

nature of luminosity and emptiness, this nature of appearance and emptiness. The nature of ego is great emptiness. The nature of self is selflessness. The nature of the phenomenal world is nonexistence. It is empty yet appearing. That is why it is said that emptiness is inseparable from appearance, from luminosity itself.

The term *great symbol* is also used, but "symbol" is not meant in the conventional sense of something that stands for or suggests something else; instead, it is the thing itself-the real thing, the actual stuff. For example, we could say that spaghetti is the symbol of Italian food. However, when we eat spaghetti we are not eating a symbol. We are eating actual Italian food. In a similar way, the "great symbol" is not like a picture that represents a real place somewhere else. The great symbol is the great nature of true reality. It is the actual taste of the true nature of inseparable emptiness-luminosity.

Maitripa, a great Indian *mahasiddha* and one of the forefathers of the Kagyu lineage, explains the definition of Mahamudra in this way:

Mahamudra is nondual awareness that transcends intellect; it is nonconceptual and lucid, like all-pervading space. Though manifesting boundless compassion, it is devoid of self-nature. It is like the reflection of the moon on the lake's surface. It is lucid and undefinable, without center or circumference, unstained, undefiled, and free from fear and desire. Like the dream of a mute, it is inexpressible.

The Mahamudra teachings are the essence teachings of the New Translation school of Tibetan Buddhism. This school refers to those traditions that developed in Tibet during the second spreading of the Buddhist doctrine, beginning in the eleventh century. In particular, the New Translation school includes the Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelugpa schools. The Old Translation school refers to the Nyingma lineage. The fundamental elements of Mahamudra are presented in the Mahayana journey in the teachings on transcendental wisdom or knowledge called *prajnaparamita*. The teachings on Mahamudra are also taught in the different tantras and *shastras*. The tantras refer to the scriptures or teachings of the Buddha that form the basis of the Mantrayana. Shastras are commentaries or philosophical treatises that elucidate the Buddha's teachings.

The Glacier Mountain

The Sun of Devotion

In order to follow the path of Mahamudra, we need the genuine transmission from the lineage and the lineage masters. From the Mahamudra point of view, the guru plays a very important role because no matter how well, how directly, and how perfectly Shakyamuni Buddha transmitted the Mahamudra teachings, we are not able to be in his

presence now. However, we are able to be in the presence of our gurus, and it is only through their blessings that we are able to directly receive, connect with, and realize this heart of Mahamudra. In the Mahamudra tradition it is said that the compassion of the guru and buddhas is equal—there is no difference in their compassion. However, in terms of kindness, our guru is more kind to us than all the buddhas of the three times, because he or she directly points out our true nature. Thus, the key to Mahamudra experience or realization is our devotion to the guru and the lineage. Without devotion, there is no *adhishtana*, or blessing transmission. Without adhishtana, there is no way for us to realize the true nature of mind.

In one of the songs of realization, it is said that devotion is like the sun shining on a snow mountain. This mountain is like the guru. If the sun of devotion does not shine on the glacier mountain of the four kayas of the guru, then the river flow of blessings will not descend. This metaphor shows us whether or not we will be able to receive the transmission of Mahamudra. The more intensely the sun of devotion shines, the more strongly the stream of blessings will flow. If it is too cold, or too cloudy, or if no sun is shining, then the glacier mountain remains frozen. It is always beautiful, it is always pure, but the stream does not come down from that mountain. Therefore, generating devotion is very important if we are to receive these blessings. It is important to pay close attention to our mind of devotion. Because devotion to the guru, to the lineage, and to the teachings of Mahamudra is so strongly emphasized, the path of Mahamudra is frequently known as the path of devotion.

Devotion is the path, and devotion is realization. Devotion is experience and devotion is fruition. Whenever we experience genuine devotion, we experience Mahamudra mind; and whenever we realize the depth of devotion, we realize the true state of Mahamudra mind.

Devotion is not simply blind faith; rather, the experience or taste of devotion is an experience of the naked reality of our mind, especially of our emotions. Devotion comes from trust and from surrendering ourselves. Such surrender and trust come from confidence, which comes from knowledge. Therefore, this devotion is deeply rooted in wisdom and knowledge.

Passionate Devotion: Working with Emotions

The experience of devotion is extremely personal in terms of its degree and its way and power of manifestation. Devotion is something that we need to connect with naturally, without preconceptions. For example, we do not need to sit down for an hour in order to try to figure out how or what it should be, or toward which object it should arise. Devotion has to arise naturally with the help of the lineage and with the help of our

emotions. The power of a genuine experience of devotion is utterly beyond concept. When we fully experience devotion, it transcends all conceptuality. When we fully experience devotion, it helps us to transcend emotions, even though it arises from or is based on emotions.

As with every aspect of the path, devotion does not arise naturally or easily for everybody, nor is it something that is necessarily constant. It is similar to our experience of meditation practice. Every time we sit and meditate, it is different. Sometimes our practice is deep and calm. We might feel that our practice is a wonderful achievement and that we can work with all of our thoughts and emotions. At other times we might feel as though we have never sat on a cushion before. We might feel that we have lost everything, including all qualities of calmness. The same is true for devotion, except that it fluctuates even more.

Ultimately speaking, devotion is not directed outside our mind. We direct devotion toward "ordinary mind," which is the Mahamudra mind, and to the genuine heart of enlightenment that is within us and within our emotions. We direct devotion to the mind of enlightenment that is right within our fear and hope. There is no Mahamudra mind outside these experiences.

Devotion involves working with our emotions very directly. In fact, the two are closely tied together. Within devotion, we can find elements of all our emotions. There are elements of passion. There are surely elements of jealousy, and there are elements of aggression and pride as well. While there are elements of every emotion within devotion, the strongest is passion, followed closely by jealousy. It is important for us to process these emotions rather than deny them. We need to see them clearly while also trying to remember the kindness, wisdom, prajna, and skillful means that we have received from our guru and the lineage. We should continue to try to develop our devotion further, no matter how much or what kind of emotion arises.

Jealousy is frequently involved with devotion because we tend to compare ourselves with others and become competitive. For example, in a class, there are many students but only one teacher. When the teacher acknowledges another student, you might feel, "Oh, my colleague is doing better than I am." Because the teacher acknowledged that person and forgot to acknowledge you or even smile, you might suddenly think, "What's wrong? He smiled at the other guy over there. Did I do something wrong?" There is a lot of fear involved with these thoughts.

We might not be totally crazy with jealousy, but there is sometimes a sense of feeling incompetent or unworthy. This also arises from making comparisons. For example, you might compare yourself with other students and think, "Oh, I'm not worthy. They can do

things better than I can." At other times, you might say the opposite: "I can do things better than they can." Either way, it becomes problematic.

Having some sense of openness, willingness, and courage to work with such emotions when they arise becomes a powerful way to realize and experience true devotion. Sometimes it is necessary to recognize the helpful nature of our emotions and to acknowledge their power and potential to be of benefit to us. It is not fair to accuse and blame our emotions all the time.

Original Devotion

Trust in our own enlightened heart can be reinforced through trusting the heart of the guru. We call this "merging our mind with the mind of the guru" or "mixing our heart with the heart of the guru." We have to do this intentionally in the beginning, with trust and with effort. Gradually, however, it does become effortless. Sometimes when we focus totally and one-pointedly on the guru's mind, we have the experience of merging—the experience of being one person. What happens in the next moment? We might feel claustrophobic and run out of the room.

Try to generate devotion—in any amount, in any style, in any way you can. You can cultivate devotion in your own way. Do not worry about how someone else does it. If you simply mimic others because you think that devotion should be uniform, then that will not be genuine. Do not be afraid to express devotion in your own way, whether it is a Tibetan way, an American way, a European way, an Asian way, a Russian way, or any other way. It does not matter. Pure devotion does not have any standardized form or mold to fill. If there were a standard form for devotion, then teachers would have handed it out a long time ago, but there is no checklist or fill-in-the-blanks for devotion. Every individual way of expressing devotion should be as authentic, original, and individual as possible. Then there will be a real sense of connecting with your heart—not in exactly the same way that someone else's heart is connecting, but in a way that you can feel your own heart connection. That is the most important part of our whole journey.

The Mahamudra path is very different from the Hinayana-Mahayana journey in this respect. In the Hinayana-Mahayana journey, there are standard forms. There are checklists. If you are taking monastic ordination or bodhisattva vows, there is a checklist for what you can and cannot do. There is a standard way to conduct yourself on that path. However, on the Mahamudra path, it is very individualized, and that is why your own personal connection with the lineage becomes so powerful and important.

It has been taught that if someone brings to the practice of Mahamudra the tendency to take great pride in not relying on the spiritual guidance of the guru or in not following the guru's meditation instructions, then such a person might fall into the animal realm. In other words, their practice might lead them into a realm of stupidity, a state of completely spaced-out consciousness. This shows us that on the path of Mahamudra, devotion is beyond any question, such as whether or not we should have it or whether we can substitute something else for it. Devotion is not optional. Mahamudra can be realized only through the path of devotion.

Mahamudra Lineage History

Mahamudra emphasizes the continuity of oral instructions, which are passed on from master to student. This emphasis is reflected in the literal meaning of the name "Kagyu." The first syllable, *ka* (*bka'*), which means "speech," refers to the scriptures of the Buddha and the oral instructions of the guru. *Ka* carries the sense of the enlightened meaning conveyed by the words of the teacher, as well as the force with which such words of insight are conveyed. The second syllable, *gyu* (*brgyud*), means "lineage" or "tradition." Together, these syllables mean "the lineage of the oral instructions."

Over twenty-five hundred years ago, Prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree in Bodhgaya and then manifested as the Buddha. According to Buddhist cosmology, he was the fourth historic Buddha of this fortunate aeon. Prince Siddhartha's achievement of enlightenment—the realization itself—is called the *dharmakaya*, or the body of truth. When that realization is expressed through subtle symbols, it is called the *sambhogakaya*, or the body of enjoyment. The physical form of Shakyamuni Buddha, which is the historical manifestation of such realization in a form more accessible to sentient beings, is called the *nirmanakaya*, or the body of manifestation.

The Mahamudra lineage traces its origin back to Shakyamuni Buddha through Marpa Chökyi Lodrö, the great translator and realized yogi who brought the unbroken lineage of Buddha's Mahamudra from India to Tibet. At the age of fifteen, Marpa first trained as a translator under Drogmi Shakya Yeshe and later traveled three times to India and four times to Nepal in search of Buddhist teachings. Marpa is said to have studied with 108 masters and yogis, but his principal teachers were Naropa and Maitripa. Marpa then transmitted the lineage to his heart son, the famous yogi Milarepa.

The great master Gampopa, who is also known as Dakpo Lhaje, and Rechungpa were the principal students of Milarepa. Gampopa was prophesied in the sutras by the Buddha and established the framework of the lineage by unifying Milarepa's Mahamudra lineage with the stages-of-the-path tradition of the Kadampa lineage. The resulting

unique tradition, known as the Dakpo Kagyu, was critical to the unfolding of the Kagyu lineage.

Gampopa transmitted this lineage to his three heart sons, one of whom was the First Karmapa, Düsüm Khyenpa. In the Kagyu lineage supplication, the line "knower of the three times, omniscient Karmapa" is a reference to the First Karmapa. The transmission was passed from the First Karmapa to his disciple, Dragon Rechenpa, and then from him to the Second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi. It has passed continuously in this way to the present incarnation, who is the Seventeenth Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the youngest living Mahamudra lineage holder. The continuity of this lineage transmission is known as the golden rosary.

In general, there are two main lineages of Mahamudra, which are known as the direct and the indirect lineages. The original source of the transmission of the direct lineage is the Buddha Vajradhara, while the original source of the transmission of the indirect lineage is Shakyamuni Buddha.

The Direct Lineage

The original source of the teachings for the special transmission of the direct lineage is Vajradhara, who is the primordial, or dharmakaya, buddha. Vajradhara expresses the quintessence of buddhahood itself, the essence of the historical Buddha's realization of enlightenment. The skylike dharmakaya nature of Vajradhara is depicted in paintings by his dark blue color. Vajradhara is central to the Kagyu lineage because Tilopa received the Vajrayana teachings directly from Vajradhara, who is synonymous with the dharmakaya, the source of all manifestations of enlightenment. Thus, the Kagyu lineage originated from the very nature of buddhahood.

Tilopa acknowledged the origin of this Mahamudra lineage in his songs. He sang, "I, the yogi Tilopa, do not have any human teacher; I do not have any human master to follow. My teacher, my guru, is the great Vajradhara, the dharmakaya nature of Vajradhara." This shows that the lineage came directly from Vajradhara to Tilopa.

The Indirect Lineage

The line of transmission originating with Shakyamuni Buddha, which is known as the indirect lineage, is also referred to as the oral instruction lineage. Tilopa originally inherited four main streams of wisdom that were transmitted by Indian mahasiddhas

such as Saraha, Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Chandrakirti, and Matangi. Tilopa then condensed these four special transmission lineages into one and transmitted it to Naropa. This stream then passed from teacher to disciple: from Naropa to Marpa, Marpa to Milarepa, and then Milarepa to Gampopa.

However, Gampopa received the transmissions of two different Indian lineages. One was the tantric lineage, which came from Tilopa to Naropa to Marpa and then to Milarepa. That tradition conveys a very strong Vajrayana element. Gampopa also received the full transmission of the Indian master Atisha, which is known as the Kadampa lineage.

Atisha was trained at Nalanda University and became a great Buddhist master. He also served as the discipline master at Nalanda University. During the time of Marpa, he came to Tibet and transmitted many Sutrayana teachings. He was responsible for the transmission of both the philosophical and the practice traditions of the Prajnaparamita teachings. Thus, Atisha's lineage was based primarily on the sutras, although he also transmitted some tantric and Mahamudra practices.

Therefore, when the Mahamudra lineage came to Gampopa, it was a rich mixture of the tantra and sutra traditions. Gampopa presented the Mahamudra lineage by teaching three different methods of practicing Mahamudra.

Three Classifications of Mahamudra

According to the teachings and tradition of Lord Gampopa's lineage, the three classifications of Mahamudra are Sutra Mahamudra, Mantra Mahamudra, and Essence Mahamudra. Sutra Mahamudra is Mahamudra: The Great Seal is primarily based on the sutra teachings, and Mantra Mahamudra is primarily based on the mantra teachings. Essence Mahamudra draws from both sutra and mantra, but is traditionally distinguished as the devotional path based on blessings.

Sutra Mahamudra: The Secret Road in the City

The general teachings of Mahamudra were presented by Lord Buddha and his followers in such sutras as the Prajnaparamita sutras or the discourses on transcendental knowledge. These sutras teach primarily "the great emptiness." The shortest of the Prajnaparamita sutras is the *Heart Sutra*, which teaches the inseparability of form and emptiness. That sutra, along with the whole collection of Prajnaparamita teachings, is one of the bases for Sutra Mahamudra.

The teachings on buddha nature are the other basis for Sutra Mahamudra. The buddha-nature teachings point out that the nature of our mind, emotions, and thoughts is complete wakefulness. That wakefulness is what we call buddhahood, or enlightenment. Furthermore, that enlightenment is the nature of all sentient beings. This essence of enlightenment is what we call buddha nature or *tathagatagarbha* in Sanskrit.

These two streams of teachings form the basis for the sutra aspect of Mahamudra. The practice of Sutra Mahamudra essentially involves the study and contemplation of these sutras, followed by meditation. We contemplate the teachings on emptiness, or *shunyata*, as well as the teachings on buddha nature, which is our fundamental wakefulness. Through this process, we discover our own heart of enlightenment. We discover that enlightenment is nothing external to us but is found within this very mind—within our emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. It is within these experiences that we see the basic state of enlightenment.

The meditation of Sutra Mahamudra essentially consists of resting one's mind, free of mental activity, in the state of nonconceptual wisdom. This is the fundamental definition of Sutra Mahamudra: mind resting in the state in which it experiences the *dharmadhatu*, which is the expanse or nature of all things. This resting is essentially a nonconceptual wisdom beyond all elaboration, or the unity of clarity and emptiness. In this context, one meditates in the following way: The object of one's meditation is luminosity free of any projections; the perceiving subject is the lack of mental engagement; and one meditates without mental engagement. There are many extensive explanations on meditating without mental engagement, found primarily in the teachings of Maitripa and Sahajavajra.

The Sutrayana approach to Mahamudra is seen as a very profound method because it does not require any of the sophisticated and complex tantric rituals, deity yoga visualization practices, or *samayas*. It is a simple sutra approach, yet it conveys the direct transmission of the tantric essence of awakening. This particular approach is also known as a secret passage. It can be compared to a secret street within a city—a route that has not been widely discovered. Although it is right in the heart of the city, very few people know about this secret street. What is the difference between this street and the other streets in the city? This street is a shortcut, without traffic or traffic lights, and it is a direct route. This street is right within this very city, and it will take you straight to your destination without any delays. Thus, in order to find this path, you do not have to go far. The direct and profound methods of Sutrayana Mahamudra are found right within the sutra approach, right within the ordinary and simple path of spiritual practice. Through this path, we can attain complete buddhahood by traversing the five paths and ten *bhumis*.

Sutra Mahamudra is viewed as being very profound, straight to the point, yet simple. The difference between Sutra Mahamudra and other sutra approaches, such as the general Hinayana and Mahayana paths, is that Sutra Mahamudra has a tradition of skillful means that contains profound methods of directly pointing out the selfless and luminous nature of mind. There is a direct method of pointing out, which usually does not exist in other sutra approaches. The skillful methods of pointing out the nature of mind used in Sutra Mahamudra are imported, in a sense, from the Vajrayana tradition. Therefore, the essence of Sutra Mahamudra is usually described as being prajnaparamita, or the transcendental wisdom of emptiness, with a touch of the Vajrayana. Finally, it is called Mahamudra, the great seal, because by using the very words and teachings of the sutras, it brings the realization of Mahamudra.

The Sutra Mahamudra approach is seen as a specialty of the Kagyu tradition and was the central emphasis of Gampopa's teachings. Therefore, although it originated in India and was also taught by Marpa and Milarepa, Gampopa is regarded as the main figure responsible for bringing this teaching to its full development and manifestation.

Mantra Mahamudra: The Path of Great Upaya

The second aspect of the Mahamudra tradition is the approach of the Mantrayana, or the Vajrayana. This approach involves quite profound and sophisticated methods, which include working with creation stage and completion stage deity practices, as well as very detailed instructions on working with *nadi*, *prana*, and *bindu*. The main presentation of Vajrayana Mahamudra is found in the *Anuttarayoga* tantras and in the instructions of those tantras. These tantras are transmitted through the four principal *abhishekas*, or empowerments. When Mahamudra is introduced as the naked, natural state through the use of Vajrayana methods, this is called Mantra Mahamudra.

A special feature of the Vajrayana path is the variety and richness of its methods, through which one can realize the nature of mind. This diversity of methods is not emphasized in the Sutra Mahamudra approach, in which there is just one simple pointing-out method for experiencing Mahamudra. In Mantra Mahamudra, there are many means of pointing out mind's nature, such as the process of the four abhishekas. When we go through the initiation process of an abhisheka, we are empowered to practice the mandala of a particular deity, which symbolizes the nature of mind. This is the traditional way in which a student is introduced to the nature of mind. The images of deities represented in paintings and sculptures are actually reflections, mirror images, of the nature of our own mind. By working with such a reflection through the process of visualization, we are working toward the recognition of our own mind. For example, in order to see your own face, you have to rely upon a mirror. When you see your

reflection, you can say, "Oh, yes, my face has such and such features," and you can recognize whether your face is clean or dirty. Similarly, the pure and impure aspects of mind are reflected in these symbolic images of a deity. Thus, through deity yoga practice, Mantra Mahamudra reflects to us the nature of mind.

The Mantra Mahamudra deity practice is very profound; at the same time, it is quite easy to misunderstand the images and to misinterpret the deity as an external entity. The practice of the Vajrayana path requires a very strong understanding, and the source of that understanding is the instructions of the lineage and the Vajrayana tantras. When we study the instructions and receive the transmission, our understanding becomes clear. Through this clear understanding, we are able to genuinely relate to Vajrayana deity practice.

Essence Mahamudra: Simultaneous Realization and Liberation

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On this path, there is no need for either the elaborate methods of Mantra Mahamudra or the gradual training of Sutra Mahamudra. In Sutra Mahamudra, there are still some forms; for example, the practices of *shamatha* and *vipashyana* meditation, as well as the practices of bodhichitta, are retained. There is also a great deal of formal study. In Mantrayana Mahamudra, there is also a certain formality of method that can be seen in the reliance upon ceremony and ritual; for example, there are extensive liturgies, visualizations, and mantra recitations. Thus, in this sense, Vajrayana Mahamudra is also a very formal way of introducing the nature of mind. In contrast, the Essence Mahamudra path is totally formless. The transmission happens instantaneously. Essence Mahamudra is nothing more than one's naked, ordinary mind resting in the unfabricated state.

In the Essence Mahamudra tradition, all conceptual clinging, such as clinging to ideas of sacred and profane or of virtuous and unvirtuous, is cut through, and we work directly with the experience of mind and its nature. The lineage guru points out the nature of mind to us, directly and nakedly. This kind of pointing-out instruction is very genuine. It is not something that we can mimic or repeat. We cannot "try it out" one time and say, "That was just a rehearsal. It did not work out, so okay, let's do the same thing again." That is not how it works. In the tradition of this lineage, we get one direct and naked pointing out, which has an effect. Throughout the history of Essence Mahamudra, pointing out has always happened in a simple, ordinary way. This type of pointing out typifies the Essence Mahamudra approach, where we are working directly with our experiences of ordinary, worldly life, as well as our experience of the nature of mind.

Perspectives on the Mahamudra Journey

We prepare ourselves for the Mahamudra journey first by coming to understand its place within the more general Buddhist journey and, second, by grounding ourselves in its essential meanings, characteristics, and forms. Then we will be ready to look more closely at the details of the three modes of Sutra, Mantra, and Essence Mahamudra.

Ground, Path, and Fruition

The Mahamudra journey is usually viewed from the perspective of ground, path, and fruition. For example, when we begin our Sutra Mahamudra journey, we enter at the level of ground Mahamudra. At this stage, we are introduced to the fundamental nature of reality, the basic state of our mind and of the phenomenal world. We develop a clear intellectual understanding of the view of emptiness and of the nature of mind through our study, contemplation, and meditation practices. When we are ready to give rise to the actual experience of Mahamudra meditation, we enter the stage of path Mahamudra by first engaging in the preliminary practices and then receiving the pointing-out instructions from our guru, which prepare us to engage in the corresponding meditation practices. Subsequently, we develop our practice more fully through what are known as enhancement practices. The fruition stage is the completion of our journey. It is the point at which we fully discover the nature of our mind, which is the achievement of buddhahood. Thus, whether our Mahamudra journey follows the methods of Sutra, Mantra, or Essence Mahamudra, we relate to the progressive stages of ground, path, and fruition. This is true even though the Mahamudra teachings speak about "sudden awakening."

Sudden Awakening

Even in Sutra Mahamudra, there is some sense of sudden awakening. These teachings are typically distinguished from the Vajrayana Buddhist teachings, yet Gampopa describes the Mahamudra of the Sutrayana tradition as being consistent with the Vajrayana teachings. Therefore, we might well ask what it means to say that Sutra Mahamudra is consistent with the techniques of Vajrayana.

It is important to see that Sutra Mahamudra does not consist only of the teachings on emptiness yoga; it is not simply a philosophical or intellectual approach to understanding emptiness. Sutra Mahamudra introduces a certain method of "clicking," which comes from the Vajrayana tradition. When the "click" occurs, there is a strong sense of force—a sense of something happening suddenly. When the extensive teachings on emptiness are connected to this Vajrayana notion of clicking, they become much more powerful and our journey progresses much more quickly. This clicking is

strongly connected to or dependent upon our devotion to the teacher, to the teachings, and to the power of the blessings of the lineage. We suddenly click into a certain state of awakening. We are talking about two states of mind here: asleep and awake. When you are sleeping, you have the potential of being awakened—of being an awake person. You always have that potential, and from the point of view of potential, there is no difference between you lying there asleep and the awake person who is watching you sleep like a log. At the same time, there is a communication taking place between the sleeping mind and the awakened mind. For example, the fully awakened mind of Vajradhara communicated with Tilopa, who was possibly half-awake at a certain point. Then the clicking happened between them, and Tilopa was fully awakened by Vajradhara's teaching.

In one sense, we could see this click as the result of something coming from the outside. Because we experience the world dualistically, we cling to the notion of receiving something from outside ourselves. However, whatever we "receive" is not something foreign to the essence of our minds. It is already there in the same way that the potential for being awake is present in our minds while we are in a state of sleep. In order to wake up, we need only this clicking; it does not matter whether we use an alarm clock to click into the awakened state or another technique, such as a bucket of water, which is much more powerful. However, since we are following a progressive path, if we attempt to use the clicking method to jump into the state of awakening at the beginning of our journey, we might experience some confusion.

In general, our guru, our spiritual friend, guides our journey on the Buddhist path. Because of this, we always have some sense of a reference point and some sense of blessing. However, we should not misconstrue this to mean that our teacher has total power over us. A teacher does not have the power to pull us out of samsara. For example, at the general or basic Sutrayana level of the path, the teacher is simply like an alarm clock. We must make the effort to approach the clock and set the alarm for the right time. Then, when it buzzes in the morning, we have a choice about whether to wake up or go back to sleep. It is our own individual responsibility—we can press the snooze button or we can get up. Thus, there needs to be a sense of balance. Although the teacher or spiritual friend is very important on our journey, he or she is not like God. We have to put in our own effort. This effort begins with ground Mahamudra, which is the fundamental teaching of the Mahamudra path.