

# The Vow and Aspiration of Mahamudra

Including the Pith Instructions of Mahamudra  
by Tilopa

By Garmapa Rinjen Droje, Translated by C.A. Muses, Compiled by  
Marilynn Hughes





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## INTRODUCTION

(Bolded items are Additional Comments or Commentaries  
Added by Marilynn Hughes)

**“EDITOR’S NOTE** - “Mahāmudrā (Tib. p’yag-rgya-chen-po) means literally "the great attitude or symbolic gesture". The term derives from the Hindu Tantra (as *śri* or *mahāyantra*) and the subsequent Buddhist Tantra of North India. One writer of that school, Advayavajra, in his *Čaturmudrā*, refers to Mahāmudrā in very much the same way that Śakti—as ultimate Divinity as *Goddess*—is referred to in higher treatises of the Hindu Tantra: "She is not an object subject to time... she combines saṃsāra and nirvāṇa; her substance is universal Love; she is the unique essence of the Innate Transcendent Bliss.”

### **“TRANSLATOR’S INTRODUCTION**

“Buddhism seldom positively asserts what is the Truth. Rather, it teaches the truth-seekers to

understand and to explore their own minds, for in the quest of Reality nothing is more important or befitting for the seeker than to know *what the mind actually is* rather than to know only *what mind knows of*— the so-called knowledge and objects known by the mind. Reality is the object known, but the first step is to understand the knower of this Reality. Whatever one's beliefs, opinions, and thoughts, all these depend on the mind and come through the mind, for there is no possibility for one to escape from the sphere of mind in thinking or knowing.

After waking from sleep, each day of our lives begins with an awareness of 'I'. Descartes observed, "I think, therefore I am" — which seems logical to common sense since it feels the necessity for a knower in order for anything to be known. But whether or not this 'I' really exists and is substantial is debatable, says Buddhism. Although Buddhism denies the reality of the ego, it does not absolutely deny the reality of the "awareness," or thinking-process (at least in Mahayana Buddhism). Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to know what this "awareness" or "mind" is.

Buddhist schools employ two different approaches in the study of mind. The Vaibhasika and Yogacara may be said to use the "horizontal" approach, i.e. studying the mind analytically by mapping its divisions, characteristics, functions, etc., including the 8 Consciousnesses and mental functions of the different stages of Samadhis. The Tantric [Buddhist] schools and Zen, however, employ what may be called a "vertical" approach—urging the student to disregard the

analysis of functions and peripheral knowledge of mind and instead to penetrate directly and deeply to the very foundation of mind-essence.

To clarify for the readers the Buddhist view of these two approaches in studying the mind, the translator will explain them through applying what may be called the "three-dimension system" to the mind: The first dimension – function; the second dimension – the form; the third dimension – the essence-of-mind.

The first dimension (Chinese "*Yung*"; Tibetan "*Rtsl*") means "activity" or "function"; the second dimension, (Chinese *Shang*; Tibetan *Rnam Pa*) refers to the "form" or "characteristics." The third dimension (Chinese *Ti*; Tibetan *Ngo wo*) points to the essence or real nature of mind. The manifestations in the first dimension of mind – the peripheral or outer realm of mind – are comparatively easy to comprehend. The second dimension, the form and characteristics, is not easily understood without a certain kind of study or investigation. The third dimension denotes the transcendental aspect of mind or the Dimension of Beyond.

The function of mind refers to the capability of the mind to know or to be "aware" of the Five Objects (of sight, sound, touch, taste, feeling, smell), of Dharma (all objects, existences, and ideas, etc.), and if we include the two obscure consciousnesses (No. 7 and No. 8) their functions are to become aware of the illusory ego (in the case of No. 7) and the "form of all Dharmas" (in the case of No. 8). Also, the function of

mind refers to the emotional manifestations of mind in being able to express love, hate, anger, joy, etc. This realm, of the functioning-aspect-of-mind or the first dimension of mind, is very obvious and immediately known by all. Now, the second dimension—the form or characteristics of the mind—refers to the awareness of the mind, or more clearly, the "awaring-aspect-of-the-mind". This "awaring-aspect-of-mind" is found in all the Eight Consciousnesses, though some consciousnesses (such as No. 8, the Alaya) are not as sharply aware as the mind-consciousness or the eye-consciousness.

Although this "awareness" continually takes place in the mind of every individual, seldom is the individual conscious of the "awareness" itself but is rather primarily conscious of the objects of the awareness. To become "aware" of the "awareness" requires some study and effort. Holding onto the "awareness" for long periods during meditation will in time produce a change in the function and pattern of the 8 Consciousnesses and a *relative* transcendental accomplishment will be achieved. According to Buddhism, the final transcendental accomplishment—the perfect Buddhahood—will only be reached through the realization of the Void-nature of the "awareness." The frequently used terms in Mahamudra—"brightness" and "light"—refer to the "evolved-awareness" of the mind, while the "Void," "non-existent," and "non-creating" refer to the "root-nature" of awareness. This realm of the "Void-bright" is the essence of mind, here—the third dimension of the mind. In short, the essence of mind, as taught in

Mahamudra, is the "void-bright" or "awareness without subject-object".

Thus the teaching of Mahamudra disregards the first dimension of mind and even does not concern itself much with "awareness" but strives to cut through the Samsaric "awareness" which stems from the subject-object pattern of thought.

To completely realize the essence-of-mind is by no means an easy task. It requires years and *lives* of study and effort. One may ask, Why is it so difficult if the Buddha-nature is inherent in one's mind? What prevents this realization is the *force* of our "habitual thinking." On a small scale this bondage may be likened to that of some childhood habit or obsession which, although we know it is illusory and irrational, nevertheless grips us and influences our thinking and behavior because of early, deep-set conditioning. It is much the same in the case of our "endeavor for enlightenment"; though the Void-nature of mind is somewhat glimpsed or even realized, this does not permanently eliminate habitual thoughts which have been operating through immeasurable lifetimes in the past.

Therefore, Mahamudra and Zen can never be considered merely philosophy or art, for they are actually the most serious teachings of the Buddhist religion. They are teachings of liberation and should not be abused, as Zen has recently been in the Occident, by being made a subject of vain talk or subtle

speculations as though they were only a game of the mind.

The reader will discover that the opening stanzas of *The Vow* express the religious and spiritual tradition of Mahamudra. The first five stanzas present the fundamental principles and the necessary "wishes" of the Buddhists. The author of *The Vow* is Garmapa III (1284-1339) a very great authority and accomplished yogi whose numerous writings include *The Profound Inner Meaning Of Tantrism*, considered by Tibetan scholars the greatest work on the subject. *The Vow* is recited by the White School as a daily prayer.

Although this Vow is comparatively short, it contains the majority of the essential teachings of Mahamudra. In Tibet, there exists quite a body of books and commentaries explaining this Vow. At present these works are not available; therefore translator has supplied a short commentary to accompany the stanzas also. Also, since the original text was not available, the present translation was made from the Chinese text that the translator had previously made from the Tibetan.

The translator is confident that this *Vow of Mahamudra* is one of the highest teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and firmly believes it will contribute much to the search by psychologists and religionists for a deeper understanding of man's essential nature."

***The Vow of Mahamudra, Garmapa Rinjen Droje,  
Commentary and Translation by C.A. Muses, 1961***

## *From the Vow of Mahamudra*

### *Running Commentaries by C.A. Muses*

*(The Mahamudra is the Great Symbol of the body of teachings  
representing the culmination of all the practices in Buddhism)*

(Bolded items are Additional Commentaries added by Marilyn  
Hughes)

“1

I pray to the Guru,  
And to those holy beings in the Mandala (**Universe**),  
I pray to the Buddhas (**Enlightened Ones**) and to their  
Sons (**Bodhisattvas – (Soul who has generated great  
compassion and wishes to attain to Buddhahood for the  
benefit of all sentient life.)**) in the Three Times and in the  
Ten Directions,  
Remember me, have compassion and pity on me,  
Bless with accomplishment my wishes.

(Commentary from Sokka Gakkai International, Foundational Texts of Nichiren Buddhism) “The entire universe, all physical space. Specifically, the ten directions are the eight directions of the compass—north, south, east, west, northwest, northeast, southeast, and southwest—plus up and down. Buddhist scriptures refer to the existence of Buddha lands in all directions throughout the universe, each with its own Buddha. The expression “the Buddhas of the ten directions” in the sutras indicates these Buddhas. The phrase *ten directions* often appears with the phrase *three existences*, meaning past, present, and future existences. “The Buddhas of the ten directions and three existences” thus means all Buddhas throughout space and time.”

(Commentary added by Marilyn Hughes about the Ten Directions from the writings of Nagarjuna and the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra):

**“Verses of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra on the Ten Directions**

With Comments from Nagarjuna the Greatest Buddhist Philosopher after the Buddha, Founder of the Mahayana [The Great Vehicle] School of Buddhism.

**Nagarjuna’s Comments: East**

The Buddha’s virtue is pure in that it creates only peace & contentment, unlike the virtues of gods and dragons that can distress living beings.

**Verse of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra**

In the east there is a realm called *Without Distress*  
 Where there is a Buddha named *Virtue of Goodness*.  
 His physical signs are like a mountain of gold,  
     His name is heard boundlessly.  
     When people hear his name  
     They will attain the stage of no retreat.  
 I now fold my hands and worship Him  
 And pray He will abolish all grief and distress.

**Nagarjuna’s Comments: SouthEast**

The Buddha’s spiritual virtue makes gods and people be without sadness.

**Verse of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra**

In the southeast there is a realm called *Moon Light*  
 Where there is a Buddha named *Without Lament*.  
 His bright light is like the sun and the moon,  
 Upon meeting Him emotional distress is extinguished.  
     Ever teaching the Dharma for living beings,  
     All the inner and outer sufferings are abolished.  
 Praising the names of the Buddhas of the 10 Directions,  
     I bow my head in worship

### **Nagarjuna's Comments: South**

The Buddha is like sandal incense and a cool pool. Hearing the Buddha from afar is like detecting a current of incense, and in extinguishing the heated distress of the three poisons He is like the refresh-ment of a clear and cool pool.

#### **Verse of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra**

In the south there is a realm called *Rejoicing*  
 Where there is a Buddha called *Sandal Virtue*.  
 His face is like the full moon,  
 The brilliance of its light being without measure.  
 He is able to extinguish the heated distress  
 Of the three poisons in living beings.  
 Hearing His name one reaches the stage of no retreat  
 Therefore I bow my head in worship.

### **Nagarjuna's Comments: Southwest**

Because of the Buddha's spiritual qualities, powers, awakenings, etc., treasures are always being offered to living beings.

#### **Verse of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra**

In the southwest there is a realm called *Host of Signs*,  
 Where there is a Buddha named *Offering Treasure*.  
 Always with countless treasures of the Dharma,  
 He offers them broadly to all living beings.  
 The heads & faces of the gods worship  
 Their bejeweled hats bowed down to His feet.  
 Now with my five limbs on the ground  
 I take refuge in the honored one that offers treasure

### **Nagarjuna's Comments: West**

The brilliance of the Buddha's body and wisdom is without limit.

### Verse of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra

In the west there is a world called *Skillfulness*,  
 Where there is a Buddha called *Limitless Brilliance*.  
 The light of His body and the brilliance of His wisdom  
 Shine without bounds or limits.  
 Those that hear His name  
 Will attain the stage of no retreat.  
 I now bow my head in worship  
 And pray He will extinguish the bounds of Life & Death

### Nagarjuna's Comments: Northwest

The Buddha's physical body is like a wonderful blossom, with  
 its virtues being without limit.

### Verse of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra

In the northwest there is a world called *Host of Sounds*,  
 Where there is a Buddha names *Blossom of Virtue*.  
 The world has a multitude of bejeweled trees  
 Broadly issuing forth the wonderful sound of the Dharma.  
 With the seven blossoms of awakening,  
 He is ever adorning living beings.  
 The sign of His white tuft of hair is like the moon,  
 I now bow my head in worship.

### Nagarjuna's Comments: North

The Buddha's blessings of virtues are lofty and revealed like  
 banners and signs.

### Verse of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra

In the north there is a realm called *Unshakeable*  
 Where there is a Buddha called *Signs of Virtue*.  
 His body possesses the major and minor signs,  
 By which he adorns Himself.  
 In breaking the hateful host of devils

Good influences all the people and gods.  
 Hearing His name one reaches the stage of no retreat,  
 Therefore I bow my head in worship.

### **Nagarjuna's Comments: Northeast**

The Buddha is ever teaching the practices of the disciples, the self-awakened and the Bodhisattvas. With people speaking of lower, medium & higher levels of diligence, there is that called 'Practicing the Three Vehicles'.

**Theravada and Hinayana (Smaller Vehicle)**  
**Schools Based on the Teachings of the Buddha and focused on individual liberation. From the cycle of rebirth.**

**Sutrayana and Mahayana (Greater Vehicle)**  
**Developed by Nagarjuna embodying all of the previous doctrines, but focused on the attainment of Buddhahood for the good of all.**  
**Most Mahayana Buddhists will take the Vow of the Bodhisattva which consists of promising to continue incarnating until all living sentient beings have been liberated.**

**Vajrayana and Tantrayana (The Diamond Way)**  
**Building on the previous schools, Tantrayana is a profound and very often held secret psychological practice initiated to attain to Buddhahood very quickly and benefit all of life faster. More vows are taken to insure a more intensive practice.**

### **Verse of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra**

In the northeast there is a realm called *Peacefulness*,  
 Where all the treasures are attained together.  
 The Buddha is called *Practicing the 3 Vehicles*,  
 His body is adorned with limitless signs.  
 The light of wisdom and insight is without measure,  
 And is able to destroy the darkness of ignorance.  
 Living beings are without grief or distress,  
 And so I bow my head in worship.

### **Nagarjuna's Comments: Below**

Brilliant refers the brilliance of the Buddha's body, the Buddha's wisdom, and the light of the bejeweled tree.

**Verse of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra**

Down below there is the world that is *Broad and Great*,  
 Where there is a Buddha named *Brilliant Virtue*.  
 The signs of His body are wonderful and superlative,  
 A golden mountain of Jambu River sand.  
 With the sun of wisdom and insight He always  
 Opens the blossoms of good spiritual roots.  
 The precious ground is very broad and great,  
 And I bow my head in worship.

**Nagarjuna's Comments: Above**

The blessings of Buddha's disciples spread a host of virtues  
 broadly.

**Verse of the Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra**

Up above there is the realm of *Many Moons*,  
 Where there is a Buddha named *Ocean of Virtues*.  
 The great virtues of the Disciples  
 And the Bodhisattvas are without measure.  
 The Lion among those that are noble  
 Is named *Spreading Many Virtues*.  
 The devils all have fear of Him,  
 And so I bow my head in worship."

**Nagarjuna and Dasabhumika Vibhasa Sastra**

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) First, according to the traditions of Buddhist Tantric ritual, a supplication is offered to one's teacher (who is considered more important than the Buddhas), next to one's patron Buddha, then to the Darginis, Guardians, and other beings of the Mandala who grant protection and

certain powers to the yogi. This supplication to the esoteric or Tantric lineage is followed by one to the esoteric lineage of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the past, present, and future, and in all directions of space.

2

The pure action of my body and my mind  
 My virtuous deeds and those of all sentient beings  
 Are like clear streams flowing from the Snow  
 Mountain

– devoid of the defilements of the Three Circles  
 May they flow freely into the great ocean—  
 the ocean of the Buddha's Four Bodies.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) The pure action of body and mind and the virtuous deeds of sentient beings exist (pure in essence) only if one realizes that the action, the doer, and the receiver (The Three Circles) are alike empty and void.



The Three Circles, a Japanese Buddhist Dharma  
 Wheel

(Commentary from Sean Robsville, *Transcultural Buddhism*)  
 “The triskele or triskelion symbol, which resembles three commas or teardrop shaped beads chasing one another round a circle, is a Buddhist meditational symbol that represents the three aspects of Dependent Relationship which give existence to all functioning things.

The Buddhist teaching on Dependent Relationship states that phenomena exist in three fundamental ways. Firstly, phenomena exist by dependence upon causes and conditions. Secondly, phenomena depend upon the relationship of the whole to its parts and attributes. Thirdly, and most profoundly, phenomena depend upon designation by the mind [1]. *The mind is a non-physical aspect of the universe that is not reducible to matter.*

The appearance of motion of the three swirling teardrops symbolizes that the impermanence of all compound phenomena arises from these three ever-changing relationships.”

(Commentary by C.A. Muses continued . . . ) The unimpeded realization of this enables one to merge with (obtain) the Four Bodies of Buddha, or the three-in-one—the Dharmakaya (Formless Body), the Sambhogakaya (Subtle Body of Limitless Form), the Nirmanakaya (The Dimension of Ceaseless Manifestation), in the all-encompassing (Tantric) Body of Universal Essence (Primordial Consciousness).

### 3

Until I attain the Four Bodies of Buddha,  
 May even the name of Samsaric (Delusions,  
 miseries and sins)  
 Be unheard in all my future lives

While I enjoy the happy Dharma-Oceans (**Oceans of Teachings**).

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) It is a long journey from sentient being to Buddhahood (**Becoming an Enlightened One**). Even a diligent and well-gifted person, after strenuous efforts, may not attain Buddhahood in one lifetime, even though he depends on Mahamudra which is considered an "Abrupt" or "Sudden Enlightenment" teaching like that of Zen. Therefore, in Buddhist countries, people are made mindful of this and taught to pray for auspicious conditions and favorable environments in their future incarnations.

#### 4

May faith, intelligence, diligence and leisure,  
 Good Gurus (**Teachers**) and the essential teachings  
 come to me,  
 May I practice rightly without stumbling and  
 hindrances—  
 The blessings of Dharma filling my future lives.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) Mahamudra is not just philosophical. Without faith, intelligence, diligence, favorable environment, and skilled teachers there would be no base for its study and practice and no result for sentient beings still existing in the realm of causation.

#### 5

The Holy and Wisdom reckonings liberate me from  
 ignorance

The pith-instructions destroy my dark doubts forever  
 Through the light from meditation, vividly and  
 unmistakably, I behold Reality  
 Increase, O Light of the Three Wisdoms! (**Listening,  
 Hearing, Contemplation**)

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) Buddha taught that to judge rightly one should rely on the admonishments of the Sutras (**Holy Books**) and on one's own innate reason (the Holy and Wisdom reckonings). By not leaning blindly on just one or the other, one is less likely to err.

Some doubts can be dispelled through intellectual reasoning, but more subtle and deeply entrenched doubts cannot be eliminated through reasoning or study of the Sutras. These can only be destroyed by the "pith-instructions"—the clear, precise, practical instructions given by one's own Guru.

The real nature of mind can best be compared to the transparent brightness of physical light. Here, however, the word "light" is also used in a symbolic aspect to refer to the experience of the Three Wisdoms of the Foundation (the undeveloped Buddha-nature in every sentient being), of the Path (the partially realized Buddha-nature from meditation practice), and of the Fruit (or full enlightenment).

(Commentary added by Marilyn Hughes)

### **Pith Instructions of Mahamudra by Tilopa**

**"1.**

**Mahamudra cannot be taught, Naropa,  
 But your devotion to your teacher and the hardships you've**

met

Have made you patient in suffering and also wise:  
Take this to heart, my worthy student.

2.

For instance, consider space: what depends on what?  
Likewise, mahamudra: it doesn't depend on anything.  
Don't control. Let go and rest naturally.  
Let what binds you let go and freedom is not in doubt.

3.

When you look into space, seeing stops.  
Likewise, when mind looks at mind,  
The flow of thinking stops  
and you come to the deepest awakening.

4.

Mists rise from the earth and vanish into space.  
They go nowhere, nor do they stay.  
Likewise, though thoughts arise,  
Whenever you see your mind, the clouds of thinking clear.

5.

Space is beyond color or shape.  
It doesn't take on color, black or white: it doesn't change.  
Likewise, your mind, in essence, is beyond color or shape.  
It does not change because you do good or evil.

6.

The darkness of a thousand eons cannot dim  
The brilliant radiance that is the essence of the sun.  
Likewise, eons of samsara (Realm of Delusions)  
cannot dim  
The sheer clarity that is the essence of your mind.

7.

Although you say space is empty,  
You can't say that space is "like this".  
Likewise, although mind is said to be sheer clarity,  
There is nothing there: you can't say "it's like this".

8.

Thus, the nature of mind is inherently like space:  
It includes everything you experience.

9.

Stop all physical activity: sit naturally at ease.  
Do not talk or speak: let sound be empty, like an echo.  
Do not think about anything: look at experience beyond  
thought.

10.

Your body has no core, hollow like bamboo.  
Your mind goes beyond thought, open like space.  
Let go of control and rest right there.

11.

Mind without projection is mahamudra.  
Train and develop this and you will come to the deepest  
awakening.

12.

You don't see mahamudra's sheer clarity  
By means of classical texts or philosophical systems,  
Whether of the mantras, paramitas,  
Vinaya, sutras or other collections.

13.

Ambition clouds sheer clarity and you don't see it.  
Thinking about precepts undermines the point of  
commitment.  
Do not think about anything; let all ambition drop.  
Let what arises settle by itself, like patterns in water.  
No place, no focus, no missing the point –  
Do not break this commitment: it is the light in the dark.

14.

When you are free from ambition and don't hold any position,  
You will see all that the scriptures teach.  
When you open to this, you are free from samsara's  
(Consequence of actions from the past, present and future.)

When you settle in this, all evil and distortion burn up.  
This is called "The Light of the Teaching".

15.

The foolish are not interested in this.  
The currents of samsara constantly carry them away.  
Oh, how pitiable, the foolish – their struggles never end.  
Don't accept these struggles, long for freedom, and rely on a  
skilled teacher.  
When his (her) energy enters your heart, your mind is freed.

16.

What joy!  
Samsaric ways are senseless: they are the seeds of suffering.  
Conventional ways are pointless. Focus on what is sound and  
true.  
Majestic outlook is beyond all fixation.  
Majestic practice is no distraction.  
Majestic behavior is no action or effort.  
The fruition is there when you are free from hope and fear.

17.

Beyond any frame of reference mind is naturally clear.  
Where there is no path you begin the path of awakening.  
Where there is nothing to work on you come to the deepest  
awakening.

18.

Alas! Look carefully at this experience of the world.  
Nothing lasts. It's like a dream, like magic.  
The dream, the magic, makes no sense.  
Experience this grief and forget the affairs of the world.

19.

Cut all ties of involvement with country or kin,  
Practice alone in forest or mountain retreats.  
Rest, not practicing anything.  
When you come to nothing to come to, you come to  
mahamudra.

20.

A tree spreads its branches and leaves.  
Cut the root and ten thousand branches wither.  
Likewise, cut the root of mind and the leaves of samsara  
wither.

21.

Though darkness gathers for a thousand eons,  
A single light dispels it all.  
Likewise, one moment of sheer clarity  
Dispels the ignorance, evil and confusion of a thousand eons.

22.

What joy!  
With the ways of the intellect you won't see beyond intellect.  
With the ways of action you won't know non-action.  
If you want to know what is beyond intellect and action,  
Cut your mind at its root and rest in naked awareness.

23.

Let the cloudy waters of thinking settle and clear.  
Let appearances come and go on their own.  
With nothing to change, the world you experience becomes  
mahamudra.  
Because the basis of experience has no beginning,  
patterns and distortions fall away.  
Rest in no beginning, with no self-interest or expectation.  
Let what appears appear on its own and let conceptual ways  
subside.

24.

The most majestic of outlooks is free of all reference.  
The most majestic of practices is vast and deep without limit.  
The most majestic of behaviors is open-minded and impartial.  
The most majestic of fruitions is natural being, free of concern.

25.

At first, practice is a river rushing through a gorge.  
In the middle, it's the river Ganges, smooth and flowing.  
In the end, it's where all rivers meet, mother and child.

26.

When your mind is less acute and does not truly rest,  
Work the essentials of energy and bring out the vitality of  
awareness.

Using gazes and techniques to take hold of mind  
Train awareness until it does truly rest.

27.

When you practice with a sexual partner, empty bliss  
awareness arises.

The balancing of method and wisdom transforms energy.

Let it descend gently, collect it, draw it back up,

Return it to its place, and let it saturate your body.

When you are free from longing and desire, empty bliss  
awareness arises.

28.

You will have a long life, you will not gray, and you will shine  
like the moon.

You will radiate health and well-being and be as strong as a  
lion.

You will quickly attain the ordinary abilities and open to the  
supreme one.

May these pith instructions, the essentials of mahamudra,  
Abide in the hearts of all worthy beings.

*These are the great Tilopa's oral instructions. Tilopa taught these on the banks of the river Ganges to the Kashmiri pandit, the wise and learned Naropa. Naropa taught The Twenty-Eight Vajra Verses to the great interpreter, the king of translators, Marpa Chökyi Lodrö. Marpa finalized his translation at Pulahari in the north of India. Ken McLeod translated this into English in Los Angeles in the southwest of the United States, working from the efforts of previous translators and various commentaries."*

*Tilopa*

The Root-Principle is the Two Truths – the absence of the concrete and the null views

The superb Path is the Provisions – without either the exaggerating or minimizing views

The Fruit is the Two Benefits of neither Nirvana

**(Imperterbable Stillness of Mind) or Saṃsara (Repeating Cycle of Birth, Death, Life Characterized by Delusions, miseries and sins)**

In future life, may I meet such right teachings.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) These three terms – Root or Foundation, Path, and Fruit – are frequently used terms to explain the complete philosophy and procedure of Buddhism, though in Hinayana, general Mahayana, and Tantric Buddhism the terms Root, Path, and Fruit are applied differently. Here, the author points out that the basis or "Root" of Mahamudra is the view which transcends Yes and No, which goes beyond the truth of either existence or non-existence. The Path of Mahamudra is knowing the mind in its essence without either adding or deducting anything to its original nature. The Fruit is Buddhahood, the realization which transcends the concepts of both Nirvana and Saṃsāra. This Fruit is expressed in the Two Benefits – blessings accruing to oneself and blessings bestowed on others.

## 7

The Essence of Mind is the Two-in-One – the void and radiant original source,

Mahamudra, the Diamond-Practice, is the Purifier

The Purified are the flickering and insubstantial

Blindness and Defilements

May I attain the immaculate Dharmakaya, the purified Fruit.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) Mahamudra is called the "Diamond-Practice" because it is held to be the *strongest* antidote for delusory thoughts and worldly desires. To the sentient beings the Blindness (ignorance) and Defilements (desires) appear real and substantial, but the enlightened being knows them as insubstantial and nonexistent.

## 8

The View of Mahamudra lies in neither adding nor deducting from the nature of mind  
 Being mindful of this, (the View) without distraction,  
 is the root-action of Mahamudra  
 Of all meditations, this is the highest practice  
 Let me always find this right teaching of the View,  
 Action, and Practice.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) To understand the nature of mind is easy if one can recognize it without making any mental effort, and grasp it instantaneously as it is at this very moment. The practice of Mahamudra lies in the constant awareness of this view. Other teachings using visualization, mantras, and bodily and prana (**Life-force**) exercises must all employ effort and are With Form. Compared to them, the practice of Mahamudra, effortless and Without Form, is superb.

## 9

All Dharmas (manifestations) are the expression of mind

The mind is of no-mind – void in essence

Void, yet not extinct, it manifest all

Let me observe this essence, and retain this immutable view.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) Dharma: In Buddhism "Dharma" has two meanings. It means "Doctrine" and is also a general term to include all "objects, manifestations, and existences".

## 10

In our confusion, we consider the self-manifestation (which never came into being) apparent in outer objects

In our blindness, we hold the self-awareness to be the real ego

Because of the Two Clingings, sentient beings wander in Samsara

May I cut this root of Confusion and Blindness.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) Two Clingings: 1) The Clinging of Ego—clinging to the individual conditioned and continuously changing consciousness as the ego. 2) The Clinging of Dharma—clinging to objects and manifestations as real.

## 11

"Nothing really exists!" Buddha, himself, sees no existence

"All is not empty!" since the causes of Nirvana and

Samsara exist

This, is the Middle Path of the Two-in-One, neither agreeing nor contradicting.

May I realize the discrimination-free Mind-essence.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) One trying to understand Buddhism is often puzzled by its apparently contradictory statements such as, "Everything exists," "Nothing exists," "There is an ego," "There is no ego," "Meritorious deeds are beneficial," "Meritorious deeds do not exist." Such statements can be understood only if one learns to think from the standpoint of different categories of truth. For instance, in the Mundane category (or point-of-view) everything exists; but from the standpoint of Transcendental truth, nothing exists. This distinction in Buddhist philosophy between the Mundane and Transcendental views must be kept in mind.

## 12

No one can describe *that* by saying, "This is it!"

No one can deny that by saying, "This is not it!"

Such is the Non-created nature of Being which transcends the realm of Consciousness

May I attain, decisively, this uttermost truth.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) Because "the Non-created nature of Being—Mind-essence" lies beyond the realm of words and thoughts, it is indescribable; therefore, it can neither be affirmed nor negated. Furthermore, this Mind-essence though beyond words and thought is, nevertheless, all-pervading. Since it

embraces all, no one can deny it by saying of anything, "This is not the Mind-essence".

### 13

Ignorant of this, we drift in the ocean of Saṃsara  
 If one realizes this essence, there is no other Buddha  
 In the final truth, there is neither Yes nor No  
 May I realize the Dharma-nature – the principle of  
 Alaya!

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) The cause of Saṃsara is the Blindness – the subject-object pattern of thought which does not exist in the dualistic-free Mind-essence. Enlightenment or the attainment of Buddhahood is nothing but the complete realization of this Mind-essence. The experience of the final realm of truth lies beyond the opposites and thoughts of Yes and No.

### 14

The manifestation is mind, the Voidness is also mind  
 The enlightenment is mind, and the Blindness is also  
 mind  
 The springing of things is mind, and their extinction  
 is also mind  
 May I understand that all Increasing and Decreasing  
 inhere in mind.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) All activities, existences, experiences, Saṅsaric or Nirvanic, all stem from the mind. If one understands and realizes the mind, he understands and realizes all.

'Increasing' and 'Decreasing' here means the two opposites: the purity and defilement, the merits and sins, the enlightenment and blindness etc.

### 15

Unsullied by intentional practice or meditation-with-effort

Away from the Worldly-Wind of distraction

With no effort and correction, I rest comfortably on the natural state of mind

May I find the adroit and subtle teaching of Mind Practice.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) The difference between Mahamudra and other types of meditation is that in Mahamudra no meditation-effort and no correction is employed; but in most other types of meditations such as visualizing a subject, holding the breath, meditating on love and divine mercy a mental effort is always required, concentration—choosing one and rejecting the other—is always stressed, whereas in the practice of Mahamudra, no effort whatsoever is required. After one has realized the essence of mind, concentration or non-concentration, distracted thoughts and Samadhi (**State of Intense Concentration Reached through Meditation**) all become Mahamudra itself. Though for the beginners of Mahamudra, the distractions are obstacles for their meditation, they still should not '*intentionally* practice Mahamudra' or *meditate Mahamudra with effort*. Because any effort or intentional practice helps not but impedes the realization of Mind-Essence. Hence, to comfortably rest on "the awareness

of mind" and observe it is the key-instruction of Mahamudra.

## 16

The waves of Thought-Flow – strong and weak, clear  
and dim – subside  
Without disturbance the River-of-Consciousness  
flows naturally  
Far from the mud of drowsiness and distraction  
Let the steady and immutable Ocean of Samadhi,  
absorb me!

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) The chief difficulty for the meditator arises from the habitual flow-of-thought common to everyone and which, according to Buddhism, has had this characteristic *flowing* nature from the very no-beginning. Besides this uncontrollable and habitual thinking the two chief obstacles hindering the meditator are drowsiness and distraction. Only through the attaining of a steady Samadhi can these obstacles be overcome.

## 17

Repeatedly contemplating the incontestable  
mind,  
Clearly discerning the indiscernable meaning,  
I forever eliminate the doubts of Yes and No  
Let me surely behold my original face.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) "Original face" – A symbolic term denotes the original Buddha-nature innate in every sentient being from the very no-

beginning. It is interesting to note that this term, "Original face", is widely used in Chinese Zen as well as being found in the Mahamudra teaching of Tibet.

### 18

When I observe the (outer) objects, I find nothing but  
my own mind  
When I observe my mind, I find nothing but the  
Voidness  
Observing both mind and objects, free am I from the  
Two Clingings  
Let me realize the true nature of the illuminating  
Mind-essence.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) In the first step of Mahamudra practice, the yogi is taught to observe the outer objects and to keep on observing them. Continuing in this, he will come to the actual realization (not merely through belief or intellectual reasoning) that all objects are the phenomenal reflections of mind. Then he is taught to observe the mind, itself. From this continual observance, the yogi finally arrives at the realization that mind, itself, is merely voidness. When the yogi observes both mind and objects he is liberated from the Two Clingings – the Clinging of Ego which is the subjective-illusory conception of mind, and the Clinging of Dharma, which is the objective-delusory conception of mind. When one realizes the illuminating Mind-essence, one finds that neither ego nor objects exists. The two-fold egolessness – of persons and of things – taught also in the Lankavatara Sutra, one of the texts basic to Mahamudra and Zen.

## 19

Because *that* transcends the mind, it is called the Great Symbol

Because *that* frees from the extremes, it is called the Great Middle Way

Because that encompasses all and embrace all, it is called the Great Perfection

Let me understand that knowing one is knowing all.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) The Great Symbol (Tib. Pyag Rgya Chen Po) literally means "The Great Hand-Seal," referring to the custom of ancient times when the Emperor signed imperial edicts with the print of his hand. Mahamudra is like the imperial law which was supreme in its own realm and came to be called "The Great Symbol," being acknowledged as the teaching which could not be violated and which surpassed all others.

Since Mind-essence is intrinsically apart from the subject-object pattern of thought, the teaching of realizing the Mind-essence is in this respect called the teaching of the Great Middle Way (Tib. Dwu Ma Chen Po). Since Mind-essence intrinsically encompasses all and its teaching is the consummation of all teachings, it is called the Great Perfection (Tib. Rdzogs Pa Chen Po). If one succeeds in practicing one teaching, no matter by what name it is called, he succeeds in realizing all.

With Clings absent, the great bliss continuously  
 arises  
 With no form to cling to, the radiant light outshines  
 the dark hindrances  
 May I constantly practice the practice of no-effort –  
 transcending mind  
 The natural and spontaneous Non-Discerning.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) The sufferings and miseries of sentient beings are the result of 'tensions' which are originated from the 'fundamental tension'. Buddhism denominates this fundamental tension as 'clinging' (Tib. *atsin Pa*). If one can eliminate, or even subdue this Clinging to some extent, a great bliss or Nirvanic ecstasy will arise.

Hindrances cannot exist without being embodied in forms; therefore, if the yogi can realize in his Mahamudra meditation that no forms whatsoever exist at all, he automatically overcomes all hindrances.

Any effort, or intentional practice in Mahamudra meditation is redundant, useless, and even harmful since the Mind-Essence is ever-present and has always existed. The closest description one can give of the experience of the enlightenment mind is the feeling of a natural and spontaneous non-discriminating, subject-object-free awareness.

## 21

The craving for ecstasy and *good experience* in  
 meditation naturally dissolves  
 The evil thoughts and blindness rest innately pure in

### Dharma-dhatu

In the "ordinary mind" there is no loss or gain, no claim or disclaim.

Away from words, let me realize the truth of Dharma Essence.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) It is common for the yogi to cling to the rapture, brightness, and pleasant visions and feelings experienced during meditation-practice. Buddha, however, has warned that those who continue to crave such experiences cannot liberate themselves. In practicing Mahamudra rightly, the yogi will find his craving for such ecstasies diminish and finally dissolve.

Dharma-dhatu may be translated as "the Universal Whole" in which evil thoughts and virtues, blindness and enlightenment are innately identical.

There is a famous Zen story that once a monk asked the Zen master Chow Chu, "What is Tao (reality or path)?" The master answered, "The ordinary mind is Tao." This "ordinary mind" can be easily misunderstood as referring to the ignorant and illusory mind of the ordinary person. However, it really means the Mind-essence which the enlightened being sees and which *is not a new mind* or something which is different in essence from the common mind. The enlightened see mind as it is—natural, common, and intrinsic. In this sense, Mahamudra denotes the Mind-essence as "the ordinary mind" wherein one finds no loss or gain, no claim or disclaim, since it excludes all discriminations and includes all differentiations.

Before actually and directly realized the Mind-essence, whatever philosophy or theories one holds ("Reality is one," "Reality is two," "Truth is this or that") are nonsense like 'Playwords' of children. When one directly and actually realizes the Mind-essence, he reaches the world-beyond or the state called here "Away From Playwords."

## 22

Not knowing their natures are identical with  
 Buddha's  
 Sentient beings wander endlessly in Sangsara (**Realm  
 of Delusions**)  
 To those misery-bound who have undergone endless  
 sufferings  
 May I forever succour them with the unbearable great  
 compassion!  
 May I forever succour them with the unbearable great  
 compassion!

## 23

Right in that moment when the Great Compassion  
 arises  
 Emerges nakedly and vividly the Great Voidness.  
 Let me always find this unmistakable Two-in-One  
 Path  
 And practice it day and night.

(Commentary by C.A. Muses) The teaching of Buddhism on Great Voidness and Great Compassion is not rightly understood by most people. These two are, actually, one entity manifested in two aspects. But

to the Sangsaric beings, these two are seemingly irreconcilable since in many characteristics they seem opposed, the wisdom seems 'cold' while the compassion is 'warm'; the Voidness has no object while the Compassion demands an object, etc. Only the Buddha and enlightened beings can merge the two, or, more accurately speaking, realize and unfold the identicalness and simultaneous-existing-nature of the two. Here the author points out that the unmistakable sign of the experience of the enlightened being is that during the moment of enlightenment, when the great Voidness is seen, the Great Compassion automatically arises, or, in some cases, a great and unbearable compassion, should it ever arise, will automatically bring forth the emergence of the Great Voidness.

#### 24

With meditation-produced clairvoyance and other  
miraculous powers  
May I ripen all the sentient beings and adorn  
Buddha's Pure Land  
May I fulfill the compassionate vows of all Buddhas  
And eventually achieve the highest enlightenment  
and perfections.

#### 25

The power of the compassion of Buddha  
The power of the loving Bodhisattvas  
The power of all virtues and good deeds  
May I bind these powers into one great force  
By which the pure vow of mine

And the benevolent wishes of others may be readily fulfilled!"

*The Aspiration of Mahamudra*

"Namo guru.

Gurus and yidams, deities of the mandala,  
 Buddhas of the three times and ten directions and  
 your children,  
 Consider me with kindness.  
 Grant your blessing that all my wishes be realized.

Sprung from the snow-mountain of the pure actions  
 and intentions--  
 Mind and those of all sentient beings without limit--  
 May the river of virtue undefiled by the three spheres  
 flow into the ocean of the four bodies of Buddha.

As long as I have not realized this,  
 Through all my life times, birth after birth,  
 May not even the words for defilement and suffering  
 be heard,  
 And may I enjoy the prosperity of oceans of  
 happiness and virtue.

Having obtained this excellent, free, and well-favored  
 life,  
 Along with faith, energy, and intelligence,  
 Having attended a worthy master and received the  
 pith of the sacred instructions,

May I practice the sacred Dharma properly in all my lives without interruption.

The study of scriptures frees one from the veil of ignorance.

The contemplation of oral instructions overcomes the darkness of doubt.

Light born of meditation illuminates the way things are.

May the radiance of the three wisdoms increase.

The significance of the ground is the two truths, free from the extremes of eternalism and nihilism.

The excellent path, the two accumulations, free from the extremes of assumption and denial.

The result obtained is the two benefits, free from the extremes of existence and peace.

May I meet the Dharma, which is free from error.

The ground of refinement is mind itself--indivisible luminosity and emptiness:

the refining--the great vajra composure of Mahamudra:

What is to be refined--the incidental stains of confusion:

The result of refining--the unstained Dharmakaya: may I realize it.

Confidence in outlook is cutting assumptions about the ground.

The key to meditation is maintaining that without distraction.

The supreme activity is to exercise the sense of meditation in everything.

May I have confidence in outlook, meditation and activity.

All Dharmas are projections of the mind,  
As for mind, there is no mind; mind's nature is empty.

Empty and immediate, mind appears as everything.  
Investigating it well, may I settle the basic points.

Appearances, which never existed in themselves,  
have been confused as objects;  
Awareness itself, because of ignorance, has been confused as a self;  
Through the power of dualistic fixation I wander in the realm of existence.  
May ignorance and confusion be completely resolved.

It doesn't exist; even Buddhas do not see it.  
It doesn't NOT exist; it is the origin of Samsara and Nirvana.  
No contradiction; conjunction, the middle way.  
May I realize the pure being of mind, free from extremes.

If one says, "It is this," nothing has been posited.  
If one says, "It is not this," nothing has been denied.  
Unconditioned pure being transcends intellect.  
May I gain conviction in the ultimate position.

Not realizing it, one circles in the ocean of Samsara.  
Realizing it, Buddha isn't anywhere else.

"It is everything," "It isn't anything"; none of this.  
 May pure being, the basis of everything, be realized.

Since appearance is mind and emptiness is mind,  
 Since realization is mind and delusion is mind,  
 Since arising is mind and cessation is mind,  
 May all assumptions about mind be eliminated.

Unpolluted by meditation with intellectual efforts,  
 Undisturbed by the winds of everyday affairs,  
 Not manipulating, knowing how to let what is true be  
 itself,  
 May I become skilled in this practice of mind and  
 maintain it.

The waves of subtle and coarse thoughts calm down  
 in their own ground.  
 Motionless, the river of mind abides naturally.  
 Free from the contaminations of dullness and torpor,  
 May I establish the still ocean of shamatha.

When one looks again and again at the mind which  
 cannot be looked at,  
 And sees vividly for what it is, the meaning of not  
 seeing,  
 Doubts about the meaning of "is" and "is not" are  
 resolved.  
 Without confusion, may my own face know itself.

Looking at objects, there is no object; one sees mind.  
 Looking at mind, there is no mind; it is empty of  
 nature.

Looking at both of these, dualistic clinging subsides on its own.

May I realize sheer clarity, the way mind is.

Free from mental constructions, it is called Mahamudra.

Free from extremes, it is called Madhyamika.

Everything complete here, it is also called Maha Ati.

May I attain the confidence that, it understanding one, all are realized.

The great bliss of nonattachment is continuous.

Sheer clarity without fixations is free of obscurations.

Passing beyond intellect, non-thought is naturally present. May these experiences continually arise without effort.

Attachment to good and fixation on experience subside on their own.

Confusion and evil concepts are cleared away in the realm of ultimate nature.

In the ordinary mind, there is no rejection or acceptance to separation or attainment.

May I realize the truth of pure being, complete simplicity.

While the nature of beings has always been full enlightenment,

Not realizing this, they wander in endless Samsara.

For the boundless suffering of sentient beings

May overwhelming compassion be born in my being.

While such compassion is active and immediate,

In the moment of compassion, its essential emptiness  
if nakedly clear.

This conjunction is the undeviating supreme path;  
Inseparable from it, may I meditate day and night.

From the power of meditation come eyes and actual  
knowledge.

Sentient beings are ripened and domains of  
enlightenment refined.

Aspirations for the realization of all aspects of  
Buddhahood are fulfilled.

May I complete these three -- fulfillment, ripening,  
and refinement --

And become a Buddha.

By the compassion of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas  
of the ten directions

And the power of whatever pure virtue there may be,  
May my wishes and those of all beings be fulfilled."

*The Vow of Mahamudra, Garmapa Rinjen Droje,  
Commentary and Translation by C.A. Muses, 1961*

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# The Vow and Aspiration of Mahamudra

Including the Pith Instructions of Mahamudra  
by Tilopa

By Garmapa Rinjen Droje, Translated by C.A. Muses, Compiled by  
Marilynn Hughes

THE VOW AND ASPIRATION OF OF MAHAMUDRA:  
Including the Pith Instructions of Mahamudra by  
Tilopa Text and Commentary

The Vow and Aspiration of Mahamudra: Including the Pith Instructions of Mahamudra, by Garmapa Droje, compiled with commentary by Marilynn Hughes, presents a profound guide to the Mahamudra path of meditation and realization. This volume also incorporates the Pith Instructions of Mahamudra by Tilopa, bridging the teachings of two great Mahasiddha masters and offering timeless guidance for serious practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. Rooted in the Kagyu lineage, these teachings focus on the cultivation of clarity, insight, and direct experience of the nature of mind. Through vows, meditative instructions, and spiritual commentary, readers are led on a path toward awakening, liberation, and inner transformation. This edition makes these traditionally esoteric teachings accessible for contemporary students, providing clear explanations, commentary, and guidance to support the practice of Mahamudra meditation. It is an essential resource for advanced practitioners, teachers, and anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Vajrayana

meditation, pith instructions, and the wisdom of the Indian and Tibetan Mahasiddhas.

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