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THE TREASURY OF SONGS ESOTERIC INSTRUCTIONS ON MAHAMUDRA

BY

SARAHA

This text on mahamudra by Saraha is rather more formal in style than Maitripa's. It is set out in three sections in accordance with the traditional aspects of ground, path and result.

The section on the ground or basis (gZhi) describes both the intrinsic and the delusions which obscure it. This is similar to the exposition in Chapter 9, THE NATURAL WAY AND THE WAY OF DELUSION by Padma Sambhava. Saraha highlights the dilemma inherent in presenting such teachings when he states that true presence "cannot be demonstrated: it is inexpressible and no one can comprehend it in a dualistic way". The experience of integrity is beyond expression yet the energy of that experience flows on as a wave of spontaneous compassion offering guidance to beings. If the truth is inexpressible, are the teachings, by their very nature, approximate, or even misleading? The familiar injunction not to mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself springs to mind. We need the finger to help us find the way, but having found the finger it is very tempting, because very safe, to spend one's life measuring it, examining it, becoming a fully-fledged fingerologist. As Shakyamuni Buddha said, you need a boat to get across the river but there is no need to carry it with you once you are on the other side. Just as the tantras point out that the things that bind an ordinary person can become the means of liberation for a yogi, so the instructions that lead to liberation can be the means of confusion for one who gets attached to them or uses them as a further cladding for the fragile ego.

Although Saraha had a scholar's training his style here is to offer a simple sharing of his experience. He presents the ground: the simplicity of the base and source of experience. Then the path: the way to not stray from the ground. And finally the result: abiding at ease in the ground without reification or attachment. There is no discussion or debate for this is not a proposition but a revelation. This sutra style of discourse gives the mind fewer angles to play with, for either one is inspired by it and enters the practice, or else one is untouched and leaves it alone. This of course, as Saraha tells us, is just as it should be.

Saraha is very clearly talking about a path of direct awakening, a knowing free of the contaminating limitation of knowing something. There is nothing special to do, simply to be open to how life shows itself. Offering us the example of the intrinsic emptiness of the sky, Saraha says, "Similarly if we search through mind and all phenomena we will not be able to find even an atom of true existence." Having seen this oneself, the resulting clarity is inalienable as one's own presence forever beyond being an object of attachment.

THE TEXT

Salutation to Sri Vajradakini. Salutation to the most joyful co-emergent original knowing.

The topics addressed in this text are presented in three sections.

SECTION 1

The first topic is a teaching on the ground, the intrinsic presence of mahamudra. This has three aspects, A, B and C.

A. SHOWING HOW IT IS ITSELF

Whatever moves or does not move,¹ and all that is stable or unstable,² and whatever there is that is material or non-material,³ and all that presents itself as appearance and all that does not – all possibilities without exception have never wavered and will never ever waver from the sky-like openness (of the ground). Moreover, although we use the term 'sky' to refer to the sky, the sky itself has no specific individual nature at all. It is completely beyond being an object to which might be applied delimiting concepts such as 'is', 'is not', 'without existence', and 'without non-existence'. In this sky, mind and the actuality⁴ of appearances have not the slightest difference. All the names that indicate difference are merely sudden adventitious⁵ titles. They are without true validity and are merely descriptive words. Everything is one's own mind.

Outwith one's own mind there is not even an atom's worth of anything else. From the very beginning our mind has never been a thing.⁶ Whoever sees this has gained the excellent clarity of all the buddhas of the three times.

What is well-known as the intrinsic cornucopia⁷ is not just another false idea since from the very beginning it is co-emergent presence. This presence cannot be demonstrated; it is inexpressible and no-one can comprehend it in a dualistic way. If there is an owner then she will have some possessions. But if from the very beginning there has been no self, what can this non-self possibly possess?

If mind is something real that one possesses then all phenomena will also be real and capable of appropriation. If there is no mind, who will conceptualise what something is?

Mind and all the thoughts that we can perceive cannot be obtained⁸ by searching – and the searcher herself cannot be found. Neither knower nor known exists as such; they are unborn and unstopped in the past, present and future. This does not change for it is the intrinsic way of innate great satisfaction. For that reason all appearance is the intrinsic mode dharmakaya. All sentient beings are buddhas. All construction and activity have been within all-encompassing space from the very beginning. All the things that are identified by language and concept are like the horns of a rabbit.

B. SHOWING HOW BEINGS BECOME DELUDED DUE TO NOT AWAKENING TO THE ACTUAL

Alas! When the sun is unobscured by clouds its rays go everywhere yet those without eyes remain in perpetual darkness. Spontaneous co-emergence⁹ is present everywhere yet those who are stupefied are very far from it. Because beings do not see that mind is not an entity, they strongly bind¹⁰ the original truth of mind by relying on discrimination and conceptual judgement. Then, just as people become mad from the 'blessing' of a demon, beings become powerless, meaningless, and create suffering for themselves.

Believing that things are real, beings are seized by the great demon of thought and thus they create only meaningless suffering for themselves. Some of these stupid ones are bound by the discriminations of their intellects. They keep the master (mind as it is) at home and go seeking for him (mind as imagined) elsewhere. Some of them believe that reflections are real. Some of them do not cut the root but only cut branches and leaves. No matter what they do they are not aware of being deceived.¹¹

C. SHOWING HOW HERMITS GAIN AWAKENING

Wonderful! Child-like beings do not know their own true presence but I actualise it by never wavering from the state of that true presence. I awakened to the beginning and end of myself and thus I saw myself, my true presence, abiding alone. Although this aloneness is experienced it is not taken to be inherently real. There is no seer nor anything to be seen and so it is inexpressible. Since it is inexpressible, who can know it?¹²

When you open to the unchanging mind you will enter the awakening that I, the hermit, abide in. The milk of a snow lion cannot be held in a poor quality pot. When the lion roars in the forest all the small deer are afraid but the lion cubs are happy and go running to their mother. Similarly when the great satisfaction that is unborn from the very beginning is taught, stupid people who harbour wrong ideas become afraid but fortunate ones become very happy and the hairs on their bodies vibrate.

SECTION 2

In this second section the three aspects of the path of mahamudra will be dealt with.

A. AWAKENING CLARITY THROUGH THE VIEW

This has three parts.

1. FIRSTLY, THE VIEW IS SHOWN AS IT IS

Wonderful! Look at yourself with an unwavering mind. If you yourself awaken to your own true presence the wavering mind will also arise as mahamudra. In the openness of great satisfaction all dualistic characteristics are self-liberated.

When one awakens from a dream one sees that all the joys and sufferings within it were without real substance. So abandon (involvement in) all hopeful and doubtful thoughts, for who is there to think of inhibiting and encouraging?

By opening to one's true presence one sees that everything within samsara and nirvana is devoid of individual self-existence and thus one's hopeful and doubting thoughts are exhausted. Then who will make effort in abandoning and accepting? Every appearance and every sound is like a magical illusion, a mirage or a reflection – they are free of the characteristics of seemingly real entities. The one who sees the illusory quality of appearances is the sky-like presence, our mind itself. This true presence is without centre or limit and so who will be able to comprehend it?¹³ There are many different rivers such as the Ganges yet when they reach the salty sea they are all of one taste. Similarly the discriminating mind and all its functions and contents must be known to have but one taste in actuality.

2. SECONDLY, THE METHOD OF AWAKENING IS SHOWN

If someone searches the entire extent of the sky they will see that it has no centre or end and so they will completely dispense with these concepts. Similarly if we search through mind and all phenomena we will not be able to find even an atom of real existence. The mind that is doing the searching cannot be perceived. So see that there is nothing at all that can be seen (as existing in truth).

3. THIRDLY, NOT STRAYING FROM PRESENCE IS SHOWN

Just as a crow that is released from a ship flies around in all directions but then returns to the ship (when it does not sight land), so the desirous mind may go chasing after thoughts but then settles on the unchanging presence of mind itself. Unaffected by situations, free of hopes, one destroys all hidden doubts – this is the indestructible vajra mind.

B. THERE ARE THREE ASPECTS TO MEDITATION

1. FIRSTLY, THE NON-MEDITATION OF MAHAMUDRA

The true presence of mind that cuts the root (of ignorance) is like the sky. There is no meditation to be done so avoid meditation. Keeping ordinary mind in its spontaneous original mode it is unadulterated by any artificial concepts. This intrinsically pure mind has no need of artifice. Without holding tight or letting go, rest in your own presence. If there is nothing to understand, then the intellect needs nothing to meditate on. The one who (seems to) understand is free of both object of meditation and meditator. Just as the sky is not an object for the sky, emptiness does not meditate on emptiness. This non-dual clarity is like milk in water, and thus all things remain unchangingly in the complete satisfaction of integration.

2. SECONDLY, THE SUPREME MEDITATION OF NEVER SEPARATING FROM THE TRUTH OF NON-MEDITATION

Throughout the three times abide in this way in the limitless original openness free of meditation. To maintain this is what is conventionally called meditation. Do not restrain the vital winds, do not bind the mind. Keep non-artificial awareness as you would a child.¹⁴ When thoughts and recollections arise, keep the presence of your own true presence – do not create any difference between the water and the wave!

3. THIRDLY, ILLUSTRATING THE PATH OF MAHAMUDRA BY MEANS OF EXAMPLES

True presence free of reifying the ordinary mind completely liberates the three principles of interaction.¹⁵

In mahamudra the mind is not set to work and there is not the least atom of meditation practice and so there is no meditation. The supreme meditation is to never be separated from the presence of non-meditation which is non-dual and spontaneously co-emergent. This is the flavour of complete satisfaction.

When water is poured into water there is just one flavour, and similarly when you are fully merged in open presence, the mentation of expectation and reifying conceptualisation is completely terminated.

C. THERE ARE THREE ASPECTS TO THE TEACHING OF THE CONDUCT

1. FIRSTLY, TO SHOW THAT THE CONDUCT OF MAHAMUDRA IS NOT FIXED BY RULE

Wonderful! The yogis who abide in the unchanging presence of nonduality have not the least taint of accepting and rejecting. I neither hold nor discard any phenomena, and so I do not tell you, my children, to do anything. Just as the mind, this jewel, has no substantial reality, so the conduct of a yogi is also devoid of substantial reality.

Many many different kinds of mental constructions can be described but yogis abide in just one way of seeing. This too is not an entity and so the yogi is completely free from the many possibilities of reified manifestation. Therefore with this crazy unlimited freedom, maintain the child-like conduct free of all intentional activity.

2. SECONDLY, TEACHING ON HOW TO AVOID BEING TAINTED BY THE OBJECTIVE SITUATION WHEN BEHAVING IN THIS WAY

Wonderful! Our mind is like the lotus which grows from the mud of samsara. No matter how many faults one has, mind is never touched by any of them. Food and drink can both bring pleasure but your mind and body can also be tormented by them. So no matter what you make use of, be unaffected, neither bound by nor freed from the object.

3. THIRDLY, TEACHING ON BENEFITING OTHERS SPONTANEOUSLY WITH DESIRELESS COMPASSION

Within the openness of clarity's unlimited display of ways of behaving, on seeing the torment of foolish beings, tears flow from an all-encompassing compassion. Giving them your happiness and taking on their suffering, you engage in their welfare. If you attend to presence, you will find that it is free from the three conceptions of subject, object and their connection. It is not something inherently real for it is like a dream or a magical illusion.

Being free of all desire and attachment, you will experience a joy devoid of all sorrow, so act like a master of illusion performing magic.

SECTION 3

The third section deals with the result, the full attainment of mahamudra.

A. TEACHING ON THE CERTAIN ATTAINMENT OF THE RESULT

Experience is intrinsically primordially pure like the sky and so there is not the least entity to be adopted nor discarded. This is the mahamudra free of mentation so do not yearn for any result! Because the mind that entertains hopes has been unborn from the very beginning, how can there be any entities to be adopted or discarded? If someone were able to actually possess a real entity, what would become of the doctrine of the four mudras?¹⁶

B. TEACHING ON THE CONFUSION OF WANTING TO GET SOMETHING WHEN THERE IS NOTHING TO GET

Just as a mountain deer when confused by thirst runs rapidly towards the water it sees in a mirage, foolish people troubled by desire find that no matter how much they try, their goal just gets further away.

C. NOT GETTING ANYTHING AT ALL, WHICH IS CALLED GAINING THE OPENNESS OF VAJRADHARA

Completely pure presence has been unborn from the very beginning. In this there is not the least trace of discrimination and so the consciousness that creates distinction is purified in the field of actuality. The only name that need be applied is Vajradhara ('never straying from pure presence'). Just as in a dry desert plain one sees a mirage of pure water when in fact there is none, so the mind that names and discriminates must be purified on its original purity. It cannot be spoken of in terms of being unchanging or totally extinguished.¹⁷

Like the wish-fulfilling gem and the wish-granting tree, your hopes will be fulfilled by the power of your aspiration (to realise this teaching). Moreover the conventional notions of this world belong only to relative truth – in actuality not one single thing has any true individual existence.

*This mahamudra secret teaching known as "THE TREASURY OF SONGS" (DOHAKOSA)
arose from the speech of the glorious hermit Saraha.*

It was translated by the Indian scholar Vairocanaraksita.

Notes

1. This refers to everything animate and inanimate.
2. This refers to the mind and to mental events.
3. That is, that which 'exists' and that which 'does not exist'.
4. Chos-Nyid, dharmata, the basis of all that appears.
5. That is, they are mere conventional constructs and have no inherent connection with the object they are supposed to represent or refer to.
6. When we think or say 'my mind' it as if it is something I have, an entity I can possess. Yet both the thoughts, feelings and so on, the contents or possessions of the mind, and the subject, the container or possessor of these experiences, are empty of inherent existence. There is no fixed mind-substance. To awaken to how one's mind is is to awaken to the inseparability of awareness and emptiness.
7. Chos Kyi Za-Ma-Tog
8. When we try to get hold of our mind or the thoughts and experiences that seem to be 'in' it we do not arrive at 'the thing itself', for there are no such things to be found. We find ourselves in an endless chase using thoughts to find 'the truth' but only finding thoughts about the mind, thoughts about thoughts. Mind and experience are elusive, slipping away like a snake while the ego-self is left grasping at the lifeless skin the snake has sloughed off.
9. Of emptiness and clarity.
10. Although this uncontrived truth of the mind is not an entity and so cannot be bound, those who are stupefied by the delusion of reification imagine that their mind is an entity among other entities and thus create the illusion of limitation within the infinite. In this way it is as if they bind or cover or limit the intrinsically ever-free infinite.
11. i.e. they do not appreciate the underlying error which distorts all their experience.
12. i.e. know it in the way that a subject knows an object, for that kind of knowledge is dependent upon expressible concepts.
13. i.e. it is not an object for dualistic comprehension.
14. i.e. not too loose, not too tight, giving it freedom but always keeping it in view.
15. Subject, object and their connection.
16. Karmamudra, the activity of bringing together all the disparate aspects, both internal and external, into nonduality; jnanamudra, the knowledge that nothing is to be done; samayamudra, the impossibility of movement from this; mahamudra, the absence of anything other than this.
17. That is, free of the extreme polarities of permanence or of traceless annihilation.