

MODERN TANTRIC BUDDHISM

Embodiment and Authenticity
in Dharma Practice



Lama Justin von Bujdoss

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Modern Tantric Buddhism

Embodiment and Authenticity in Dharma Practice

Justin von Bujdoss



North Atlantic Books
Berkeley, California

Praise for *Modern Tantric Buddhism*

“While there has been much material produced on the modernization of Theravada and Zen Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism remains undertreated. Modern Tantric Buddhism makes a significant contribution to filling that lacuna by offering a timely and potent revisioning of the tradition. Interweaving lived religious experience, tantric texts, and critical theorists, von Bujdoss shows how Western tantra can transform the structural afflictions of colonialism, whiteness, and patriarchy. For academics, he provides instructive and valuable primary data to theorize the multiple forms that Vajrayana Buddhism is taking after and beyond modernity.”

—ANN GLEIG, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF RELIGION AND
CULTURAL STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA, AND
AUTHOR OF *AMERICAN DHARMA: BUDDHISM BEYOND
MODERNITY*

“In today’s world, where tantra has been wrongly equated with sex—justifying hedonism and reinforcing narcissism—and amidst the hyperdrive of modern materialism, now more than ever we need a serious, in-the-world practice that neither denies our humanness, nor seeks to transcend it. Modern Tantric Buddhism realigns us with tantra’s original core values of integrity, authenticity, and true empowerment. Lama Justin von Bujdoss—scholar, yogi, householder, and chaplain—shows us what tantra is really all about and how to meet the immediacy of our everyday experiences with greater wisdom and compassion. Impressive in its scope, grounded in lineage, and exceedingly accessible, this book helps professional caregivers and lay practitioners alike transform illness, trauma, death, and all that constitute our ordinary life, into the active ingredients of spiritual awakening. This book reflects, here and now, our true nature—that as embodied spiritual beings, we are already free. What a timely, breath of fresh air.”

—**DR. MILES NEALE**, AUTHOR OF *GRADUAL AWAKENING: THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST PATH OF BECOMING FULLY HUMAN*

“Lama Justin von Bujdoss offers us an introduction to Vajrayana Buddhism unlike any other of which I am aware. Arising from his courageous application of tantric insights to hospice work, prison ministry, and the task of ‘healing the earth,’ this book has a unique freshness of approach that will engage a broad spectrum of readers. While engaging us in the narrative of his own quest, von Bujdoss embeds anecdotes within ‘the contemplative attitude’ that Milarepa termed ‘the best of samayas’—keeping to contemplative awareness at all times. Modern Tibetan Buddhism thus wins over our attention by moving with us in the struggles of daily life, no matter where we mindfully follow the sigh of our breath.”

—**REV. FRANCIS V. TISO**, AUTHOR OF *RAINBOW BODY AND RESURRECTION: SPIRITUAL ATTAINMENT, THE DISSOLUTION OF THE MATERIAL BODY, AND THE CASE OF KHENPO A CHÖ*

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*Dedicated to Tsunma Dechen Zangmo, Vajravarahi, and Palden
Lhamo Dusolma. May your blessings destroy the limits of broken ego-
clinging, leaving a trail of ordinary, authentic liberation everywhere.*

Acknowledgments

Modern Tantric Buddhism could never have been written without the kindness of others. In this regard, I feel blessed. Most directly, I am indebted to my wife, Cheryl, and to my three wonderful sons—Pico, Winston, and Marcus—all of whom continue to grace me with their patience, grounding, love, and joy. I am similarly indebted to my parents, Martha and Nicholas, for holding space for me to become who I have become and for rolling with the endless change and my years of travel in Asia. Thank you for helping me find the time and space to nurture the seeds that have grown into this book.

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I would be nothing without my teachers. Whether it be Tsunma Dechen Zangmo's endless creativity and passion for embodiment; Pathing Rinpoche's masterful power of ritual and authenticity as a tantrika of the old school; Bokar Rinpoche's oceanic love, compassion, and patience; or the sheer power and intensity demonstrated by Gyaltsab Rinpoche, I have benefitted

from experiencing, through these Tantric Buddhist masters, the beauty, dynamism, and warm breath of this living tradition. Through them, and our work together, this living tradition has become an inseparable part of me. For this I will always be grateful, and I look forward to the ways in which our relationships will yield the fruit of our mutual aspirations. These teachers have proven to me that tantric tradition has a power and applicability that will forever endure.

I also want to express a deep sense of gratitude, appreciation, and warm kinship for Lama Rod Owens, an excellent dharma teacher and close dharma brother. Much of the work in this book arose simultaneous to the dharma teaching we have been doing together over the past few years. The hours of private conversation, plotting and planning, disrupting the status quo, and sharing meals have kept me on track. Our work together has inspired me to cut deeper, speak more honestly, and joyfully own the work of taking risks, no matter the costs.

Lastly, I feel the need to acknowledge the presence of death, chaos, suffering, fear, anxiety, and hardship as essential teachers. I pray that I am fortunate enough never to be drawn out of relationship with these precious lamas. In fact, I pray that I remain their close heart-son: nothing I do would have meaning without their constant presence. May they accompany me like my shadow, and may their wisdom continue to unfold.

To you, everyone mentioned here, I raise a skull cup of precious nectar. May the blessings of the mahasiddhas continue to rain down upon us all, no matter where we may find ourselves. May our practice continue to remain powerful, and may we bring untold benefit to all beings.

Foreword

I met Repa Dorje Odzer, or Lama Justin, as many people are meeting each other these days—on social media. I was living in the Washington, DC, area at the time and was the resident lama for a small dharma center there. These were the days before Radical Dharma, and not many people were interested in a sassy, black, queer lama and his dharma teachings on sex, race, gender, oppression, and other pop cultural phenomenon that were widely considered not dharmic. It was a lonely time. I had never met other lamas who were on the same page as me until Lama Justin reached out over Facebook Messenger to say hi and to introduce himself. I was visiting Brooklyn at the time. He seemed cool, and it just so happened he and his center, the New York Tsurphu Goshir Dharma Center, were in Brooklyn as well. I was intrigued. I was leaving Brooklyn the next day to head back to DC, and I wanted to meet him before I headed out, but I found out he was unavailable because he was working as a full-time chaplain. Instead, I met up with his teaching partner and codirector of the dharma center, Lama Sangye, who was a sassy, queer, male monk who sashayed around Brooklyn in full Tibetan monastic robes. We had lunch at a café. Now I was really intrigued. We made plans for me to visit the center on my next trip to Brooklyn.

The following month I was back in Brooklyn to have lunch at the center in Park Slope. I met Lama Sangye again and was introduced to Justin, his wife Cheryl, and the center protector in the form of a brown American pit bull terrier named Wu. They all lived together at the center. The center itself was an old house that Justin and Sangye had fixed up some. The house looked like a building that had been transported straight from India or Tibet. It seemed very out of place in busy, modern Brooklyn. Moreover, meeting the residents of this center was like sitting down with old friends. We talked about the Kagyu lineage, all its drama, and our hopes and frustrations. Yet what we discovered was that we wanted and needed to do something different as authorized lamas. Justin, Sangye, and I realized that we shared a common teacher, Lama Tsering Wangdu Rinpoche, my first Tibetan lama, whom I'd met almost a decade before. After our lunch, they pointed out that the dharma center was now my home, too, and in that moment, we became family.

Over the past several years, we have had many take-out Chinese food meals, many long conversations about our struggle and frustration with our lineage, (which refuses to adapt to the needs of an ever-diverse practice community), and much dreaming about helping establish a new way of practicing tantra that is modern, simple, and direct and that does much more work to center justice. Over the years, our aspirations have brought us together into a close partnership. Justin and I were trained directly by Tibetan masters. Although our primary teachers were abnormally progressive in relation to their generation, we are still members of a lineage that refuses to evolve to meet the needs of diverse Western practitioners. I believe that one reason our lineage and the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition refuses to adapt is simply because it does not know how to be in the world without hierarchy, control, or the centering of male bodies and needs through entrenched patriarchy.

Modern Tantric Buddhism: Embodiment and Authenticity in Dharma Practice is Lama Justin's vision for a new path of embodied practice for Westerners, especially Americans. Yet it is more than that; it is an act of activism, interrupting our tradition to inspire a new way of being. In *Modern Tantric Buddhism*, Lama Justin returns to the root and development of tantra while decentering Tibetanism. And to be clear, this is not an anti-Tibetan book. This is not the text of a disgruntled teacher looking to make a name for himself by bad-mouthing the community that has supported him. Instead, it is a clear aspiration and proposal for Westerners to take more agency in developing a practice that reflects our lives more. Tibetan masters took Indian tantra and shaped it to reflect their lives, giving rise to Tibetan Buddhism. Lama Justin is advocating for Westerners and Tibetan teachers to work together in helping to establish a tantra that reflects our lives instead of perpetuating dharma cultures of dominance that reflect practices of colonization rather than practices of liberation. This book, like other recent books in the genre, is moving us forward to a Western Buddhism or, in this case, a Western or American tantra that is inclusive, is dynamic, and directly confronts systems of power and abuse as one of the paths to liberation.

Embodiment and Authenticity in Dharma Practice

We need to figure out a way to make our dharma practice both embodied and authentic. After all, this is twenty-first-century America and not medieval Tibet. Lama Justin is interested in a dharma of change, movement, and adaptation. As Western teachers, we have no choice but to advocate for change in our tradition to affect how tantra is developing in our country. Like myself, Lama Justin wants to end sexual and ethical misconduct, which are rampant in Tibetan Buddhist communities where young monastics in monasteries in Asia are abused by older monastics; young incarnate tulkus or reincarnate lamas are trained through emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; and power is concentrated within the hands of the few and transparency is nonexistent. This culture of abuse is also reflected in Western communities in the many experiences of students being taken advantage of by mostly male Asian and Western teachers. *Modern Tantric Buddhism* is a calling out of this culture of abuse through the offer of a new way of practicing this ancient tradition.

Modern Tantric Buddhism is brave, audacious, fresh, and forward-thinking. Lama Justin is risking a lot to bring forth a different vision of the tradition. However, Lama Justin is still a white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, male teacher, and he will have blind spots and views that still center his privileged identities. That is important to point out and to take note of. *Modern Tantric Buddhism* is the beginning of a culture of creating accountability; however, I hope that we can be inspired by his vision to start articulating our wildest dreams about a culture of practice that reflects our identity locations as well.

One of the ways that modern tantric practice as a lived path of transformation evolves and becomes an embodied reality is through friendship. There is nothing more true than this as I reflect on how my practice has deepened in my friendship with Lama Justin. I have never met anyone who has lived, breathed, swallowed, and shit out Tantric Buddhism like he has. As one of the first black, queer lamas, I have had to make a home somewhat outside of our tradition because the anti-blackness and anti-queerness of the tradition has driven me there. Lama Justin's friendship has invited me back in to claim my place. I do not know if I could ever have done that without him.

These days, we move forward together, laying the foundation for our vision of a justice-centered and inclusive tantric community called

Bhumisparsha, inspired by the Buddha's mudra of touching the earth as validation of his awakening. Bhumisparsha is touching the ground of our experiences in this time and place and affirming that we do not need to become anything different than who we really are to become free. I consider *Modern Tantric Buddhism* the first text of this new tradition.

—Lama Rod Owens, MDiv, coauthor of *Radical Dharma*

Introduction

I like to think that this book is the continuation of a journey that was begun by my teachers and their teachers before them. Like any other passing thread of reflection, whatever truth readers might find within these pages can be located within the nexus of experience and is not necessarily something to be made more permanent than the initial experiences the reader has. In this way, I mean this book to be temporary—it is definitive only within the context of my experience and will be made meaningful by others based upon where they take it and how they unlock the experience of the unadorned moment.

In *Modern Tantric Buddhism*, I hope to bring together my experiences as a Buddhist chaplain and a Western Buddhist teacher to examine the Buddhist tantric tradition and explore the practice of meditation, death, living with hardship, and what it looks like to find increased agency and authenticity through embodied spiritual practice. This book speaks to specialists and laypeople alike. It also is a useful resource and guide for chaplains of other faiths who are exploring what it means to be engaged spiritual caregivers and engaged people of faith. I also share stories of time spent with my teachers and some of the ways I have done the work of finding my own voice that reflects and embodies my vision of the Buddhist path. In this sense, I suspect that practitioners of Buddhism will find some support and some meaning in the stories I share.

I intend to capture some of the intersectionality inherent in trying to engage in spiritual practice, intersectionality that honors and connects to my tradition in a way that challenges it to take responsibility for the needs of a changing world and the needs we might encounter as we go through life in a world full of uncertainty. It is particularly important to me to hold the complexity of what it means to wade through the tradition in a healthy way, with a critical lens. In doing so I must consider how difficult it is to remain free of bias and the desire to present this topic in a particular way, or from a particular point of departure. With this in mind I admit that this exploration may very well be an exercise in, if not impossibility, then improbability. That is not to say that this book lacks authenticity. A central aspect of this book is *establishing the*

authenticity of the Tantric Buddhist path as practiced by the contemporary Western *tantrika*, as had been done throughout the Indian subcontinent from the seventh through eleventh centuries as well as in Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Indonesia, and everywhere else that Tantric Buddhism has found a home. I hope to show that such practice, here, in Brooklyn, New York, for example, can have the same agency and deep-rooted connection to the power latent within the experience of life as it does in medieval India, classical Tibet, or anywhere else.

Similar to some traditional presentations on tantra, I touch on some of the established aspects of tantric practice, as well as practice in relation to death and dying. Unique to this book, however, I touch upon self-empowerment, sacred geography, trauma, taking responsibility for biases rooted in whiteness and patriarchy, and finding a home (and ministry) in places of darkness and pain in what might appear to be more contemporary everyday settings. These are things that I set out to include after I began noticing that more and more people seek me out for advice, instruction, and help with their experiences of embodied practice. In this context, I have come to experience that, increasingly, practitioners find themselves hitting a wall when it comes to feeling that they have permission to bring themselves fully into practice. Sometimes this takes the form of Western folk feeling the need to be less Western, less able to bring the truth of their experience and their identity to Vajrayana spiritual communities. *Embodiment*, as I refer to it in this book, has to do with claiming the basis of our experience, learning how to see that our ordinariness, our Western identity, our joys and sufferings, are also a valid basis for awakening. Awakening is not about becoming someone else as much as it is about becoming more free by being more authentic.

This book is also a form of dharma practice in the sense that the meditations and reflections contained here are rooted in learning to relax into the experience of the embodiment of authentic wisdom. It is also a form of guru yoga in the sense that the reflections borne here have only been possible due to the kindness of my teachers' blessings, instruction, and empowerment. Through them, I have learned to develop confidence in walking on the path. To the traditionalist, this book might be challenging as part of this work is meant to punch and push at our comfortable definitions and assumptions the same way a baker must punch and push newly risen dough so that it can proof and be made into bread. This book is meant to challenge the hard soil of our

spiritual habits so that the calcification of self-assumed knowing is able to become the soft fertile soil that can foster being. Perhaps most essentially, I mean for this book to be read, digested, and then forgotten. It is meant for you to build on, and for the generations after us to do the same, much as the environment around us is sculpted and resculpted by each successive generation.

It may be the case that the tantric view is beyond words—in many ways, it is indeed beyond words—beyond conceptualization, beyond measure, and beyond any sense of order other than the natural arising of everything that appears around us. It is rooted in deliberate construction, holding experience, and letting everything go. Like the very process of breathing—inhalation, retention, and exhalation—it is a process of simultaneous creation and destruction that can only be fully known and appreciated when we are at rest, at ease, and settled. Given the intensity of this range, it is easy to get lost in all of the peripheral topics and fascinating places of discovery that exist within Buddhist tantra. For the purpose of this book, I focus on the Buddhist tantric view and try to remain disciplined so I do not veer off course. This is difficult with a path that, at its core, is somewhat pathless. This is especially the case given so much is still not definitively known historically about the origin of the tradition and the vast corpus of both Sanskrit and Tibetan tantric texts still remains untranslated.

I also concentrate on showing how the Buddhist tantric view can help provide a useful underlay, not just for Buddhist practice, but also for caregivers and chaplains, therapists, and curious citizens of appearance. The secondary focus is to demonstrate to contemporary practitioners of Buddhism a way of relating to the Vajrayana tradition through the challenge of meeting the constantly changing nature of what it means to be human in the face of death, illness, caring for others, and finding meaning in places that tend to scare us. In this regard, this book serves as a loving critique of a tradition for which I have great passion as well as concern regarding its skillfulness in finding relevance in contemporary Western culture. Tantra is rooted in developing a sense of intense, sometimes playful, intimacy with everything that we experience. It is erotic in the sense that it alludes to an experience of bliss that transcends conceptual elaboration and intellectual definition. It is also easily misunderstood because it challenges us as practitioners to bring our experiences of everything, the good and the bad, to practice so that we

can experience the intimate awareness of how we struggle and suffer. This can be controversial and provocative as much as it can be as comforting and unassuming as a favorite sweater. Tantra is intensely intuitive, and therefore, it is often described as feminine in nature, which, in a fast-paced Western culture centered around patriarchy, might feel less relevant than it should.

In order to share my work—predominantly as a Buddhist home-hospice chaplain and, to a much lesser extent, first as a volunteer at Rikers Island, where I offered meditation groups for a variety of populations, both inmate and officer, and then in my current work as Staff Chaplain and Executive Director of Chaplaincy and Staff Wellness at New York City Department of Correction—I seek to use stories from the intersection of my work as a chaplain, my scholarship as a student of the dharma, and my vocation as a dharma teacher in my own right. In this way, this book is an exploration of severance, loss, compassion, impermanence, and finding meaning in the midst of difficult situations. It is meant to serve as both a handbook and a supportive model for chaplains, others in the helping professions, and Western Buddhists who are interested in seeing their tradition engaged in a way that promotes a sense of inclusivity and natural connection between the experience of life and the philosophical basis through which the tradition exists.

This book is essentially about practicing dharma and being a compassionate presence for others throughout the full range of the human experience, especially moments of profound difficulty. It seeks to bridge the traditional theory and praxis of Tantric Buddhism with the experience of what it means to be an American—looking for the kernels of inspiration and deep insight that the tradition offers within our seemingly ordinary lives and breaking down the barriers we put up that prevent us from seeing that this tradition is deeply alive and all around us when we stop to look.

Be Here Now

I also hope this book serves to promote a larger discussion around the present moment in the West, which I believe to be a perfect place and time for authentic Western dharma lineages to take root and mature. I often hear people, especially those within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, describe the present moment in the United States as one that is still in transition—from the

time when the tradition was brought here to one day, when authentic Western Buddhist teachers will arise. I believe that such people are *already here* and that they are not being noticed, because they don't match assumed strange projections of what such dharma teachers should look like.

Perhaps the United States holds the potential for wondrous, authentic dharma practice and awakened experience even amidst its strip malls, parking lots, social media, and endless contradictions. I suspect that when we begin to embrace who we are as expressions of our environment, our histories and identities, our violence, and our kindnesses, and we learn to take pride in and celebrate them as useful, dynamic ways of experiencing dharma and expressing dharma, we will begin to occupy a greater sense of embodiment and a greater sense of our authenticity and will have confidence in our subsequent individuation as dharma practitioners.

Such an approach is inherently tantric in the sense that the tantric path begs us to bring all of the latent energy of our being onto the path. In some cases, this might be emotional energy; in other cases, this involves physical and spiritual energy. Such a path of practice asks us to massage and heal the tender spots that exist where the cultural armor of our teachers, generally of Himalayan descent, has left us vulnerable and unsure through our internalized insecurity and self-shame.

Over the course of time, the Tibetan historical and cultural narrative developed a much more elegant and blessed story of the dissemination of dharma from the golden land of India to Tibet than the one that might have actually happened. In fact, it is not unreasonable to assume that just as much adolescent awkwardness as we find now as things slowly transfer to Western hands was present in eleventh-century India as the tradition made its way north to Tibet. It's also profoundly helpful for me to be reminded that the idea of an origin of a pure and distinct Tantric Buddhism, separate from its Hindu mirror, Hindu tantra, is messier and more indistinct, if not completely unlikely, than the very clean and highly polished religious story that one finds in the canon. This latter point remains a fascinating topic of debate amongst scholars.

Regardless of one's point of location in relation to the genesis of the Tantric Buddhist tradition, it is vital to remember that we continue to be responsible for the embers of that tradition. The deep, vital heat within those

embers—stoked by mad yoginis and yogins in the wilds of medieval India; by nuns and monks of great monastic centers in northern India; later, by a host of ordained and lay in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Lhadakh, and Mongolia; and then still later here in our very ordinary-seeming, often much less romantic, West—is right now within our hands. The electrifyingly fresh and warm whispers of the dakinis is a spiritual norm available everywhere, if we can open up to it. Though the world around us has changed, the essence of what is available to us through dharma insight has not—it cannot change because it is fundamentally liberated.

The question is now the same as it has always been: Can we be present in this moment to allow that experience to arise?

We live in a world in which the spiritual is highly professionalized. One doesn't have to look far to see all sorts of teacher training programs and certificates for a range of spiritual practices—often offered at exorbitant rates. In a basic way, this preoccupation with spiritual qualifications and credentials is important and makes sense, yet in other ways, it seems to engender a great deal of anxiety and grasping within those who strive for the distinction of being professional spiritual teachers. This predilection for being a professional spiritual person feels off to me. I know this from having gone through a certain amount of striving and grasping myself. I went through the process of trying to understand and examine my tradition as best I could with the intended objectivity of a scientist to determine the best structured path to follow; all the while I failed to understand the importance of messiness and chaos in spiritual development. It is through this messiness that we are faced with the difficulties that force us to grow.

Quite often I am asked for counsel by aspiring Buddhist chaplains on how to accomplish their goals. This process is both easy and complicated to explain at the same time. The easy part is explaining the process of going through Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and professional related matters. Explaining what to expect from the actual experience of going through such training and education is more challenging as what we encounter experientially in training is very much rooted in our individual experience. It is much more difficult to bring light to what Buddhist pastoral formation might look like for any given person. Some people have a very formalized

practice with a spiritual community, others may have more of an itinerant relationship. One isn't better than the other, both have strengths and weaknesses, yet the central aspect of pastoral formation for chaplains is how they bring the richness of their individual traditions to the good and the bad, that which is challenging as well as that which is easy. Finding their centeredness within their own experiences as chaplains is not that challenging; however, finding it so that each of them can remain a spiritual, grounding presence for another, quite possibly someone they might not be able to identify with, or perhaps even like, is an *art*. I use the word art here intentionally because I think that chaplaincy, and ministry in its diverse shades, is more of an art than a vocation that you can just learn. Certainly, familiarizing oneself with liturgical sources can be a useful skill to learn, but being with another in an open, nonjudgmental way is something you learn only through experience. As with all other art forms, the process of making mistakes and taking risks in the face of uncertainty is part of honing one's artistic ability.

With this being the case, it's easy to find oneself wondering whether the underlying desire for *qualifications* is really rooted in wanting to rush to the goal of easy, open, unpatterned presence. Sometimes I suspect this to be the case. Yet anyone who has taken an art class, or a writing course, will quickly recognize that achieving success in any art form is a mysterious process that involves a deeply personal struggle within oneself in relation to the process of seeing, reacting, being, and responding in this way. Tantra is all about art.

Qualifications in dharma experience is something different all together.

For the sake of clarity and full disclosure, I think this is a good place to describe some of my qualifications in writing this book. I am ordained as a repa in the Karma Kagyu tradition. This tradition goes back to the mahasiddhas of medieval India. It's a tradition of lay yoginis/yogins or lay yogic practitioners. I received my ordination for the repa blessing from His Eminence Goshir Gyaltshab Rinpoche in 2011.

In the fall of 2017, I was given permission to transmit the repa lineage and to offer a variety of empowerments and transmissions related to this tradition. This is something that I've begun to work on codifying. I am in the process of discernment around the formation of a recognized religious order that holds the hybrid tantric germ that informs the repa lineage while it also

speaks to how such a lineage might arise in an embodied and authentic manner here in the West.

I'm also authorized to transmit the Chöd lineage of Lama Tsering Wangdu Rinpoche, the great Chöd, Shije, and Longchen Nyingthik master. From Lama Tsering Wangdu, I have also received authorization to transmit some of the related practices that come from the *Shije* (which translates as the "Pacification of Suffering") tradition, which originated from the great mahasiddha Padampa Sangye. I bring this up with a sense of discomfort because I value quiet, slow, non-flashy dharma and am not interested in calling attention to myself. That being said, I am also committed to transparency and accountability and to bringing an alternative structure for the practice of Tantric Buddhism; this is something that I am equally passionate about, and if that means feeling temporarily uncomfortable, I welcome this discomfort.

In some ways, I came to this path with as little effort as a moth attracted to light. I remember a dream I had when I was seven: an elderly yogin with a long, white beard and long hair tied up in a topknot was surrounded by a halo of violet light. I remember, very vividly, feeling a sense of peace, comfort, and relaxation in the presence of this figure during my dream. Later, at various points in my life, I have had similar dreams involving specific mahasiddhas of the past including Maitripa, Naropa, Shavaripa, as well as unnamed beings. This is to say that my relationship to the path that I have found myself on feels innately familial; it is something I don't question because it feels so authentically real and constellated that I don't have any doubt about it.

Preserving and offering to practitioners of Buddhadharma in the United States aspects of very engaged, lay Tantric Buddhist practice is of vital importance to me. Given the direction that American culture is moving, I feel that we are heading toward something of a contemplative crisis. The speed of our lives is unfolding at a rate never seen before—so fast, in fact, that the difficulty in maintaining relationships to what's going on around us is palpable. Because of the hyper-speed quality of our lives, the increasingly hyper-capitalistic quality of our inner lives, and our need for constant personal branding and rebranding through social media, it is easy to be left feeling tired, overwhelmed, and not sure of ourselves and the world around us. This exhaustion and sense of being overwhelmed can feel all the more

pertinent and urgent when we open our eyes to the environmental crisis—this world of ours is on fire. For these reasons, and perhaps because we might benefit from a radical shift in contextualizing the way this existence of ours appears and is experienced, I believe we currently need a tremendous contemplative transformation, and I hope that this work can provide some support for those who also feel this need deep within their bones.

Indeed, perhaps this book can coexist with similar books, not just from the Buddhist tradition, but from other traditions that are looking to change the way that we relate to the world around us and are trying to create counterculture through contemplative practice. I feel that it's time to slow down, reexamine our intentions, and adapt a perspective and a practice of increased awareness of intentionality. A process, or practice, of slow-dharma, like that which has arisen within the slow food movement, would be quite appropriate for times like these. It is time to come back to the simple curiosity or basic awareness of what it's like to be fully engaged in our lives and fully present through all of our senses and through a clear and direct experience of our minds. Part of my intention for writing this book is to help create the counterculture rooted around these aspects of dharma practice.

Life as Experimental Dharma Art

A very meaningful part of my spiritual formation is rooted in growing up in an artistic household. My father is a painter, and his father before him was a painter. My mother, for a time, was a weaver and designed clothing that she made—she later became an acupuncturist (a healing artist). I grew up in a loft in SoHo in Manhattan in the 1980s. Much of our family life involved going to museums and galleries and other locations of culture in New York City; this led to my learning about the different qualities of light, the importance of color, and the range of open expression from the sublimely transcendent to the dissonant, as well as the changes in visual tone not just in art but in the world around us. Exposure to art is what allowed me to see others and other cultures as unique, meaningful, and worthy of respect. Art is also a seminal way in which I have learned to connect to spirituality and better understand the fruition of my spiritual path.

For many years, I wanted to be an artist—I have a deep love of painting and a personal fascination with sculpture even though I have not made any

sculpture since college. When I first came to dharma practice, it took me a while to escape the scholarship and the intellectual aspects of the tradition (which were, at the time, my approach) to understand that meditation practice *is* art; it is the art of being open and awake, of directly seeing, of resting in the authenticity of experience—there are so many ways of saying it. Even now, the act of teaching or creating spiritual community is more of an artistic endeavor that may sometimes follow the thread of tradition, and at others, appear to veer off into uncharted territory inspired by the lineage that I hold and by the inspiration created therein.

Many years ago, one of my teachers, who I will share more about later in the book, suggested that I practice meditation outside at dawn. She said this would allow my experience of awareness to rest on the changing quality of the light and the way everything in one's visual field changes as the sun begins its daily journey from one horizon to the next. I took to sitting on her terrace roof amid her planted orchids and other flowers; I faced the vastness of the valley below Gangtok, Sikkim, and the range of mountains on the other side every morning. Sure enough, as the sun rose above the hill upon which her house was perched, the light changed everything. To be able to sit and rest in that experience as it unfolded with focus and gentle recognition was, and remains, a very powerful experience. This simple practice is dear to me.

To this day, I prefer dharma practice outdoors. I also prefer my practice to be experimental, as if my practice is seated in an artist's studio, or an alchemist's laboratory; realization dawns through constant experimentation. Although tried-and-true instructions help point out the direction in which we might find that thing called *realization*, the process of fine-tuning these instructions is deeply personal, and it is this personal experimentation that yields wisdom. Maybe I am lazy, or unruly, but I am not fond of formal dharma and formal dharma centers; I appreciate their function, yet I am much more comfortable being in the everyday ordinary world.

Sometimes it feels that the West, with its harried rate of production and the value that is placed on output as a way of maximizing economy, appears to infect the way we practice meditation and even how we enter into relationships with one another. When this is the case, we easily feel as if what we are doing is less important than how much we are doing. In the Buddhist tradition, this can be a seductive place where we can get stuck. For instance, sometimes we may find ourselves focusing on the number of hours

we put into a retreat or the number of mantra recitations or prostrations we are doing. In essence, our practice can accidentally become about quantity and not quality. I pray that this book allows us to slow down so that the simple beauty of the soft light at dawn and other countless ordinary moments in our lives can be seen as the miracles that they are. I pray that we can open ourselves up to the rich, artful qualities found in spiritual practice—especially when we table the idea of accomplishing anything in particular.

Structure

The structure of this book follows a somewhat classical Tantric Buddhist model. It can be broken down into three major sections: one dedicated to Body, one dedicated to Speech, and the last dedicated to Mind. Each of these sections is treated with graded subtlety, again, using the somewhat classical Tantric Buddhist pedagogical structure of exploring things in an Outer, Inner, and Secret manner.

For example, Body is treated with all its physicality, including its trauma, its identity, and its relationship to colonialism/colonization, as the expression of our potential for enlightenment, as a nexus of agency, as a participant (and creator) in our relationship to geography, and finally, in its relationship, eventually, to death. I am indebted to the independent researcher Rev. Francis Tiso, who kindly permitted me to use a translation of a set of instructions from the *Dam Ngak Dzod*—one of the great treasures of Buddhist wisdom compiled by the Tibetan polymath Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye. This wonderful text can be found in his essay entitled “Mi la ras pa on the Intermediate State: An Introduction and Translation of Profound Instructions on the Direct Introduction to the Intermediate State, Using the Mind to Discriminate the Path.”¹ This text is attributed to the early Kagyu teacher Jetsün Milarepa, which he in turn offered to his student Rechungpa for bringing the experience of death onto the path.

The section Speech is addressed in a similar manner, with an emphasis on activity, as speech traditionally symbolizes action. We explore tantric view as it relates to relational being, interdependence, ethics, and conduct. For the final portion of this section, we explore a vajra song written by one of my teachers, Pathing Rinpoche, who died in 2007, on pointing out the essential modes of conduct as per the narrative of the tantric tradition. I translated this

song in 2008 with the kind guidance of Khenpo Lodrö Donyo, the abbot of Bokar Ngedon Chokhor Ling, the monastery of another dear teacher, Bokar Rinpoche. This section also includes a brief description of Vajrasattva Meditation taken from the personal journals of my root teacher, Tsunma Dechen Zangmo, with the permission of her daughter, my dear dharma sister Dekila Chungyalpa.

The section on Mind is covered in a similar fashion, ranging from the more tangible to the increasingly subtle, and includes reflections on yidam practice and touches on the view as it relates to mahamudra. The final aspect of this section includes commentary on instructions for resting the mind in spacious freedom from Tilopa and Maitripa. I am indebted to Westin Harris for permission to use a vajra song written by Padampa Sangye, which encapsulates the essence of the Shije and Chöd traditions.

This structure allows us to journey together to get a sense of the ways in which tantra is naturally interwoven through all aspects of our being. It also allows us to better understand how this rich, variegated, inter-being is nonhierarchical in the sense that an awakened manifestation of Body, for example, is simultaneously an expression of Mind and, likewise, Speech, arising. The structure also allows this book to be referred to in a nonlinear way so that the readers can develop their own relationship to its contents based upon what is alive and compelling to them; it can be read cover to cover or randomly.

SECTION I | BODY

Outer Body

Initially, coming to Buddhist practice can be both exciting and daunting. It's exciting because the Buddhist world seems a brave new world full of fantastic appearances and newfound promise and possibility. It is daunting much for the same reason, or more precisely, because it feels *new*. Often starting something new brings on a whole range of feelings that can include anxiety, tentativeness, and fear. If starting new things can be difficult, it seems natural to say that entering a new world through which we experience everything around us with clarity comes with certain hardships. It's also probably worth qualifying this by saying that the hardships experienced are often unique to the particular person entering this new situation.

One such trial the Western audience must successfully navigate on the path to creating a relationship with dharma in general, and very specifically, Tantric Buddhism, is their connection to colonialism, colonization, and orientalism. In the context of this exploration, *colonization/colonialism* refers to the power practiced by spiritual community, teacher, lineage holder, and individual practitioner as well as the potential oppressions that are created by holding power in an unexamined manner. *Orientalism*, in this context, is pertinent in that it can inform either racist tropes about Asian lineage holders or an escapism from the present moment into some idealized fantasy world of what Buddhist practice looks like that is likely more an invention than an authentic reality. You might ask why such topics are important in an exploration of dharma, and you might even go so far as to suggest that addressing colonialism and orientalism is some kind of maladaptation of dharma to suit a political agenda. Indeed, such reactive arguments are common, and in my opinion, are a bit of a knee-jerk reaction and, in their own way, are based upon the fear that somehow dharma will be altered by being examined with a critical lens. In fact, I would go so far as to say that a certain amount of reflection on such colonialisms serves as an invaluable way with which to temper the foundation upon which you can build a relationship to dharma. Such awareness is an integral aspect of the root of Buddhist practice.

In the context of this exploration, it's important to begin to understand within ourselves *why* we are coming to dharma. What are our expectations? What are our intentions? Are we running away from one sense of self to create another more interesting one? Are we getting involved with all this exotic stuff because we are bored or are in need of a vacation from the ordinary?

Understand that no matter how we answer these questions, even if we answer them in ways that point to us being bored, or in need of a change, or having previous arrangements that just haven't met up with where we want to be, *it's okay*. The point here isn't really the nature of the answers to such questions—no matter how shocking or disappointingly romantic they may be—the point is *being able to ask the question* and maintain an awareness or curiosity about one's intentions and expectations.

The truth is we generally come to dharma because we want to be better. Perhaps we want a sense of peace borne from insight, or a more intimate relationship with the moment, or a deepening sense of connection to the world around us. Generally, we come to dharma because we are suffering. There is no harm in admitting that. In fact, just being honest about the dilemma that we find ourselves in is a significant step. The larger point is that in a very real way, none of us is perfect, especially when we are first starting to develop a relationship to dharma. This is okay—in fact, it's normal. More importantly, dharma practice isn't about becoming perfect in the way that we normally think of perfection; it's more about becoming more authentic and gaining the perfection inherent in *authenticity*. We will return to this later, but for now, it's important to be methodical and not get ahead of ourselves.

At the core of colonialism and orientalism is the very nature of the relationships we seek to enter into with others. In this particular case the *others* are either particular individuals or entire cultures or systems of spiritual practice. In the simplest terms, *colonialism* has a lot to do with the relationships we create and how we derive benefit from them. Such reactions are transactional in that we profit at the expense of the agency of the person, culture, or geography with which we are interacting. *Orientalism* is related in the sense that it is rooted in our ideas of those with whom we are entering a relationship and how we objectify and extract value from said individuals or systems—this can include unexamined cultural appropriation, a romantic

obsession with the other (in this case Buddhism, or Buddhist cultures/figures), and an oversimplification of the challenge that Buddhist practice offers to each culture in which it finds itself housed.

The key here is developing an awareness of the way we objectify Buddhist practice, determining *why we are doing what we are doing*, and remaining aware and self-reflective about what informs us in entering into dharma practice. Such honest reflection is not about publicly airing our deepest secrets; it's also not about admitting some kind of guilt. This is more about holding ourselves accountable. It's about maintaining a sense of honesty and integrity. If we cannot be honest with ourselves, how then are we going to be honest with our dharma sisters and brothers or our teachers? How will we be able to adhere to a spiritual discipline and maintain a commitment to the system of Buddhist ethics that is both an expression of practice through which we can develop wisdom and a desire to reduce the suffering of all beings?

Part of an honest assessment of our initial points of orientation and intention as they relate to the practice of Tantric Buddhism also needs to include an awareness that it is most likely that the Tantric Buddhisms we are practicing are the product of a variety of interpretive lenses, and that these are based upon the influence of Western scholarship and Western ideas of what *tantra* is and how it came into being. This has been highlighted through the work of Christian K. Wedemeyer from the University of Chicago, Donald S. Lopez, Jr., from the University of Michigan, and a number of other scholars. In this way, it behooves us to understand the existing layers of invention and transposition as we enter into a relationship with the subject matter. Similarly, we benefit from being cognizant of the invention of the contemporary display of what our traditions have become known to be. The work of Wedemeyer and Lopez Jr. highlight some of the ways in which Buddhism has been, in a sense, invented by the West—at least our idea of our relationship to Buddhism. Such analysis allows us to see that there is not a singular Buddhism but rather, many *Buddhisms* to which we relate and interact with. Our practice of any of the various Buddhisms with which we feel connected, whether they are tantric or not, involves learning to develop a relationship with their invented appearance and the degree to which we connect to (or profit from) such held appearances, origin stories, and so on.

More specific examples of these inventions can be found in Brian Cuevas's work on the *Bardo Thodol* and the work of David M. DiValerio,

Andrew Quintman, and Peter Alan Roberts regarding the assumptions, exaggerations, and inventions around narratives surrounding Rechungpa, Milarepa, and other mad, wandering, tantric yogins.

Such exploration is important because it helps us sift through our ideas about what we are practicing and why we are engaging in such practice. Perhaps the unintended consequence of stepping outside the tradition to look at modern scholarship leads to the bursting of uninterrogated convenient narratives; if this is the case, I feel we may find real gems when we sift through the cognitive dissonance created by having our spiritual assumptions challenged. After all, the Tantric Buddhist path is meant to be traversed, not encased in a shrine or within a museum; it is less concerned with convenience and more directed toward definitive experiential praxis.

This fundamental honesty and ease within our practice is very important as we gain a sense of comfort in learning how to tease out some of our blind spots. It's not easy recognizing our own faults or limitations, our hang-ups, or the way our kleshas manifest. *Kleshas* can be defined as afflicting or disturbing emotions that are rooted in a misapprehension of reality as it arises and is misperceived through the fundamental three poisons or three unwholesome roots (ignorance, attachment, and aversion). Together, these three poisons function as an impediment that prevents us from achieving enlightenment as they are commonly held to be the root of our ignorance which in turn causes our suffering. Sometimes we are able to maintain this kind of awareness with ease, and at other points, we freeze up and are unable to proceed. This is usually because we are not comfortable with what we are noticing. That's okay, this is what our dharma siblings and teachers are here for. They help point out our blind spots in a way that allows us to see them.

Becoming comfortable with learning to recognize our relationship to power; our assumptions about race and gender, specifically patriarchy and whiteness; and our blind spots around these are invaluable ways in which we can develop a stable foundation upon which to build our practice. To those who would say that these are political issues, not dharma, I would answer that adding these reflections to practice is actually just a deepening of our awareness of interdependence. They are ways to develop integrity in the relationships we build, maintain honesty within the way we move through the world, and solidify the basic goodness that we are working to develop through the practice of Buddhадharma.

ChÖgyam Trungpa Rinpoche's attempt to define spiritual materialism has had an impact on how dharma has been presented in the West. The term *spiritual materialism* is ubiquitous at this point, and, though it might not necessarily need it, the term could use some updating to include the points we are exploring here specifically, as well as a lack of awareness of our relationship to power, race, gender, and class, and the benefit created by such ignorance. This is especially vital within dharma contexts, and such awareness must remain present within the spotlight of our meditation, not for political reasons, but because it makes us better dharma practitioners. It also makes us more responsible dharma heirs. This open and honest awareness also has an impact on our ability to be present and effective in a way that allows us to act with our eyes wide open.

In this spirit of freshness and breaking up the hard soil of our practice, picking up a book by Frantz Fanon or Edward Said or exploring critical race theory and feminism would do a practitioner well. My root teacher, Tsunma Dechen Zangmo, a Sikkimese Buddhist nun, had a master's degree in English literature and loved to read non-dharma literature just as much as she liked to read dharma texts. In fact, the way she connected to literature reinforced the way she taught and the effort she invested in her practice and her teaching. I will return to her example often over the course of this book as her impact and her example remains exemplary.

No one ever said that in order to practice dharma you need to give up that which was never mentioned in the sutras or the tantras. Such anti-intellectualism is absurd and a gross oversimplification. We would be well served to apply critical analysis to such extreme ways of thinking. As it turns out, it's more likely that as practice deepens, what is considered dharma will likely expand to include not just much of the way we interact with the world, but also much of the world we are interacting with. Practicing dharma, especially Tantric Buddhism, is more like learning an art form than gaining knowledge. It's more about refining your being than adopting some new qualities; it's more about a shift in perspective—a pointing out of the way things actually are.

What I am saying is that it is important to develop a sane, kind, honest foundation—or approach—to dharma. Such an approach doesn't merely apply to Buddhist practice but to life itself. Central to this honesty is learning to combat self-deception. Cultivating and practicing the tantric view is about

developing a sense of *radical presence* or *radical openness*. This type of openness or presence is like the light of a lighthouse in the middle of a storm at sea; it is this which is able to maintain a container for *samsara* (suffering) in a way that reduces our sense of suffering. In some cases, it seals suffering in its place and allows us to find liberation in places we would characterize as flawed. It allows us to hold the lamp of awareness and knowing to whatever we experience, in order to illuminate the way that we create suffering, and perhaps, most importantly, it helps us take responsibility for our own practice.

There is liberation in medical emergencies, in death, in grieving, in violence, and in the generalized ways in which we might characterize *samsara*. Chaplaincy (not just Buddhist practice) holds the power to find liberation and transformation in some of the hardest places—places that we would prefer to never experience.

Much like gardening, our harvest yield depends upon how we prepared the soil, weeded and tended the young shoots, and did our best to care for the plants given the weather during the growing season. There are no magic beans that, when planted, will do all the work for us and lead us to untold wealth. Much like playing an instrument or learning to draw or paint, the overall quality of the way we manifest has to do with spending long hours practicing, learning how to feel into what we are doing, and perhaps even gleaning what the nature of creative expression is all about. If we don't even try, how can we think that anything will happen? More to the point of what we are discussing here, if we are not able to be honest about where we are when we are beginning, no matter how embarrassing that may be, are we really going to achieve what we are setting out to achieve? Even Alice Coltrane and Thelonious Monk had to start at the beginning.

It isn't discussed much, but the Tibetan diaspora has had an effect on the tonality around how Vajrayana dharma has been transmitted in the West. It has also had an impact in relation to the way lineages have developed in exile as well as their relationship to power. The genuine horrors of the Tibetan genocide are not in question; in fact, this history cannot be removed from discussions around how Buddhist tantra has developed and spread. In order to maintain a continuity in our own practice (and a sense of agency in relation to history), at this point in time, it is helpful to acknowledge that questions involving how dharma arises in the West and its development here

are perhaps entirely Western questions. Questions around what an American Dharma and/or American Tantric Buddhism might look like and how such dharmas are presently forming are exciting. These questions seem to be at the fore in most Buddhist communities in the United States to some extent or another. Just as it is helpful to understand the cultural context around which Tantric Buddhism was essentially forced into modernity—by the violence of the Chinese invasion of Tibet and the pain and existential threat associated with such a process—it is helpful to remain mindful of the cultural context in which these traditions are taking root and arising in new forms within our own culture. In the case of American culture, I refer to something that could never be a singular monolithic system given the diverse array of cultures that we find within America and not neglecting our own genocides and deep internal conflicts and the effect such conflicts and cultural cognitive dissonance has had upon our respective psyches.

Perhaps it is time for us to continue to step into the manifestation of this American Tantric Buddhism with less preoccupation with it being okay to do so, and more focus on acknowledging our own nascent emergence: something *has to* emerge for the system to remain relevant and survive. This involves recognizing that individuation, while absolutely necessary, is often a chaotic experience, and that chaos is a valuable part of growth. So, in a way, I ask us all to embrace chaos, not for the sake of anarchy, but rather as a way of putting down attachment to established order that is rooted in keeping things comfortable or the stasis that is rooted in past traditions rather than expressing natural growth. Quite often, we are the most brutal inner-dictators, maintaining the status quo through fear.

If you find the notion of Western Tantric Buddhism scary, that is a good thing. It means that such a form of practice has tremendous power, enough to really shake things up. To create chaos. To generate the energy needed to allow awakening to emerge. This is a good thing.

Agency and Buddha-Nature

At this point it is worth talking a bit about *Buddha-nature*. The idea behind Buddha-nature is that all sentient beings have it. That is, all sentient beings have the seed of enlightenment within them. You could say that we are already Buddha; however, we lack the wisdom and the clarity to recognize

this and effectively manifest Buddha activity. No matter who you are, or where you come from, you have the seed of enlightenment within you. This is something to celebrate. In the *Uttara Tantra Sastra* by Asanga, the fourth-century early Buddhist philosopher, practitioner, and exponent of Yogacara philosophy and practice, we see Buddha-nature defined in the following manner:

The nature of buddha nature is explained by the means of the three examples of a jewel, the sky and water. The significance of these examples will be given later. The dharmakāya is like a jewel because it is totally free from any impurities. It is like the sky when there are no clouds present because the sky by nature is free from clouds. It is like water because water is naturally very pure and the impurities found in water are not part of the nature of the water. In the same way, buddha nature is perfectly pure.¹

Later he goes on to say:

In the example of the jewel, buddha nature possesses tremendous power because it has the power to achieve ultimate happiness, Buddhahood, which is of the greatest value for all beings. So it is extremely precious and powerful and is compared to a jewel because a jewel has the power to dispel poverty.

The essence of Buddhahood is compared to the sky because the sky never changes. The earth is constantly changing, but the sky even over periods of thousands of years never turns into anything different. In the same way, the suchness of all phenomena is unchanging and there is no alteration of its nature.

The essence of Buddhahood is compared to water because water has a wet and flowing quality which allows it to go everywhere. By its mere presence everything can grow. Buddha nature also possesses a moistening quality, the lubricating quality of compassion.²

That we are all joined together by more than just the spark of common potential, and by the very essence of awakening is very extraordinary. It is also a great reason to better understand *how* we ought to manifest in relationship to one another. Asanga lays out, in the rest of the *Uttara Tantra*,

a clear description of the causes of enlightenment as well as the function and fruition of the process—a process that is our natural birthright.

If we all share the same root potential for enlightenment, doesn't that seem like a good reason to remain aware of how we relate to colonialism, orientalism, sexism, racism, and patriarchy? If we are all of the same family—the Buddha family—it seems wise, as well as compassionate and reasonable, to remain mindful of whether, or how, we benefit at the expense of others. This seems like a good place to begin. At the very beginning of our path in cultivating the tantric view let's aspire to bring honesty, sanity, clarity, and compassion to our journey. After all, the first person you see after reading this might become fully enlightened before you do. If that happens, wouldn't you want to be someone who supports her as her awakening dawns?

Fairly early on in my experience acquainting myself with tantric practice, my root teacher, Tsunma Dechen Zangmo, a Karma Kagyu nun, was sitting with me in her shrine room in Gangtok, Sikkim; she told me that I was all mixed up. Seeing that I was not understanding exactly what she was referring to—even though I was likely very convinced that I knew what was going on—she clarified her statement. “When you see me, you see a nun. I am not a nun; I became one to have access to dharma. Now that I have had access to dharma and have practiced, I am myself. I am not the nun that you see.” She was demonstrating that, until that point, I was mostly interacting with my idea of who she was. Her form, as a female monastic, a nun, was obvious and apparent, but I was failing to see that she was a manifestation of so much more than that.

At another point, during a formal teaching session on the basic idea that all sentient beings have been, at one point in time, our mothers—a central reason for cultivating a compassionate outlook—she expanded the teaching by stating: “All beings can also be regarded as your mother as they continually give birth to the idea that you are an independently existing being when they interact with you.” This was another very short, but profound, way in which she could cut to the very essence of the confusion that I experienced based upon the arising of appearance.

Our conceptual elaborations tend to be based upon our reactions to the way that appearances arise. It can be difficult to maintain honest, open,

radical acceptance or radical presence in relation to the things around us. In a plain and direct way, this dynamic of near-constant re-creation of the world in our own image through assumption and projection, or in other words, defining ourselves and others based upon our own location to power and privilege, is a form of fundamental ignorance: something to which we must always remain aware. Given *my* identity location as a cisgender white male, it is all too easy to forget that depending on where I am, the way appearances arise seems to privilege me; but this is *not an objective statement* about reality in general. It is a statement that reflects the intersectional patterning to which I, the culture within which I exist, and the various patterning of others who share this space and relate in varying ways. Hard work is involved in not formalizing the projected appearances as well as our habits that arise in each moment so that we can maintain a connection to our Buddha-essence and appreciate what liberation means.

It is even harder to liberate and heal toxic masculinity, patriarchy, and whiteness and the related assumptions that have created benefit for predominantly white and male dharma organizations from our dharma centers; such rigid, violent patterning needs to be interrogated through our dharma practice.

It is so easy to forget that all sentient beings have the same fundamental nature. If you have forgotten this, it is also easy to become involved in not seeing others for who they really are. It's much easier to become careless and interact with the ideas of everyone being who we think they are in relation to us—who we want them to be rather than who they are. The same fundamental misapprehension dictates the nature of the environment around us because that's the way we see it; the way we *want* to see it. When we do this, we are committing a form of violence that, although subtle, is violent nonetheless: it is a violent suppression—or distortion—of appearance.

If you keep one basic thing in mind when you set out upon the Tantric Buddhist path, have it be that appearances are tricky. Or, perhaps more to the point, our ability to clearly apprehend, and not reify appearance is difficult. The world around us, including all beings around us, may not be exactly the way that we assume them to be. This is why humility, honesty, compassion, and gentleness toward ourselves is so important when we begin. We will make mistakes, we all do, but as with learning anything new, when we find

that we have made a mistake, all we need to do is try again. It's as easy as that.

Inculturation and Authenticity

I like to explore colonization in dharma practice for two reasons. First, I believe it is an under-addressed issue in Buddhism. Second, it unnerves people. I have found, from my own experience of myself in the state of being unnerved at various points in my life, that I need to look at the unnerving situation with fresh eyes. This act of reexamination is a powerful act that affords us the opportunity to notice habits, blind spots, and assumptions, all of which may—depending on the circumstances—bring a needed new perspective where the previous one is lacking.

One shadow of the way dharma has been presented in the West, especially Tibetan Buddhist dharma, is that a prevailing view, assumption, or belief has been established that somehow being non-Tibetan means that one is less-than. More explicitly, a common assumption is that being Western is a disadvantage when it comes to the practice of Buddhism. I realize that openly discussing this topic can be unpopular and makes people uncomfortable, and I understand some of the reasons why this is the case, yet there is tremendous benefit in having uncomfortable conversations. Uncomfortable conversations are uncomfortable for a reason; usually it is because we would rather not get involved in upsetting the applecart. However, some apple carts just seem to be made to be upset. Intention is very important in having these conversations. I fully acknowledge that comparatively speaking, the dharma has only been in the West for a tiny fragment of the time it has been developing in Asia. Likewise, it is not particularly surprising that traditional Asian lineage holders might view an American Dharma as suspect and lacking the depth that one might find in Asia. I am friends with a number of Tibetans and Sikkimese that are highly suspicious of Western innovation, and I understand their concerns. To be honest, things are made increasingly complex with the Western fascination with tantra and prevalence of people practicing (and in some cases teaching) tantra with an uneven training in basic Buddhadharma. Yet, I also see the need to address the harm that is inadvertently created by not experimenting with greater inculturation for Western dharma practitioners, especially practitioners who suffer from a

sense of feeling disempowered and that their own life story or life experience is less-than what one finds in traditional Asian Buddhist communities. Without a doubt this is a complex topic that requires a levelheaded, well-informed response as well as a sense of being able to be responsible for the mistakes that arise along the way: the transfer of dharma from culture to culture is not an easy, nor necessarily straightforward, process.

As we touched on briefly earlier, all sentient beings have Buddha-nature. This being the case, in reality, there does not seem to be much room for the poverty-mentality of some Western dharma students who feel less-than simply because of where they were born and what their birth culture may be. The same goes for Tibetans who may feel that because they were born within the Tibetan cultural milieu, somehow they are more predisposed to realization than anyone else. I realize that to some who are unfamiliar with these dynamics in the dharma world such dynamics may seem absurd. Indeed, they are. That said, they are also pervasive. Such chauvinisms are so common and variegated that when one takes time to look within general Himalayan culture, they won't be surprised to see many different strata of assumption and discrimination between Tibetans, Sikkimese, Nepali, and Bhutanese. One group finds the other inferior and not cut out for the work of authentic dharma. I am not bringing this up to expose or claim a limitation on any cultural group's part due to their cultural biases as much as I am to show how pervasive this type of behavior can be. In fact, in the biography of Marpa Lotsawa, we can find several places in which Marpa, the person who ended up transmitting Naropa's dharma and Maitripa's mahamudra lineage to Tibet, was denigrated for being a stupid barbarian from the North. Somehow Westerners are shocked that limited views such as these are possible by Tibetans. This disassociation is something around which awareness brings benefit.

Prejudice and unexamined bias don't have a place within the tantric view, especially if you plan on upholding *samaya*, or tantric commitment—a topic I cover later in the book. If we are to return to the simple extension of what all sentient beings having Buddha-nature really means, holding or privileging one group over another is a pretty crude way of approaching the world. This

leads to the fascinating topic of the place of culture and *inculturation* within Tantric Buddhism. The idea of inculturation as a practice has its roots in early Christianity that originated during the Council of Jerusalem sometime around the year 50 CE. At that point, the apostles came to accept that gentiles could convert to Christianity, which up until that point, had identified as part of the larger Jewish tradition. This decision included lifting some culturally rooted rules around spiritual practice that had previously excluded gentiles. This practice of adapting the dictates of the faith to fit within the cultural values of those who were exposed to Christianity also led to the inclusion, at times, of the (new) host culture into the way the faith was practiced.

As with most forms of exposure to enlightening knowledge, I happened to learn of inculturation during a period of travel in India. While there, I read a fascinating article about the inclusion of Shaivite temple architecture by some Catholic churches in southern India and of the inclusion of generalized Hindu practices associated with pilgrimage within the context of Catholic pilgrimage on the subcontinent. In fact, in 1995, I had the opportunity to attend a Catholic midnight mass on Christmas Eve in Varanasi, complete with tabla- and harmonium-enhanced Catholic bhakti songs, an experience made more complete by being chased home in the dark by a pack of stray dogs. The richness of the service left a deeply personal mark on me around what the translation of faith practice can look like. The very idea of what it means to translate dharma from culture to culture has become such a compelling idea for me that it informs the way I practice, the way I teach, and the way I try to embody my own interpretation of Buddha activity.

I think we can safely say that culture can be viewed as a vehicle through which dharma is expressed. Dharma is not created by culture, yet culture plays a direct role in how dharma is made manifest in a way that we can all experience it. At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that although dharma has no limitations, culture does. This is not to say that we should have a flippant view regarding other cultural expressions of meaning nor ignore the fact that religion is an integral component of culture. My comments about the growth that can happen from being challenged by difficult conversations and being unnerved (as well as other forms of being forced to think differently) extend to cross-cultural exposure. Seeing how others express meaning helps us to further understand how we may do the same, and

perhaps most importantly, how we may modulate the way we do so with greater clarity and efficacy.

I have a passionate personal fascination with the ninth- through the eleventh-century transmission of dharma from the Indian cultural milieu to the Tibetan. In fact, I try to read as much as I can on the time period, especially as it relates to the transference of dharma from one cultural context to another. It is fairly clear that, over time, over the course of centuries, Tibetan Buddhism evolved into a unique spiritual expression of Vajrayana that has skillfully maintained a heart-connection to the original practices fostered by the Indian cultural milieu in which Tantric Buddhist praxis arose. This process of adaptation, or inculturation, in which dharma is affected by the container into which it is poured, can be seen as a skillful way of expressing compassion in the sense that *dharma cannot but help express itself through those who are experiencing it*. As such, it is no big surprise that dharma changes appearance as it transitions from culture to culture. Some aspects of its core remain the same—vajra-like and immutable—other aspects are less vital and are subject to phase change as far as appearance is concerned.

Discussions like this tend to rub some the wrong way. In fact, this topic can be triggering for those who have skin in the game regarding how dharma ought to and ought not to appear and who ought to benefit from said pure dharma. In my experience, fear plays a big part in the desire to keep anything from the process of natural phase change. Change is inevitable; it cannot be stopped. Fear creates discomfort in relationship to change. Do we want to keep things calcified or frozen in place because we cannot deal with swimming in the ice-cold waters of fear? Where is the gain in remaining boxed in by the hungry-ghost-like clinging to forms of dharma that require endless bending and perhaps even alteration of our very sense of authenticity, agency, and spiritual power?

If anything, I think questions like these highlight the importance of developing a tradition of modern Western Buddhist commentarial discourse through which we can examine what the potential of inculturation really means for the Tantric Buddhist tradition in the United States. I find myself, time and time again, teaching struggling Buddhist practitioners who have adopted a belief that as Western Buddhist practitioners, they are inherently second-class citizens, that their access to wisdom is limited, and that their

access to being able to claim an authentic ground—not only for just dharma practice, but for the complete fruition of the Buddhist path—is not possible.

Where this becomes particularly interesting to me is when I encounter people who hold these types of patterned or habituated views and who also occupy positions of privilege and benefit by being white or by being cisgender male dharma practitioners; yet they simultaneously experience difficulty recognizing that they have agency and power in relation to their practice. Indeed, even those with positions of power often find themselves feeling inferior and unempowered in relation to spiritual practice; they overcompensate for such inadequacies in ways that involve weaponizing dharma and dharma communities for their profit. Much work needs to be done to heal the fractured inner health of such practitioners.

The unexamined implication of the reactions of these culturally privileged practitioners is that practitioners of color—or practitioners of difference, so to speak—are often unfairly marginalized in relationship to the monolithic white power structure that tends to inform most Buddhist communities. This view of Western dharma practitioners as not having the power or not having the ability to actually manifest the fruit of the path that makes them sub-Buddha, or unable to realize, let alone culturally express realization, is a very real problem that requires addressing.

I think that these unexamined assumptions are highly problematic. This is something that needs to change, and at this point, I am not particularly concerned with the response by people who are so invested in maintaining a story of brokenness of any particular form of practitioner, regardless of their identity, their cultural location, etc.

We do a tremendous disservice to dharma—and we'll look at this in a later point in the book—when we're unable to joyfully understand that regardless of how we might appear, regardless of how we might speak, regardless of whether or not we know the Tibetan language, regardless of whether or not we know Sanskrit, regardless of whether or not our ability to have clear visualization is present, complete liberation is the birthright of every single being in the universe. Not just humans. And especially not just white humans. Or men.

This is something that needs to be addressed, and I pray that in the future, more Western dharma practitioners and teachers can challenge the status quo.

This is precisely why we must develop our own commentarial literature that advances these and similar topics. It can be argued both ways. It can be argued, it can be doubted, it can be fought. That's okay. But the conversation needs to happen. I have developed a student body of dharma practitioners, many of whom are tired of being told that they have no agency, are tired of being treated as second-class spiritual citizens. The transmission of these toxic views needs to stop.

I very much look forward to and embrace a future in which the outer appearance of dharma looks very different than the outer appearance that it has now. I celebrate diversity as it arises. I celebrate the rich potential for dharma expression through art, music, literature, and other avenues to just explode. And I pray that we're able to hone our own sense of inquiry to be able to let this happen.

Bodies of Trauma (Trauma and Incarnation)

Over the course of my relationship with dharma, whether on pilgrimage in India, while staying with one of my teachers, or while meeting with fellow students of dharma in the West, I am humbled by the depth of the pain and suffering that many who come to dharma have endured before they choose to seek refuge and begin to practice. It is inspiring to see how many people arrive at a similar place of choosing to practice in order to transform their suffering.

Whether it is rooted in recovery from substance abuse and addiction, anxiety, physical abuse, deep exhaustion, depression, or trauma—as well as other causal factors not mentioned—I find it particularly meaningful that what we bring to Tantric Buddhist practice is the full, honest range of the way we suffer. The energy enmeshed within our suffering provides a tremendous amount of power for our realization.

Much of my work as a chaplain and dharma teacher—one who chooses to go against the stream within my tradition, speaking up and out against dynamics within institutional Vajrayana, such as sexual abuse, the abuse of power, or unexamined old-fashioned parochial pedagogical practices— involves bearing witness to the extreme suffering of others. I consider my vocation a privilege. At times I go through periods of self-reflection—

curious to sense the degree to which I suffer from vicarious trauma, my own PTSD, depression, or moral injury—or engage in wild spiritual bypassing.

Working in jails is incredibly challenging work, and the cumulative effect of bearing witness and trying to hold space for others as they go through very difficult experiences takes its toll. Sometimes I wonder if I should stop and maybe do some work that's less intense. Yet I often find myself coming back to having a strong sense of needing to keep myself grounded in suffering. At the end of the day, the stakes involved in our practice ought to be understood for what they are: high.

I observed many kinds of trauma as a hospice chaplain. Most of the time, my work involved guiding people through the spiritual and emotional preparation around the end-of-life experience and the transition into active dying. Some of my work included providing spiritual counseling for family members when a loved one was at the end of life. Invariably, and to different degrees, I have borne witness to great moments of pain, frustration, sadness, depression, and defeat. At the same time, I have also seen moments of great joy and resolution that have accompanied the people I have had the privilege of meeting and working with as they approached their death; some developed a sense of centeredness and spiritual formation that provided them with meaning, grace, beauty, and peace.

The role of the chaplain in the clinical setting, as I have come to understand it, is to help guide and travel with those I meet—whether they are hospice patients, their family members or loved ones, estranged family and friends, or officers and inmates—and to be a support for all with whom I work. The chaplain is afforded the exquisite benefit of being able to remain without judgment (if they wish to be so and/or actually can operate from a place that is nonjudgmental) and as available as possible to the experiences of those the chaplain serves. This is seldom easy and yet always full of challenging areas for growth.

As a practicing Buddhist, I have found that this process of being witness and guide, of adopting a *Hermes-like* role—a role involved in navigating the dualism through which we often experience any particular given experience—seems to fit hand in glove with the best practices that you find in chaplaincy. Just as the Buddha told his students that each of us must journey the path for ourselves and that he did not have the ability to simply make

someone enlightened, let alone remove the suffering of another, the chaplain can never remove someone's particular problems or the experience of pain or loss. A skilled chaplain can, however, help in a natural way—almost organically—by supporting another to experience *themselves* more deeply, thereby easing the very harsh and seemingly immutable terms with which we tend to define our experiences. Sometimes this is experienced as an easing into the moment, or as seeing things for what they really are, or as a softening around, and within, that which we would normally not wish to experience otherwise. Just as we might experience in meditation, we are asked as practitioners to come back to what is present right now and allow whatever that may be to simply *be*.

Quite frequently, returning to the present moment—this moment right now, in all of its ordinariness, adorned with joys and sorrows—allows us to see with fresh eyes the story that brought us to where we find ourselves. This story, the story of you and me and how we got to this particular moment, is often very compelling, and a lot of wealth is uncovered in examining to what degree the story of ourselves, and often the story we *tell* ourselves, is about who we and others think we are right now in this moment. Where am I in my experience of life right now? What am I really feeling? When looked at from this perspective, the chaplain's role, and point of departure from my perspective, dovetails very well with the general Buddhist spiritual imperative and its ethical concern. In this way, chaplaincy and dharma practice fit together very well, especially an open, engaged dharma practice.

Inner Body

Identity and Embodied Spiritual Formation

As a chaplain, I frequently find that those I meet with and counsel have an established personal theology. Naturally, the range of established belief is wide and varied and can include a variety of orthodoxies (Greek, Russian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.) in addition to the views of moderate and liberal faiths, such as followers of the Episcopal Church, reform Jews, and progressive Catholics. I have also been chaplain to passionate Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Wiccans, and those who worship a whole host of individual prophets of the New Age.

I only speak for myself when I say I can never really know how true or theologically sound the spiritual underpinnings of any given person I meet are. I have my own biases, my own stubbornness, and without doubt, I have plenty of blind spots. I also struggle with my own tradition—sometimes more than is comfortable. This leads me to feel that when you are very invested in spiritual practice—with your entire heart—it is common to experience pain and sadness when your actual tradition (the human aspect of it) makes mistakes.

Personally, I find it impossible to fully understand, in an ultimate sense, the beliefs of others—or in other words, to know how right, correct, full, or effective their particular path is. Just like trying to hold water in my cupped hand for any length of time, such definitive knowledge escapes me. In fact, I often wonder what the utility of trying to know such things is—it seems like trying to know if the person next to you sees the color blue the same way you do. Is there even a right blue? And what *is* blue?

What is mind?

What is Buddha-nature? How do we recognize it?

How are we suffering? What is the cessation of suffering? What does that mean for you?

How are we not shackled by discursiveness? Our assumptions? Our biases?

What is the role that *certainty plays in our spiritual formation*?

This last question seems to touch upon, and lead us to, something we may be able to come to know, albeit with effort and focus. Certainty suggests a lack of doubt, a knowing born of experimentation, a sense of security from error. Ultimately, entering the realm of certainty may be intensely personal. Spiritually, I feel that the tentpoles of certainty are planted and firmly fastened when we wrestle with instructions left behind by our particular traditions. Once we come to appreciate these instructions, internalize them in a healthy way, digest them, and come to know with confidence what they mean, *then* we may fully know the secure and tender shelter that our tradition affords us. Only then do we see that the words in our dusty books are actually thick, golden, ambrosial nectar, and that the experience of life can become more of what it is: alive, fresh, and full of energy. Even as it wanes, this life of ours, subject to pains, worries, sorrows, and regrets, still holds the unique and ever profound richness of spontaneity and depth of meaning. Dharma percolates through our being.

When we work to distill certainty from our experience of life, we try to see ourselves for who we really are. We try to understand our outer, inner, and secret anatomy. This work also leads us to a *taxonomy of self*—a clear, reflective understanding of who we are—for it is only through knowing ourselves and how we experience our lives that we can understand how to develop greater awareness of what being open and more free means. I tend to associate openness and freedom with the flexibility I need to solidify these natural attributes, to provide ground, in order to really see who I am. Once we've figured out who we are, we need to turn to who we are in relationship with our tradition. Tradition and lineage can take a number of forms, but in their most essence-oriented function, tradition and lineage speak to how we become who we are in time and space. In this particular case, it isn't about adopting a particular set of beliefs or perspectives; it's more about how integrating lineage perspectives causes us to individuate within our lineage; in essence, it is about how we become more ourselves—empowered and confident, free and self-assured. We may very well come to find ourselves within the natural ebb and flow of our tradition or lineage without much to-do.

How this comes to be, of course, may be impossible to fully explain—except in relation to our own particular journey. Such inner-awakening is very personal and unique to each of us. This fact is easily gleaned, in my experience, from reading the lives of the eighty-four mahasiddhas. The stories of their processes of liberation often involve embracing circumstances unique to each of their lives. Whether a practitioner used a goiter as a focus to stabilize the mind, thought of the mind as a fabulous jewel and tried to steal its essence to ascertain its nature, or used conceit as a way to attain siddhi in arising as the yidam, nothing was spared. No fear was too mundane; no shadow too dark. In fact, in these stories, we can easily see how structured aspects of practice lineages were transposed upon, or woven throughout, the experience of the lives of each mahasiddha. The result of such a skillful weaving, blending, or circulation (circumambulation) of tradition within the experience of life is twofold: The experience of being becomes easily imbued with simplicity (an expression of simple appearance). This approach also offers us the possibility of complete fiery annihilation of obscurations.

Paradoxically, such seemingly simple self-styled practice requires that we are open to exploring who we are, what we are, and how we function in the world, and that we know our lineage and are particularly certain of its affect. The stories of the mahasiddhas are approachable and should be read by everyone. They capture the depth and simplicity of a well-grounded and distilled practice and offer a kaleidoscopic expansion of experience that I have come to value. From the simple comes everything—the full richness of a practice lineage with all of its subtle distinctions.

Establishing certainty within our spiritual practice invites us to wonder what we feel about religious thought. Do we consider ourselves religious, or do we tend to think of ourselves as spiritual? Is there a difference? What is it about those two words that causes such intense reactions and why?

There is no right answer, only our own—which, if it is an honest one, can hold up to a little inquiry and be allowed to change as we do.

In many cases, real training (studying, receiving instruction, practicing, reflecting, and retreating) within our individual lineages is very important for gaining certainty in the path as well as for knowing what is possible. Within the model of Tantric Buddhism, this process is described as the *Ground*,

Path, and Fruit. We will explore this process in greater detail, but let's take a look at these terms in a cursory manner here.

Ground represents the larger theory, or idea—the teachings on the way the mind appears (how it arises), how suffering arises, and how dharma can eliminate our experience of suffering. *Path* is primarily the method of putting this dharma into practice—really blending it with our experience of life. The *Fruit* is the true, naked experience of mind—an experience of seeing, feeling, and really knowing the ground to be alive within our experience of being. Certainty can be, and needs to be, known in all three relational models of Buddhist practice represented by the idea of ground, path, and fruit, as well as in the various stages and stories we experience within our own particular liberation story.

Certainty in Ground. Certainty in Path. Certainty in Fruit.

Pastoralism and Certainty

Pastoralism is something that we commonly find within Christendom; in its most basic form, it is a practice centered around giving spiritual instruction and guidance to others. Consider the parish priest who is intimately connected to the concerns and needs of his flock—spiritual, emotional, and otherwise. Think of someone who works tirelessly for the benefit of others, in real terms; this person does not just aspire to perform this task but actually rolls up their sleeves and gets into the mucky mess that comes with being. Pastoralism also has applications related to music, art, and philosophy and is practiced by those with a personal and ethical desire to return to the simple, the immediately real, and what occurs naturally. When I was working as a hospice chaplain operating from within the Vajrayana tradition as an ordained *repa*, I was comfortable discussing the importance of pastoral presence and what that means. Yet I often found—still do find—my Vajrayana contemporaries uncomfortable in challenging themselves in a way other than the way that tradition dictates.

You could definitely say that Milarepa mastered a pastoral presence or a pastoral affect. In my mind, this has less to do with him living in retreat, in the pastoral wilds of Tibet as coincidence would have it, than with the fact that he could naturally—with simple, immediate ease—sense the needs and

suffering that others were consumed by, because he could sit honestly with what arose within himself.

This ability of his sounds easy to accomplish, but in actuality, it is quite painful and heartbreaking. It is difficult to see others stuck within their own experiences of themselves and even harder to see ourselves get stuck in similar ways. Generally, we don't want to recognize how compelling the hallucinations that we have created actually are, or how we lead ourselves around in circles, let alone how we try to work through our baseless obsession with being imperfect and needing to get somewhere before we can stand on our own two feet. Retreat is certainly a great way to develop spiritual insights, and it is very important, but it does not necessarily produce compassion, nor am I sure that it produces pastoral presence nearly as well as does being fully engaged by what life brings our way. In fact, I would argue that compassion arises more uniformly, with more stability, outside of a comfortable retreat setting. When living life in full, you can easily get to the heart of difficult feelings that arise within your experience of pain and suffering, feel them, and then let them flow into the next experience. Retreat can be helpful in this regard; however, I tend to feel that it is easier to seduce ourselves into a comfortable homeostasis in which we are never really forced to face our fears, never asked to consider the shadows, and never really asked to cut deep to the bone and feel the cold pain of the roots of our own suffering.

This is why Milarepa is considered semi-wrathful within the text of his guru-yoga sadhana; the only way that he could go deeper and deeper within his practice was to cut with skill, precision, and power. Cutting deep is important; but it is hard and very uncomfortable. Yet we are best served when we can access the pain and suffering that we hide from. When we can do this, our pastoral presence is much more authentic. Milarepa is the best model for Tantric Buddhists who are looking to foster a more pastoral Vajrayana.

Sometimes I question much of the way that the Buddhist perspective is presented in the West. It is somewhat split between pedagogic models—one which would have students memorize terminology, acquaint themselves with logic, and spend years studying before they can say that they are practicing Buddhists—and a much looser perspective in which practitioners don't need to worry about committing to any particular tradition. With these approaches,

we are either going to be born in one of the Hell Realms because we are terribly ignorant, or we are going to be just fine and do not need to worry about specifics—we just need to show up, say our prayers, and follow a bit of instruction without committing to a teacher or a cogent path of practice. It is much easier to just follow the rules and sheepishly hide who we are in relation to dharma than it is to integrate dharma into our experience of life. You do not have to go far to find similar ideas with regard to the overemphasis of formal, ordained sangha and a rigid reading of the *vinaya* (the monastic code) in some sanghas in a way that causes spiritual pain for those who don't want to or can't engage in such a lifestyle.

These days, within the Kagyu tradition in particular, we seem to suffer from an overly Mahayana perspective—we must spend a long period of time practicing before we become realized. Very infrequently, we are told (or shown) that liberation can come in this moment, on this very seat, in this very session—despite the many supplication prayers we perform that make us yearn for such experiences. A practitioner may be given a practice and generally told that it will take an incalculable (or at least unknowable) amount of time before enlightenment occurs.

We venerate past masters who were exemplary and are also taught that we are nothing in comparison to them—we are mere shadows of such people. But is this really so? Why are we not taught to take greater responsibility for our realization? Why are we not taught to be creative in our practice, to take our seats and settle into our own pastoral authority? In fact, more often than not, we are presented with a specific lineage that is more like a line we shouldn't deviate from; yet when we look, we find that most of the great masters struggled to challenge and confront such preconceived ways of being. Every lineage has masters who did whatever they needed to do to effect realization—if it meant breaking the rules, they did so. Lineage is not a finished project, but a process that can be messy, and not without its problems, accidents, and mistakes.

I fear that some contemporary Vajrayana leaders lack the natural ease that Milarepa brought to the tradition at large; at the end of the day, dharma is not about monasteries, particular schools of thought to which we must tether ourselves, institutional affiliations, specific orthodoxies, expectations, or roles—dharma pastoralism is rooted in the experience of pure experience. Even though I say this, note that scholars interested in the development of the

Milarepa's hagiographical literature, as in works by Peter Alan Roberts and Andrew Quintman, present us with compelling evidence that the story of Milarepa morphed into what we know of it today from a wide variety of projections of what his life was thought to have been like by others centuries after his death.¹ Even so, despite the fact that we may only be able to interact with our own *inner* Milarepa, and we may never know the *true* Milarepa, he evokes some indescribable inspiration, not unlike the feeling of a warm, early spring day that leaves you feeling naturally resolved and content and excited for whatever comes next.

For me, part of the joy of Milarepa is that everything is okay—that within the experience of mahamudra there is nothing to add, nothing to take away, nothing to do, and I can rest in everything because it is all essentially one taste. This is a powerful root to a penetrating pastoral presence that is profound beyond words. I try, in my own way, to allow this to inform me as a chaplain and as a dharma teacher rather than depend on whatever rules or traditional norms may exist; whether this approach is a benefit and serves me well in either role is certainly up for debate.

Here in the United States, many in the Vajrayana tradition, especially those in positions of spiritual leadership, seem to fall back upon textual dictates, scripture, and the rules and maxims of form and function rather than engaging directly and naturally with how life, and thus appearances, arises.

Spiritual bypassing, or using spirituality to disengage from actually experiencing what arises and learning to rest within such experiences, appears to be a common disease for the Western Buddhist, much as diabetes and obesity are the illnesses that currently define Americans. This bypassing appears to be caused by the constant retelling of the same old story—we are imperfect, we are not enough, and we are somehow not whole in this moment, or that this very Western location of ours is fundamentally flawed. In addition, this type of undigested view lacks the rich fertility that could provide us with the needed confidence, or escape velocity, we could use to escape such samsaric cycling so we are no longer hindered by the gravity of our habits and the misguided constructions of the universe around and within us. It is easier to build a fancy dharma center, go into a three-year retreat, and tell ourselves (and others) that we will never taste any of the fruit of the dharma because we are fundamentally broken or without potential than it is to try to cut through our sad, sorry, slothful sense of being imperfect. There is

no better way to blind yourself (and build up your sense of importance) than with dogma.

Why do we become overly dogmatic at the expense of killing the experience of another? When do we let our religious dogma undermine our ability to manifest the connection created by pastoral presence? What makes us Buddhist puritans?

How we work toward achieving this reconnection to our essential wholeness, our naturally expansive and vast experience of all that arises, is ultimately up to us. Doing so includes specific techniques, degrees of effort, and conceptual models that we temporarily use to get us to a place of spontaneous confidence and certainty. Most important, however, is that we don't concretize the path, we don't rigidly hold on to our techniques (lest we become cold chauvinists regarding Buddhadharma), we don't have a dialectical obsession with how much effort we must apply (after all, we are trying to ease into the experience of realizing the mind's essential nature, not train for a triathlon), and we don't assign too much of an eternalist reality to the conceptual models we use (whether we are lay or ordained, male or female, well schooled or illiterate; whether we follow sutra or tantra, are logicians, ritual specialists, or neither, we are working with the essence of mind; no one path is necessarily better than the other). If we do, the very vows that we take to benefit others become the very cause of perverse dogmatism that does more harm than good. Before we know it, we are no better than the demons we thought we were feeding or coming to learn from, and rather than spiritual friends, we become judges, applying dialectics gathered from scripture and commentarial literature rather than from the direct experience of mind.

When does that shift occur? When do we go from spiritual friend to tormentor and judge? When does our fear prevent us from being with what arises and cause us to snuggle up within textual dictates to provide us with comfort and a defensive justification of laziness?

Of course, in an ultimate sense, the lineage doesn't care about us. That's not what we are striving for; awakening isn't about being liked or fitting in. Our practice of dharma ought not be about our identities in relation to the lineage. The lineage doesn't care if we become involved as teachers or administrators. The lineage doesn't care about monasteries or lack of

monasteries. It doesn't care about dharma centers and their creation, maintenance, and growth. The lineage doesn't care about anything other than our work to recognize our natural face, our enlightened being. Everything else is extra. Lineage doesn't do anything other than reflect our essential nature. We do the rest. We create the world of systems, we collate texts, we publish books, we create limitations and neurotic obsessions, often in the name of lineage. If we are blessed with the chance to look back at our lineage and see how easy it is to get wrapped up in the peripheral details, maybe we can return to the experience of simplicity, the experience of naked awareness. When we can do this, we don't have to become anything, or wear anything, or observe any vow, or follow any textual dictate, because we become, in that moment, dharma. There is nothing to add or take away from this basic reality.

Individuation within Our Traditions

At its best, lineage, or tradition, just happens; it is not the product of strategic planning. Why is this? Well, perhaps we are not the product of controlled strategic planning either; our mind/heart matrix of thought/emotion is a system of constant mishaps, and all sorts of stuff arises. Sometimes we can clearly rest in what arises; other times we get carried away by our hallucinations. But one thing is certain: problems arise once we try to force a structure upon the way things should be.

In my own tradition, the Karma Kagyu, I tend to wonder if we made the fundamental error of leaning too much upon the eighteenth/nineteenth-century classicism of monastic Buddhism as a model for the entirety of American Karma Kagyu (the vast majority of whom are lay) in the twenty-first century. It sounds kind of absurd, actually, when I see it written out like that, and I don't think that it is too much of a stretch to suggest that if this is the case, perhaps we lose some of our credibility and accessibility with those who resonate with the subgroups that feel at odds with the way dharma is presented in our tradition.

How are young people with little interest in India or Tibet (let alone their history) and who have little money to travel to India to feel connected? What about some curious souls from the South Bronx, Brownsville, Oakland,

Compton, or even large swaths of suburbia who want to better understand their relationship with their experience of suffering?

The dynamic energy of an engaged being, as is expressed by a wide variety of groups in the West of all imaginable ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and other points of orientation, doesn't seem to be held by the container of this kind of singular classical Tibetan approach. Perhaps it is patriarchy or the effects of whiteness in relation to the way many dharma organizations have structured themselves. I tend to feel that what matters most here is how we address the **tension** between *self-identity*—as it relates to identifying as a member of a particular group, a practice that has a lot of relative meaning, including a sense of belonging, community, and context, all of which lead us to feel supported and with a sense of agency—and the Buddhist understanding around not having any particular self.

These sparks of tension allow the power of Tantric Buddhism to blow up our ideas of who we think we are and how we tend to conceive of the world around and within ourselves. To inadvertently create the assumption that someone can only experience this if that person is conversant in eighteenth/nineteenth-century Tibetan classical Buddhist thought only serves to disempower the vast majority of sentient beings in the United States. It allows very few people to come and be held as they explore the sparky nature of what it means to familiarize themselves with the view. Perhaps Europe is different, or Central and South America and Africa, but I suspect not.

In the United States, the way that much of the Karma Kagyu lineage is being presented these days appears to be more about preserving monasticism and imposing this structure upon the inner lives of the sangha, rather than a skillful blending, meeting people where they are, and creating the container that allows for the safety and intimacy necessary to challenge the assumptions of who and what we are and what the whole field of appearance might be.

The result is that you don't have to go far to find gorgeous Karma Kagyu dharma centers, stunning in their beauty and immaculate in appearance, real museum-quality reproductions of what one might have found in Tibet before the Chinese holocaust. Yet, somehow, while observing their beauty, you are simultaneously left with the cold, clinical feeling that many of these places exude. If you look even closer, it is easy to see how tender and fragmented

the sanghas in such places appear to be. This makes me feel sad. After all, the wider sangha is vital for the continuation of the practice of dharma—not only ordained sangha. When I visit places that resemble these perfect visions of what dharma is *supposed* to look like, I think of Drukpa Kunley, Milarepa, Padampa Sangye, and Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol with great tenderness (and humor) and take delight in my identity as a repa. These teachers were vital commentators; they presented an alternative model and were voices in the wilderness that reminded people that dharma cannot be owned, cannot be trapped in books, and is not only to be delivered through the medium of classicism, which often runs the risk of becoming overly dusty and theoretical. They taught a lot of wisdom in their path, and many teachings revealed their relationship with the institutions that presented dharma in a particular kind of way. I believe that their teachings may be more suitable for the dharma of tomorrow in the West than those supplied by a monastic model.

What we seem to fail to realize, or perhaps what we disassociate from, is that the Karma Kagyu lineage is best when it is a blended practice of fiercely engaged practice activity *mixed* with the subtlety and discipline that one finds in Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye. Just as we need the sun and the moon for there to be balance on Earth, perhaps we need both the paths of Rechungpa *and* Gampopa as symbols of who we are, who we might wish to become, and from which point we wish to engage dharma. We need to examine where we become too comfortable and lazy and bring our *whole* experience as people into our practice. Good dharma practice has nothing to do with beautiful dharma centers, rich coffers, and exquisite elegance. In fact, the best practice arises from confronting the entire hallucination of this “self” and the world around us. To this end, we are well served by challenging our assumptions of how our dharma centers should appear, noticing when our devotion becomes habit-obsession rather than a mixture of connection and gratitude, and discovering when, in trying to be “good,” we accidentally cause great harm to those we tell ourselves we are committed to benefiting.

Ultimately, no matter what our particular language may be, everything that has been created by our foreparents is wonderful, and we should rejoice in what has come into being. And yet, I pray that we can make things a bit more messy, sparky, and dynamic for everyone who might be attracted to this vibrant and wonderful array of dharma. I pray that our teachers can strike a

rich and engaging balance for their students. I pray that our lineage can hold the experience of every person from every walk of life who approaches us! I pray that we face mishaps every day and that the sparks of tension within our experience of being cause endless growth so that the diversity of the larger sangha can be reflected into who our future lineage holders become. May we never hold back.

Language, Time, and Ideas about the Path

Our exploration up to this point has lead me to a few deeper problems that have both concerned and sparked curiosity for me: *language* and *time*. These both have to do with how we relate to the way we conceive of the path and our respective roles on it.

We define ourselves through the use of language. We use it to describe who we are physically, our characteristics and so forth, and we use it to fill in all of the details—our personalities, our likes and dislikes, and all the rest. We further dabble in collaborative fiction by supporting the personal narratives of our friends and loved ones, and we offer counternarratives of what we dislike. Soon, what may have begun as a relatively blank page (a debatable point indeed) is filled up with a testimony of who we would like to be, who we envision ourselves to be, and the way in which we interpret the world around us. This language is a tapestry of meaning that we consciously and unconsciously weave together—it's a living history, along with plotted trajectories of future events we have yet to live. In and of themselves, these products of our individual relationship with language are amazing works of art that capture how we conceive, what we can allow to be, and what we must keep at bay. They are our hells and our anchors—perhaps they prevent us from flying off into a manic subconscious world, or perhaps they confine us to knowable modalities of being that provide us with the tools to experience life. Whichever the case may be—and I suspect that it is most likely a combination of the two at differing points in time—language, in this context, acts more often than not like a prison. It is like a thief, like an unreliable friend whom we continue to trust even though they continue to disappoint. For some reason, we cannot accurately describe the pain of loss, experiencing the death of a loved one, terrible bouts with illness, and the fact that one day we will be forced to say goodbye to all that we hold dear.

The images we create with our internal literary drives have a hieroglyphic quality: our written language is often highly symbolic, which is difficult to interpret/assign meaning to. As has been said, in the beginning was the word. From that word, an entire world was created, a veritable cosmos. Our interwoven personal narratives develop with increasing complexity and nuance, creating a web, a net, or a systemic literary storyline in which we capture every detail. Everything we do, all we experience, tends to be added to this net of meaning that is cast upon the phenomenal world.

At times we are able to put down our pens or turn off whatever device we use to compose these narratives of distinctive being—one of the most common devices in such work is our discursive mind. This is the mind of spatial relationships, of color schemes, the mind of philosophy and dualistic comparisons. Perhaps this is also the sociology mind, the mind of architecture, the mind of economics, and the mind of urban planning; that part of us that organizes, that maintains the desire to play with the economics of mind; the way we become hypnotized by the production, consumption, and transfer of phenomena. When we can put this need to chase and define down—although we’re not really putting anything down or changing anything—then what we were formerly engaging with becomes less of an object and more of an experience. There is almost a sense of relief in this, a wonderful supporting ease, and perhaps the experience of a type of contentment.

In his very condensed version of the ninth Karmapa’s *The Ocean of Meaning*, entitled “Opening the Door to Certainty,” the late Kyabje Bokar Rinpoche touched upon the enhancement practices of mahamudra meditation. These are described as “enhancement through eliminating five false ideas.”² The first of the five false ideas is that of *objects*. Of eliminating the false ideas about objects, Bokar Rinpoche writes:

Without grasping something real in the notion of saṃsāra that must be abandoned and nirvana that must be actualized but placing ourselves in the infinite one-taste of primordial awareness [of knowing] the non-duality of all phenomena gathered by pairs such as virtue and non-virtue, we eliminate false ideas about objects.³

This is a wonderfully powerful instruction that, while presented as an enhancement practice in the context of the mahamudra system, is worthy of examining, especially in light of how easily we craft global narratives of

everything within and without. If we can “place ourselves in the infinite one-taste of primordial awareness,”⁴ or settle ourselves in a position of quiet knowing in which we can allow ourselves to dissolve the need for narrative and comparisons and allow the direct experience of the world around us (and within us) to arise as a dancing array of inherently perfect appearance, what might happen? And is this easier said than done? I’m not so sure about that—if we can playfully try to fold this into our everyday activities, I suspect that, bit by bit, we can massage the habits of stale knowing. If we can play around with the *view*, we’re really practicing something profound.

The second of the five false ideas is that of *time*. Of eliminating the false ideas about time, Bokar Rinpoche continues:

Although there is no fundamental truth about the reality of the three times, we think within a mode obscured by the division into three times. Consequently, realizing equanimity which does not establish a distinction of the three times, we eliminate the false ideas about time.⁵

This instruction is especially relevant in helping us loosen the grasping of the compelling reality of our narration as we constantly pin things down (including ourselves) to various points in time. Our past informs us in the present and helps determine the future, or so we tend to think. The idea of time having particular characteristics is a lovely subtle subject—Buddhism is full of them. The number of eons, or lifetimes, or years that it takes before we fully awaken is just one example. Assuming that the past was a particular way, the notion of the golden days of long ago in relation to these degenerate times, is another poignant example. The very notion of *systematic evolution* (individual spiritual evolution) is a wonderful blended assumption rooted in the false ideas of objects *and* time. How many others do we hold on to? What other unexamined aspects of our faith tradition do we just assume are true out of the habits of appearance and time? What would it be like if we crafted our own notions based upon our experiences? Wangchuk Dorje, the ninth Karmapa, reminds us that “the division of the three times (past, present, and future) are simply the imputations of ignorant fools.”⁶

More specifically, he warns us that included within this is the relationship we may feel we have with the past and future. He further continues:

Therefore, since the three times do not exist as separate [entities], their qualities must be realized. Yogins and yoginis who have manifested this [realization] are able to bless a great aeon into an instant and an instant into a great aeon. This occurs from the perspective of the equality [of the three times]; if they were separate entities this would not be possible.⁷

Yet it is possible, and it is up to us to ease into allowing this possibility. This gets back to having set ideas about who we are and what we are capable of and about all of the other stories we have woven.

What happens when we wrestle with the solidity of time? Or loosen our belts so that time can slip away? When this is possible, when will our liberation occur? Forget the texts and all of the things you have heard. When will it be possible to ease into the mind's essential nature? After ngondro? After you have mastered your yidam practice? After retreat? After ordination? After you die, in the bardo? After you die seven times? One hundred thousand times? In the future? What about right now? Did you already do it in the past but got distracted?

When we can see words as playful birds and time reflected in the way that clouds appear and disappear in the sky, and when we can see the solidity of our identities as the smoke of incense floating through the rays of a setting sun, then maybe we can experience mind a little more clearly. Not just experiencing the mind's stillness, but by exploring its outer reaches by feeling out, as if expanding awareness to meet the bounds of space, without saying, doing, thinking, or making notations, and without being Buddhist. When we try to do this over and over, we can see the artifice of relative reality, a necessary, strange place that allows us to communicate, to help others, and to support ourselves in the process of familiarizing ourselves with the mind—not reifying ourselves, not crystallizing our identities. When we tighten our belts and constrict the way we engage with the world, when we become women, or men, or Buddhists, with mass and height, with characteristics and distinct identities that feel, and want, and need, with a canon to follow and refer to, direct open experience of whatever arises without characteristics becomes very challenging.

Wangchuk Dorje reminds us that we cannot realize this when he tells us:

... mistaken ideas about prajna, or knowledge, arise from fixated attachment that solidifies the view that ultimate nature can be realized

through merely the intellectual and logical processes of hearing and reflecting (analysis). Realization does not just arise from hearing and reflecting; this is so no matter how intelligent or precise a logician you may be.⁸

Similarly, in *The Ultimate Supreme Path of Mahamudra*, the twelfth-century early Kagyu mahamudra master Lama Shang reiterates:

*However wise you are, however profound your analysis,
though you describe it for many incalculable eons,
it will be impossible to realize the true nature of the mind,
for its natural condition is not an object for analysis.*⁹

and

*However wise you are in contemplating and analyzing words,
if you do not practice, nothing else will arise from within.
It's impossible for intellect's conceptual labeling to realize the true nature.
If you do not realize your true nature, it is impossible to purify your
propensities.
Therefore, do not be attached to the academic wisdom of words,
but practice the instructions from the guru.
Repeating like a parrot becomes a song of aging and death.
Blind to yourself and others, there is the danger of falling into an abyss.*¹⁰

We can go around and around with ideas of this and that, with loads of empowerments, secret instructions, and a plethora of practices to choose from, but the real wisdom comes from practice, from trial and error. In fact, just one simple practice is more than enough—by sticking to it and blending it with our waking and sleeping moments, great wonders are possible. We are very well served by examining how and why we hold these truths about ourselves, our paths, and time to be self-evident. In an attempt to let the constancy of our personal narrative fall away like an unneeded belt, let's take these words and use them to unzip themselves so that our view is that of the experience of mind—fresh, free, naked, and not of the three times.

Secret Body

Approaching Death

The greatest threat to our well-constructed, buttressed identity is perhaps best signified through death and the dying process. Death, the great democratic destroyer, known in Sanskrit as *yama*, is the creator of the very impermanence of this life that we hold so dear. Not only this one life, but in a sense, everything around us. Nothing lasts forever; everything that has been accumulated will be dispersed; everything is impermanent. Death seals the deal so that we can really understand that such is the case.

This sobering fact, the fact of death, is often terrifying. It's common to find that people spin fantastic hallucinatory tales to obscure the basic fundamental fact that one day we will die. As we are reminded in many Buddhist texts, we do not know when this will happen. A bitter pill indeed. Living in the face of our own annihilation takes some getting used to. The best way is by remaining honestly aware of our particular situation by cultivating the radical acceptance and radical presence that we explored at the beginning of this section when we discussed how we might develop a stable foundation in relation to cultivating the tantric view.

As is generally the case within Vajrayana practice, the more we look away from that which is uncomfortable, or the more we actively hide, the tighter the grasp of the rope that binds us becomes, thus reinforcing our suffering. Similarly, the greater degree of ease and sense of natural acceptance we can develop in the face of our struggles, the more energy inherent in the situation in which we find ourselves becomes accessible; we can then access this energy and apply it toward fueling and refining our practice. Later I go into greater depth around staying present and learning to rest when faced with obstacles rather than using a tremendous amount of energy to avoid or transform them.

In the Buddhist tradition, you often hear a lot about the importance of developing definitive knowledge. I covered this to some extent when I talked earlier about the idea of certainty.

When it comes to understanding death and the dying process, two types of definitive knowledge are important to develop in unison. The first is experience with death and the second is knowledge of the Tantric Buddhist view and teachings around death and the dying process. Having both of these types of knowledge is essential. Having experience with death and the dying process is helpful, especially when it comes to providing compassionate presence for those who find themselves close to the end of life, but it is not enough. You should also work to familiarize yourself with the teachings around the dying process, which involves a certain amount of dharma training. Similarly, having only dharma knowledge is beneficial, but without being familiar with what goes on when someone is actively dying, despite your best intentions, you may be much less effective than you would have liked to have been. In some cases, you can even do harm.

I had the precious opportunity of spending a number of years working as a full-time hospice chaplain. I also had the chance to receive transmissions and instructions on a number of Vajrayana practices related to death and dying, and I experienced and practiced through the death of three very dear dharma teachers. This last point, the death of your teacher, is a magical, tender, and intensely painful and challenging experience—especially if the teacher who is dying is one with whom you have an intimate and loving connection. Practicing with grief and loss is powerful.

Death is a tricky thing. This is especially true in the West, where we have concocted such elaborate ways of trying to remove it from our field of reference. We have done this not only with death, but with birth, sickness, and aging as well. For some reason, perhaps as a result of a combination of shame, fear, and anxiety, we think that it's possible to scrub away the natural conditionality related to being. Nevertheless, death is an intensely personal experience, and I can tell you, no two deaths are the same; the same is true of birth, as midwives have told me, and as I have witnessed with the birth of my three sons. Everything, including the build-up to the phase of active dying, is different for everyone. This makes sense because part of what we encounter leading up to death is a kind of untying of karmic knots manifested through the arising of kleshas and a matrix of conflicting emotions in a combination unique to each individual. Of course, certain wide-ranging similarities appear among various groups of people, and those are attributed to cultural and religious views around what death is, how it should be understood, and

how the members of that culture should interact with someone who is actively dying. A similar range of experiences exists with regard to the views of what we encounter after death and practices including bereavement for the survivors of the deceased.

As with all things, the devil is in the details, and when we look at death and the dying process, when we really sink our teeth into the legs of yama, we begin to see that perhaps this idea of the finality of the moment of death is actually not as final as our ego-clinging would like us to believe. In fact, it may very well be that our ego-clinging has invested quite heavily in a Ponzi scheme that it would prefer we believe in wholeheartedly. It sounds trite when someone says that death is just the beginning. Yet in many ways it is. Death reminds us that this existence we have come to feel strongly about, that we have become attached to, is always accompanied by phase change. Just like Boyle's law points to the possibility of phase change, we, and everything around us, are changing. Sometimes this change is easy, and other times it is quite painful—the only thing that is indeed certain is that such change is inevitable.

Death as Guru

I think I was eight or nine when I first became fascinated with ancient Egyptian religion; I was specifically interested in Egyptian funerary practices. The preparatory rites and rituals for the process of transitioning through the underworld and into the kingdom of the dead were, and still are, very compelling for me. It was this early interest that launched the journey that eventually lead me to hospice work as a Buddhist chaplain.

In high school I became pen pals with a young Rinpoche who was a Gelug/Nyingma reincarnate lama, known as Lelung Tulku, and also regarded as the incarnation of one of the essential peers and spiritual friends of Jey Tsongkhapa. A few years later, while in college, I participated in a study-abroad program in Bodh Gaya, India, that focused on the general study of Buddhism. The semester was split up into three sections, each dedicated to one of the three vehicles of the Buddhist path. It was during this time that I first heard Bokar Rinpoche, then the retreat master for the Kagyu lineage and the heart-son of the late Kalu Rinpoche, offer an evening of teaching on

meditation. Unbeknownst to me, this lama would become a very significant teacher for me two years later.

The last month of this wonderful program was dedicated to an independent study project, which I did in Sikkim; this is where I met a Sikkimese Buddhist nun, or Tsunma, who became my root teacher.¹ Tsunma Dechen Zangmo was also the mother of Dekila, a friend of a fellow student named Erik who quickly became a close dharma brother. Erik and I decided to go to Sikkim together, by bus, from Bodh Gaya, something he and I did several other times, and something which I do not recommend you do, ever, unless you are interested in the wholesale burning off of vast amounts of negative karma due to the long and excruciatingly bizarre and dreamlike pain that an overnight and all-day bus trip through India's poorest state involves. Not unexpectedly, what ensued from this adventure was the cementing of a close friendship that is immensely meaningful to me to this day.

Initially Erik and I met with Tsunma Zangmo at her home. We planned to just drop in, offer her our regards, and give her some gifts from her daughter, who was in college in the US. Before we knew it, however, she was naturally and effortlessly teaching us more about dharma, and perhaps about ourselves as well, than we had learned during the previous three months, and we had agreed to stay with her for the duration of the month-long independent study portion of the study-abroad program.

This became a tremendously important month for me. Each day began early in the morning with calm-abiding meditation, followed by all three of us making breakfast together, which very often turned into a long conversation that became a dharma talk. Then we prepared lunch, and she continued teaching through the early afternoons. Some afternoons, Tsunma Zangmo would conduct more formal teachings on calm-abiding meditation and superior insight, the Vajrayana vipassana meditation. We would then meditate together, all three of us sitting on the roof, with the vast expanse of the valley below us. On one side was Gangtok, and upon the opposite hills perched the Rumtek monastery, the seat-in-exile of the Karma Kagyu lineage and the support for our experience of mind.



Figure 1. Tsunma Dechen Zangmo standing on her rooftop garden in Gangtok, Sikkim, November 1995. The author and Erik Bloom spent hours in the afternoons on this rooftop with her. She spent this time teaching and practicing meditation with them. Photo taken by Erik Bloom. Photo courtesy of Dekila Chungyalpa.

During this month, we had time for a pilgrimage to Rumtek itself, as well as other places, including Phodong Monastery, which was founded at the request of the ninth Karmapa in the sixteenth century, and the local monasteries in and around Gangtok. Back at Tsunma's our conversations went late into the night and she would share her stories from retreat, stories of her root teacher, Kalu Rinpoche, and stories about how her full experience of life—the joys and the hardships before becoming a nun—related to the path.

One morning Tsunma told Erik and me that a cremation was going to take place at the local charnel ground and that we should go and watch—that it would be good for our attachment and ego-clinging. Excited about the adventure on which we were embarking, we walked across Gangtok and up the hill toward the charnel ground. We came upon the family and friends of the deceased who had gathered to attend the cremation. Not long after, the body of the deceased was brought out. It was hard to make out the body's exact position because it had been enshrined in a silken, boxlike tent

structure. This structure was placed upon a stack of wood that had been doused in vegetable oil. Once the tentlike structure containing the body had been placed on the wood, the wood was lit on fire. As the flames grew, the delicate silk structure went up in flames, revealing the body of the deceased sitting upright, lifeless, facing us. As the designated people added more vegetable oil, we watched as the body was engulfed in fire; at this point the flames were several feet high and white at their base, the smoke released from the structure became thick and black as the hair of the dead person was quickly incinerated, and soon we could only see an outline of the seated figure slowly being disfigured and transformed from the intense heat.

We weren't more than twenty feet from this very powerful reminder not only of impermanence, but also of the strong attachment that typically defines our relationship with our bodies—bodies that, ironically, we take often for granted as the locus of our identity, that seem so real and so permanent. As the fire continued to burn, and as the eyeballs popped outward as the pressure within the skull built and the skin began to char, I watched with the kind of fascination that a child has when they are watching something happen for the first time. Later I heard a loud pop as the skull itself, whose cranial segments had fused together when this body had been inhabited as a toddler, separated again.

Erik and I walked back to Tsunma's home in silence. We were left with much to consider in the quiet moments of the following days, which were often ornamented with conversations on the absolute inevitability of our deaths as well as the deep well of suffering that is created when we turn our faces from this truth.

Later, we returned to Bodh Gaya, finished out the semester, and Erik returned to the US. I took an extra semester to travel and eventually ended up at Drepung Loseling Monastery, where my pen pal Lelung Rinpoche had been staying, although he was no longer there. He was in retreat at Gyuto Tantric College. He had, in his absence, arranged for me to study with Geshe Wangchen, a senior instructor at the monastery. After two months at Drepung, I also returned to the US to finish college. This magical trip had changed my life forever.

Erik and I returned to India after we graduated, as we had learned that Tsunma Zangmo was sick. At almost the same time we showed up at her door

step, so had Pathing Rinpoche, a very old and wily lama who was known throughout Sikkim as a powerful sorcerer and healer. As I learned later, he spent his time traveling from home to home, essentially engaged in constant pastoral care. He would offer prayers and perform spiritual services to benefit those who were sick and dying, and he would console the friends and family of those he was treating or those who had passed away. Pathing Rinpoche had arrived to do *pujas* (ritual service) for Tsunma Zangmo, and Erik and I had the incredible fortune of spending time with him during the breaks; at such times, we were able to ask him about his life, which was very different from that of other Tibetan lamas. Pathing Rinpoche left Tibet to come to India in the late 1930s, and as a result, he never experienced the horror of the Chinese invasion of Tibet or the chaos that came thereafter in waves over the following decades.

Later that year Tsunma Zangmo died. Before her death, she prepared Erik, her daughter, Dekila, and me as best she could, which turned out to be very well indeed. She didn't remove our suffering—there was no way that she could—and without a doubt, the three of us suffered her loss and mourned her absence in ways unique to our relationships with her. This experience drew us closer, then, and it also seems to continue to inspire us to be who we are in ways both full and embodied today, which is just one of the qualities Tsunma manifested as a Buddhist teacher.

One of the wonderfully kind things that Tsunma Zangmo did was help support Erik and me in our relationships with Pathing Rinpoche and Bokar Rinpoche. Over the next several years, I would return frequently to India for instruction from both of these great teachers, develop close personal relationships with both of them, and sadly, wrestle with their respective deaths. Bokar Rinpoche died suddenly at age sixty in 2004, and Pathing Rinpoche died in 2007. Bokar Rinpoche's death came at a period of great turmoil and personal difficulty, and it hit me quite hard. Pathing Rinpoche's death was softened by my being able to spend much of his last two weeks with him in Sikkim. I was with him on his final visit to the hospital in Gangtok. This manifested as a sudden decline in health that led him to the hospital with pain, shortness of breath, and increased weakness—in this moment of crisis he decided to be discharged to the home of Tsunma Zangmo's eldest sister, who offered for him to die in her home. That evening had been traumatic. It was the first time that I had ever witnessed a medical

crisis in a hospital, and I had no idea that later as a chaplain I would end up experiencing dozens and dozens of events like that in hospital ICUs and later in home settings as a hospice chaplain. I saw Pathing Rinpoche the last morning before he passed away and have kept a container of *tsampa*—roasted barely flour—that he offered us as a final parting gift and a picture of him at my bedside ever since.

I share this part of my story to help illustrate that death and coping with painful loss have been important parts of my spiritual path. The death of a close teacher (or anyone who occupies a special place in our hearts) has a way of hitting us hard—not just because it is sad, but because it is a reminder of impermanence, that this life of ours is fragile, and that it will end at some point in time. In these moments of painful loss and the ensuing confusion that sometimes arises, this experience can feel bittersweet if not impossible to cope with, yet when we look closely, a great deal of wisdom can be gained in these hard moments.

In many ways, I think I have become a chaplain as a result of being the student of these teachers, and similarly, in many ways, I have also become a chaplain as a result of the deaths of these teachers. I cannot remove the experience of the loss of these three wonderful teachers, and something is very firmly rooted in the Buddhist tradition about how difficulties, even trauma, can be imbued with great wisdom. In fact, it was through their deaths that I was afforded the possibility of understanding that although the teacher may die, the essence of mind, that which they use to help to guide us to experience awakening, never dies. An energy of connection and interpenetration remains. This has been an important part of my own spiritual formation that provides me with resilience in working with others. I work with aspects of spiritual formation, no matter how they appear, as a chaplain; doing so is a way for me to locate sources of strength, wisdom, and love that guide people through difficult times. Death is my guru in an equal portion to what my human gurus have been; to this day, when I encounter death in my chaplaincy, it feels as if I am being visited by an old, familiar friend.

Death and the Spiritual Path

In my hospice work, I often met with people who were caught in the grip of trauma related to being at the end of life. Sometimes they experienced these

traumas suddenly; other times they resulted from long-standing difficult experiences. Sometimes the pain or fear of finding themselves at the end of life had been experienced over the course of many years because of a long illness, sometimes attendant additional problems such as substance abuse or mental illness were involved, and sometimes they also experienced sadness or unremitting physical pain. As a chaplain, I tried to journey with people through their experiences as a way of helping them become aware of where they might actually find themselves. I provided compassionate, nonjudgmental spiritual presence and through a variety of means, helped each of them explore how they experienced meaning. In the following pages, I will share the stories of three hospice patients for whom I served as chaplain. Their names and those of their loved ones have been changed as have other identifying details. We will begin with the story of Noah, a Buddhist teacher in the Zen tradition; he became a teacher to me, and his story helps me remember how rich and intense the experience of death can be.

The Sensei and His Preparation for Death

The hospice organization that I used to work for is part of a Catholic hospital, and although I am trained to be able to act as a multifaith chaplain and am very comfortable with serving those who have spiritual needs that are different from my own, I was often notified when a Buddhist patient arrived. One day, I was told that a Buddhist had come on the service and that he had specifically requested Buddhist spiritual care. The patient, whom I will call Noah, was a practicing Buddhist, and I was given his contact information; the address listed was for a Zendo. When I called, Noah told me he was the senior teacher and founder of that Zendo. He had struggled at length with cancer, which had gone into remission, and had also experienced unrelated chronic pain for much of his life; recently the cancer had come back and was now untreatable. Noah, as he described it on the phone, was trying to “tie things up.” Included in this end-of-life work was the specific task of arranging the succession plan at the Zendo, tending to his relationship with his children, and better understanding his own story.

At our first meeting, I experienced Noah as a wise and attentive man whose physical frame was failing him at this phase of his being. His body was in so much pain that he could only hold himself in a few positions that were not excruciating. He was incredibly kind and patient with me, took time

to engage in life review, which often serves as a meaningful way of making sense of one's own story through the experience of telling it to someone else, and all the while, he shifted in various ways to remain somewhat comfortable. He told me that he was declining morphine as he was unwilling at that point to take any medication that might alter his experience of the moment, and yet the frustration of experiencing chronic pain and the added problem that his cancer had spread to his spine left him in a difficult, very uncomfortable place.

I learned that Noah first came to the dharma through the late Dudjom Rinpoche, who was a great master of the previous generation and, for a while, was the head of the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Noah told me about Dudjom Rinpoche and about his experiences practicing within the Dudjom Tersar tradition. When I asked him what was the greatest benefit those years of practice brought him in this particular moment that we were sharing together, he said, "mantra recitation."

"What mantra?"

"Medicine Buddha," he replied.

"Would you like to recite the mantra together silently right now?"

He agreed. And we sat there together reciting the mantra for Medicine Buddha, a mantra that is said to comprise the essence of the qualities of Medicine Buddha, qualities that include healing and purification of the suffering caused by illness, as well as whatever underlying root karmic causes are involved in the arising of the illness. In this case, the reliance on Medicine Buddha offered Noah a way of letting go and putting the difficulties he was suffering through into a larger perspective, that of an enlightened Buddha, something close to the root of his spirituality. The mantra was grounding and reframing, inspirational, and allowed him some sense of agency in an otherwise very finite, imperfect experience.

I made weekly visits to be with Noah in the loft that served as his personal apartment above the Zendo. This loft was also the administrative office and a guest sleeping area for visiting teachers. It was far from a private setup, which had worked fine in the past, yet as the circumstances around Noah's life changed, it became clear that this was no longer working.

Noah's experience of pain had increased, and he had finally consented to taking morphine as needed. Noah refused a home health aide to help care for him, and instead a rotating cycle of sangha members served to care for him. Sometimes I saw myself in them, and I was transported back to my time in Sikkim with Tsunma Zangmo when I had the chance to care for an ailing teacher. I also came to learn that from Noah's perspective, it was very painful to be seen by his students as he was declining, increasingly frail, weak, and vulnerable.

In a moment of heightened anxiety, he decried the lack of privacy. It was difficult for him to find a way to decline away from the gaze of his students, and he also admitted to a sense of panic related to an impending visit from his adult son and daughter. I came to learn that his children were feeling left out of this very Japanese, Zen Buddhist experience (and process) that they saw surrounding their father. I also came to learn that Noah was increasingly sad in that he felt stuck between how drugged he felt, how he just wanted to sleep, and how the experience of the freshness of the ordinary mind in the moment felt, at times, impossible.

This was a difficult thing for Noah to share with me: he felt vulnerable, impotent, and to some degree, defeated by how difficult this process of death had become. At the same time, being able to share these feelings with me appeared to be therapeutic for Noah. His doubts and fears felt inappropriate to share with his students. They were going through their own experience of death: the death of a teacher. Noah expressed his gratitude for my anonymity, my unique position in being able to be there for him in an intimate way, a way in which he could open up and share all of the terrible confusion that he was experiencing. It wasn't just confusion related to the effects of the morphine, but also confusion caused by self-doubt, by the spiritual pain that accompanied the loss of lucidity, and a vividly alive striving for awareness of the moment that framed his spirituality and that was a very important part of the way he experienced his life.

I recalled his years of meditation training and realized that Noah, while feeling foggy and drugged, was aware of this experience. This became an area that I wanted to explore with him. The awareness of an undesirable experience is awareness of the moment, nonetheless. Perhaps he was reacting to his own judgments about being relegated to a seemingly intoxicated state from taking sublingual morphine on occasion for his pain. This was a way in

which I tried to reframe his perception of his immediate concerns, not to change them, nor to necessarily solve his problem, but to show him that he was, while in the midst of doubt and anxiety, able to rest in the moment. The problem, as it turned out, was that it was a present moment that he didn't want to find himself within.

Weeks passed, and Noah's condition continued to decline. He became more cachectic, so much so, that I was able to see the weight and muscle loss with each weekly visit. He had fewer and fewer moments of lucidity as either the pain or the effects of the medication affected his ability to remain as alert and oriented as he had been when I first had the opportunity to meet him.

I had the chance to meet with Noah's son who was visiting from Georgia. He was advocating for his father to be admitted to our in-patient hospice facility so that he could have more consistent around-the-clock care, as well as a greater separation from the sangha, as it was clear that the needs of the spiritual community that Noah created were outgrowing what was possible for Noah to focus on. Despite these difficulties, this was a rich period for Noah and his son. His son was able to clearly see and appreciate how his father had established a meaningful connection with dozens of students in the vicinity and that the needs of this community were real—they had to be honored as much as his own needs as Noah's son.

In the short periods of lucidity that were fleeting and unpredictable, Noah revealed his process to his son, and later he shared himself with his daughter and grandson who came up from Florida. Noah shared how the practice of Buddhism helped him in a variety of difficult periods in his life. Occasionally I was present for these lucid moments. Sometimes Noah would look at me, and as our eyes would meet, I could feel the fullness of that particular moment, including the sense of connection between Noah and his family and the sharing of his heart in a time that was far from perfect, a time in which he felt insecure and fearful of what his death would be like should the unmanageable nature of the way things had been progressing continue.

A few weeks later I received a call from the office to let me know that Noah had been admitted to our in-patient facility. I drove over to meet him there and found him lying in bed. He was awake and very upset; his pain had been constant, so he required a very regular IV dosage of morphine, and the

effects had proven to be incredibly disturbing to him. I sat with Noah in silence and recited some mantras for him. Noah turned to me and said, “Thank you for coming, for being here with me. You can go now. Nothing helps.”

“Please know that I *am* here for you; let the staff know if you need anything,” was my response. Noah smiled and then his expression changed to one of sadness, and he told me, “I never would have thought it would be like this.” The next morning Noah died.

The memory of my visits with Noah and the relationship we developed over the short period of time that he was on hospice service remains a powerful teacher. It seems to me that the trauma that Noah experienced was related, to some degree, to his expectation that things would wrap up in a particular way. He struggled at the end of life with preparing the sangha for his succession, attending to his relationship with his adult children and his grandchild, as well as his own relationship to death. As a spiritual person, Noah saw death through the lens of his faith. As I happened to share the same faith, I recognized very quickly that the Buddhist notions of dying—with a mind as clear and as reflective as possible so that one could enter into the dying process with awareness and a degree of intentionality—was turned into a curse for Noah. He hadn’t felt prepared for what arose, and to be fair to Sensei Noah, how could he prepare for something that is unknowable?

The path toward Buddhahood is, as has been characterized by many Buddhist masters of a variety of traditions, a path that, in many ways, is full of impossibilities, and yet we still try. We make mistakes, develop greater resolve, and try again. Again, and again, until somehow, we begin to appreciate that it is the quality of being open to whatever arises rather than the accomplishment of a particular goal, in this case a *good Buddhist death*, that leads us closer to whatever Buddhahood might be.

I find the story of Sensei Noah valuable, especially in regard to discussions around Buddhist end-of-life care. It is very easy to accidentally create an attachment to wanting a preferred outcome when it comes to death. I have witnessed a great many deaths and can say that I have had the benefit of definitively learning just how differently every death arises. Some are fast, some slow, some are accompanied by sharp pain, others by dull pain—some

are accompanied by no pain at all. Then there is the range of emotional and psychological experiences, and the full range of spiritual experiences.

It feels important to me to introduce a certain amount of suspicion into the contemporary interest in Buddhist views having to do with death. Obviously, as a Buddhist, I find that greater access to knowledge of what a preferred Buddhist death might be can be helpful, but I sometimes wonder if many of the Buddhist practices around death are being shared on the marketplace to essentially purchase a positive outcome. In one regard, you can say that as long as benefit occurs, what's the big deal? In another regard, however, as fear and great attachment to positive outcomes might be the motivating factor behind the Buddhist end-of-life cottage industry, I feel that we need to be careful to know *how to provide benefit* and not empower increased anxiety and neurosis rooted in fear of death. Sensei Noah showed us just how the impact of wanting a good death can color the actual experience of death. Even with a lifetime of meditation experience, his natural grasping, grasping that I can see within myself, is revealed with all of its realism.

Facing death is hard. It helps to be realistic. It can be very difficult to occupy a place of realism when it comes to death, let alone the work of bringing the complexity of our fears and our attachments to a place of resolution or increased peace as we quickly approach the end of life. Yet this, too, is part of our shared path.

Joan: When Families Unravel

I was once called to the home of a Lutheran woman named Joan who was dying of lung cancer and had initially not wanted spiritual care visits. However, based on the assessment made by the nurse and social worker, it appeared that some benefit might arise from an initial spiritual care visit. From there, we would see where things would go with Joan.

When I first went to meet with Joan, her adult daughter, Betty, let me into her apartment. Joan, I was told, wasn't feeling well as the result of a cold and was resting when I arrived. I sat with Betty in the kitchen. Betty's affect was fast and intense; she was a little rough around the edges and very quick to answer my general questions around how she was doing with her mother being at the end of life. She was realistic and able to talk about her feelings. I soon discovered that Betty had struggled with substance abuse for much of

her adult life. Her substance abuse was made worse by the death of her husband, a firefighter and first responder to the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. He had died of respiratory ailments from exposure to the dust and smoke related to the terrible events of that day and his subsequent work on the site over the following months. But Betty had gone through treatment and had come out strong and very determined. She took to living in recovery, so much so that she became a substance abuse counselor, thereby transforming a point of personal suffering to make it a strength that she could offer others.

Betty and I hit it off, and she continued to open up to me about her older sister, Linda, who was a hospital administrator. “She’s the good one, and I’m the bad one,” she told me while rolling her eyes. “She has a lovely home, wonderful children, a good job, and a husband who is kind and there for everyone. I, on the other hand, was a drunk, lived off and on with my parents most of my adult life, and then when I did get married, my husband died.”

I also learned that Betty and Linda had a sister who had been murdered by her boyfriend and a brother from whom they were estranged who was abusive, violent at times, and manipulative. The murder of their sister had been traumatic for the family as well as for the entire community. What was worse was the fact that the killer had never been caught, and the family felt that, as a result, much of their grief was unresolved. In some ways it is not surprising that Joan’s son became unmanageable, manipulative, and physically abusive and that Betty developed substance abuse problems in response to this trauma.

When I finally got a chance to meet with Joan, I found her pleasant and polite and very shut down—she was unable to share with me any feelings of what was going on for her, even peripherally. She liked to read mysteries and watch television, and she had a dog that she thought was a “pain in the ass.”

Joan’s condition was stable for about a month, and then she began to decline. I had been making visits to her home once a week mainly to try to support Betty, as it was clear that she was bearing the brunt of much of the daily caregiving responsibilities, and, I think that at the time, I was concerned that the stressors might weigh her down in a way that would be hard to manage given her history of substance abuse.

When I had the chance, I would continue to try to provide a soft compassionate presence for Joan so that she might open up a bit. I noticed a tightness about her that occasionally led her to expose a distant stare, as if she were trying to keep the emotional pain that she had been holding with her all of these years tightly contained and controlled. I have three children, and as I reflect upon what Joan had to endure, I cannot imagine the pain and frustration, the sadness and anger and rage that she had been keeping tied up neatly in that small frame of hers. Over time, Joan began to open up to me. She would ask me to offer her a prayer, and after more visits, she began to share some of the stories of her relationship with her husband, who died about nine years prior.

One day, while in a state of labored breathing, Joan told me that she was worried about her daughters. They never really got along when they were girls, and things were just compounding as time went on. Joan was afraid that things would get so bad that their relationship was going to be beyond repair. It was as if she knew that she, and the circumstances around her, were beyond change. She couldn't shake the toughness she needed to hold things together with the murder of her daughter, she couldn't move past her disappointment with and fear of her son, and she struggled with her concern about Betty and her inability to identify with Linda. All of this left her calcified and hardened, and she knew it. She seemed to know that there wasn't really anything left to do for herself, that things were as they were and that she had learned long ago that she couldn't do anything about what she had experienced—but her daughters could change.

As Joan inched closer and closer to the end of life, I saw that Betty and Linda were unable to see things eye to eye. Linda was planning on selling the apartment to pay off Joan's remaining debts, but this would leave Betty without a place to live. Betty had left her job to care for her mother and had been living rent-free, and for her, the thought of finding a new job and a place to live while in the midst of pre-bereavement was difficult. It was hard for Betty to interpret Linda's views as anything other than a personal attack, and it was equally difficult for Linda to see that Betty didn't have the same support system that she had. In fact, at times it appeared that Linda was embarrassed by her sister. Things had gotten pretty bad, and it seemed clear that there was no way out of this slow, painful train wreck for Joan's daughters.

A few weeks later, while listening to the overnight on-call messages, I learned that Joan had passed away peacefully in her sleep. She had been transferred to our in-patient hospice facility as the palliative care needed to provide comfort in the face of the sharp decline in respiratory function and the anxiety produced by the inability to breathe was a delicate balance that wasn't able to be effectively managed at home. After some time, Joan had become unresponsive and died.

Later that day, I received a phone call from Betty, who told me that both she and Linda wanted me to perform the service at the funeral home. I had a chance to meet with both Linda and Betty privately before the service to check in to see how they were coping and was struck by how their relationship appeared to be quickly fading. It seemed as if neither had much interest or saw the point in repairing things.

The following week I led the funeral for Joan. It was open casket—in walking up to offer Joan a private prayer and the wish that she experience love and peace, I couldn't help but notice that she looked as if she hadn't experienced a single hardship at any point during her seventy-nine years of life. You couldn't tell that her daughter was murdered at a young age by her boyfriend, and that at the time, there was an uproar all over Brooklyn about it. I saw no trace of the fear of her son flying off the handle and of the occasional beating he received from her husband, his father. Nor could you see her weary knowledge that her remaining daughters might never be able to relate to one another in a meaningful way. In a strange way, the open-casket funeral was an open expression that she was taking the pain and terribly traumatic experiences with her. In life, they were too much to endure, and perhaps the only way that she was able to endure was to turn herself off, to use minimal energy so that she could just run on the bare minimum she needed to survive.

How Betty and Linda will fare after her death remains an open question. The experience of the rest of their lives offers them the opportunity to complete the story they have experienced up to now. How they will do this is up to them, and in some ways, but certainly not in an absolute fashion, their habitual ways of defining themselves in relation to the story will help determine how they complete its narrative. At the same time, I tend to believe in the possibility of an open, free, spontaneous relationship to whatever arises is present for all of us—perhaps the sisters will have the opportunity

to experience this. Sometimes it's a matter of having confidence in the uncomfortable moments—often these are the moments that afford us beautiful growth.

As we shall see later, what is prevalent in the experience of life often—but not always—becomes important in the experience of death. As much as we might like to, we cannot easily turn off the effects of trauma, difficult relationships, or reliance upon discursive habitual thinking (one of the disturbances that Buddhist practice seeks to soothe). The following story of Rosie serves as an expression of the power of what it means and feels like to experience a dramatic shift, even within your own assumptions about what your experience of the end of life will become.

Rosie's Sudden Loss

Upon return from a vacation, I attended a regularly scheduled interdisciplinary team meeting. While at the meeting, I learned that an Italian American Catholic woman in her 80s by the name of Rosie had come on service with us and that she requested spiritual care. Rosie was on hospice for breast cancer that had spread through her lymphatic system to her neck and brain. Her oncologists still held out hope that an experimental treatment regimen might prolong her life, but Rosie didn't want to hear any of it. Rosie was done. She was ready. She wanted to die. This wasn't a bad thing for Rosie. She told me that her resolute perspective was borne out of an honest appraisal of her condition. In her mind, nothing else could be done, and she much preferred to die at home than in a hospital. Rosie was comfortable, looked great, and had all of her faculties about her. She was married to a wonderful man named Ron, who was about to turn ninety-five. He was in good health, with failing hearing and slight memory loss, but he was still ambulatory, and sat dutifully at Rosie's bedside during my visits.

Rosie's nurse told the couple that I am Buddhist, and this was something that Rosie was very curious about. Rosie's spirituality was very important to her; she was a devout Catholic and very natural and confident in her faith. That I was Buddhist enabled her to ask me questions that allowed her to explore how others see and experience the world. She was interested in what meditation was all about and how she might be able to experience it. As it turns out, Ron had served during World War II as a pilot of supply planes on "the hump" between India and China and, as a result, had spent quite a bit of

time in India—this was a point of connection between Ron and me that Rosie appreciated. I asked Ron questions about his experiences in India, and he told us stories, some of which were new even to Rosie. For her, it was amazing to hear stories unfold that had not been mentioned over the span of a sixty-year marriage.

During my weekly visits with Rosie, she and I would talk about how she was feeling, and then we would take turns asking one another about the other's spiritual practice. This usually led me to share some meditation instruction, and then offer her prayer. Ron would come and go from the room where Rosie was in bed to other parts of the apartment. They never had kids, but a nephew from California came to stay in the city to help care for them in addition to the private-hire home health aide who lived with them in an extra bedroom. When Ron was out of the room, Rosie would frequently tell me how worried she was about him, and how she didn't expect him to take her death very well. Sixty years of marriage is a long time, and to have a relationship of that magnitude uprooted, no matter how much time one may have had to "prepare," is very significant.

One day while in our Interdisciplinary Team meeting, we received a phone call that Ron had had a heart attack and had been hospitalized. At the time, Rosie's social worker told us that she wondered whether or not Ron would die before Rosie, not because his health was worse, but because he couldn't take being the one left behind. At ten o'clock in the morning the next day, I received a phone call from the nurse manager, who told me that Ron had died an hour earlier and that Rosie's nephew wanted me to call him. When I called Rosie's nephew, he confirmed Ron's death and explained that he had not yet told Rosie that Ron had had a heart attack the day before. Unbelievably, he related that at nine in the morning, Rosie, who had been resting peacefully in bed, began to cry, and she cried out Ron's name. Rosie's nephew was told by the medical staff at the hospital, which was about four miles away, that Ron had died at the same time Rosie had called out his name. Rosie's nephew wanted me to be present when he told her that her husband had died. He also wanted her Monsignor to be present; however, it turned out that Rosie's Monsignor was busy with the funeral of a police officer, and he was unable to get away. Later that afternoon, at the appointed time, I arrived at Rosie's house. The moment she saw me she said, "Ron is

dead, right?” I looked at Rosie’s nephew, and he looked awkwardly at her and began to stumble over his words.

“Don’t lie to me. Don’t you lie to me. My husband is dead, right?” she said, her voice quivering and tears welling up in her eyes.

“Yes. Ronnie died this morning at nine,” her nephew replied.

At this point Rosie was crying. She reached out for my hand and said, “I knew that it was happening. I could feel him leaving me. Ron, why did you have to leave me? Why was it you who had to leave first? It was supposed to be me!”

I sat with Rosie, holding her hand and occasionally caressing her head as she lay there sobbing. She kept asking me why. Speechless, I could not think of anything. Later during the visit, she told me that she wasn’t surprised—she knew that he couldn’t live without her. I asked her if perhaps she felt that Ron had left her early to help prepare and to meet her when she passed away. Rosie liked this idea, and it led her to consider how her spirituality allows her the chance to be reunited with her deceased husband. I asked what Ron would look like when they met in heaven. Smiling, she told me that he would appear as the strong, kind young man she fell in love with so many years ago. The same man who wrote her love letters during the war, the man for whom she put a stick of chewing gum in each reply.

I visited Rosie early the next week, and she looked as if she had aged ten years. She was unable to smile during that visit, and much of the fresh, vivacious curiosity and sweetness that she exuded during our early visits was absent. By my next visit she was unresponsive and unarousable. After a period of three weeks, during which I visited her frequently, Rosie’s condition continued to deteriorate, and she died. Just hours before Rosie passed, I had been speaking with her nephew and another relative, both of whom told me that they weren’t surprised that Ron died before Rosie, and that he had even mentioned to the family that there was just no way that he could go through the experience of watching Rosie die and facing that loss. An unintended consequence, of course, was that Rosie was left to go through that very experience by herself. This is the closest thing to dying of a broken heart that I have ever seen. This quality of loss is staggering when one takes time to consider it—in a way it’s unfathomable.

Long before my teacher Tsunma Zangmo died, she told me that she wished that I would have the opportunity to experience a long and painful life. Somewhat surprised and shocked, I asked her why she would say such a thing, and she responded by reminding me that the only way to be able to walk in the footsteps of *bodhisattvas* (great beings bound by the motivation to alleviate the suffering of all beings) is to bear witness to suffering, to understand it as best you can, rest in it, feel how it arises and is experienced, and from that place, allow the deep wisdom that accompanies true compassion to unfold. All too often, our reactions to pain and suffering are accompanied by a desire to disengage, to hide, or to fail to acknowledge the truth that is arising in this very moment. We tend to fall out of our relationship to the true essence of what we are experiencing when we react to the fear and sadness and the need to protect or defend ourselves from what might be going on around us. It is the practice of entering into the path of the bodhisattva that allows us to learn to remain with these difficulties, to experience them, and then to look at their origin, consider their footprint and the effect that they engender, and simply witness them—to be gently with them, to just be ourselves within our experience, naturally, with no need to change things.

In moments like this, we have nothing to do other than be present and allow ourselves the ability to develop a sense of focused curiosity, a watchful knowing mixed with relaxed honesty. Experiencing this has been the long-lasting legacy of Tsunma Zangmo for me, and her wisdom allows me to understand how the nexus of Buddhist spiritual practice, when blended with the experience of daily life, can turn every moment, no matter how painful, into a profound blessing. Undoubtedly this is a difficult path to tread, but it also happens to be the path that we are all walking together. Sometimes we know this, and at other times, we feel as if this is just happening to us individually and that we are alone. In a way, this is a profound aspect of spiritual practice: falling down and getting back up, over and over again, in different ways, and hopefully, over time, learning true, soft patience with what it takes to remain present, in this very moment, no matter what arises.

I share these stories as a way to share the range of hardship and imperfection, the pain and the blind spots that we are all subject to. The shared difficulty of the human experience, especially when it is bracketed by the inevitability of our own death, does nothing if not show us how joined we are in the commonality of the experience of life. Sometimes great therapeutic

benefit arises when we are able to see who it is that we are and not what is happening to us.

To this end I am reminded of a number of paintings depicting Siddhartha's meditative experience just before his experience of awakening. In many such paintings, Siddhartha is shown meditating amid an array of demon warriors, seductive goddesses, frightening animals, and every manner of apparition that might try to unseat him from his experience of settling into the basic simplicity of perfection in this moment. These powerful creatures are always shown in full bounty, and what is also always shown is Siddhartha sitting, present, watchful yet not discriminating, aware but not judging, relaxed with effortless patience; he is letting these personal demons, these painful reminders of the fact that we all suffer in manifold ways, to be held in the context of spacious joy. At that moment, Siddhartha persevered and awakened into the moment and saw phenomena, all that arises, for what it is. No matter where we are on the journey of this life, and no matter how hard or easy this moment might be, we all have the same ability to begin the process of crossing over into the experience of Siddhartha. Perhaps it is not an issue of whether or not this is possible for us but a question of inevitability.

Instruction from Milarepa

Now we look at an instruction that the great Tibetan yogin Milarepa offered to one of his heart-sons, the yogin Rechungpa, as a way to better understand the tantric view around death. As we do this, it's important to understand that we are doing so from within the tradition and not as an academic or intellectual exercise. I say this only to make sure that we all have the proper attitude of reverence around the wisdom found within this instruction—for this instruction, and others like it, is alive. It contains the blessings and the force and depth of practice for which Milarepa has become so revered. This instruction is also a dynamic counterpoint to other bardo-related texts such as the *Bardo Thodol*, which are incredible texts but also very complex. This text is easier to relate to, especially if you have, or are aspiring to develop, a yidam practice. This set of instructions is deep, and one that I have come to appreciate. I am especially grateful to Reverend Francis Tiso for granting permission to use his translation of this text, which can be found in his article “Mi la ras pa on the Intermediate State: An Introduction and Translation of

“Profound Instructions on the Direct Introduction to the Intermediate State, Using the Mind to Discriminate the Path.”² As mentioned in the introduction, I provide a commentary to this text, blending aspects of the tradition with a contemporary Tantric Buddhist point of departure. I have done very little editing of Rev. Tiso’s translation, with the exception of removing a portion of the colophon and formatting.

In order for Buddhism to be fully transplanted into the cultural soil of the United States, we cannot forget death. To some extent this is a particularly important aspect of the development of Buddhism, as many of the early Western Buddhists who were involved in what might be considered an earlier wave of transmission of Buddhism from East to West are aging. Providing access to the entire path from refuge all the way through the death process is important for Buddhism here. At the same time, it also seems worth noting that what is really needed is experience around the death process, not just familiarity with theory. In this regard I feel it is promising that an ever-increasing number of Buddhist chaplains are engaging in practice centered around bringing benefit to others who find themselves at the end of life.

Profound Instructions on the Intermediate State (Bardo) from the Chakrasamvara Instruction Lineage That Explains How to Use the Mind to Discern the Path

(Tibetan title: lam blo nas gcod pa bar do ngo sprond kyi gdams ngag zab mo.)

From: gdams ngag mdzod Volume V.[3](#)

Honor to the Guru, Deva, and Dakini.

Instructions on the intermediate state that are an introduction to discerning the path using the mind. There are three instructions:

1. On the “intermediate state” of the *basis* as related to embodied beings.
2. On the “intermediate state” of definitive knowledge in relation to signs.
3. On the “intermediate state” of the fruition related to the “pointing out” [instructions].

This is the first of the three:

When the flesh and blood of an embodied being ripen fully, there is the appearance of the intermediate state between birth-and-death. This period of time from birth up until death may even be as long as a world-eon; it can also be so short that there is no time between birth and death. This is the “intermediate state of birth and death.” In that time period, the *paths of generation and of completion* are practiced together.

This is the second point:

The intermediate state of dreams arises from propensities that afflict consciousness. This refers to those embodied beings who have dreams that arise from afflictive propensities that arise during sleep. They may last as long as an eon or as short as the time it takes to awaken. This is called the intermediate state of dreams. One is to practice [the yogas of] *lucid dreaming and clear light* at that time.

This is the third point:

In the *mental body of embodied beings* (Tibetan: *yid lus*), there is the intermediate state of existence in the appearance of darkness [which occurs after death]. This may last as long as an eon, or even a moment, depending on the time between death and rebirth. This is called the *intermediate state of existence* [after bodily death]. At that time, one is to try to mingle the *yogas of illusory body and clear light*.

The Intermediate State between Birth and Death

This first section of the text explains that the term *bardo*, in essence, refers to a designation (or segment) of time. In this sense, Milarepa paints the ground upon which tantric practice ought to be centered: every moment. Every moment is the proving ground through which we are able to experience liberation, not merely some abstract moment before death, or the very moment of death, nor the post-death experience in which consciousness is said to no longer be as attached to this physical form and egoic storyline to which we have become accustomed. In fact, the division of time into bardo segments knows no limits, as time, the vast and unending thread of being, can be divided into an infinite set of segments. Here Milarepa mentions three bardos: the first is the period between our birth and our death, the second is the dream state, and the third is the bardo of death. He also describes three practices well suited to each of these bardos: the first set is generation and completion related to deity practice, the second set is lucid dreaming (sometimes called dream yoga) and clear light, and the third set is illusory body and clear light.

The essential instruction here is very basic: the time is always now. It is a mistake to pick a moment in time that has not yet arisen to be the moment in which awakening dawns. The dawning of awakening is predicated on this very moment. As such, if you are looking for instructions on how to recognize the mind of awakening at death, it would behoove you to examine the mind of awakening right now, wherever you are.

When I was working in hospice, I quickly came to recognize that some kind of miraculous resolution at the end of life was rare for most of my patients. Western culture seems to propagate some kind of story in relation to the death process in which the heavens open and an experience of holy grace occurs as one moves closer and closer to the very final moment—perhaps it's an Abrahamic conceptual elaboration, or a remnant from the Romantic age—I really don't know. The Buddhist tradition has a variety of threads through which a sudden enlightenment can be experienced, yet there is considerable conjecture as to what degree this is possible. Being with people at the end of life, including experiencing their active dying, was a humbling way for me to experience the range of death experiences—some peaceful, some painful, some ecstatic, and some ordinary, if not banal. For those with whom I spent months working in spiritual preparation for death, I found that the quality of mind they experienced in everyday life was generally the same as that which would arise in active dying. This is to say that although I do believe tremendously profound and sudden realization is possible, it is worth remembering all of the ordinary little things that piss us off and bring us out of our relationship with resting in the nature of mind. When we generate this type of honest appraisal about ourselves, we are less likely to hedge our bets in favor of the miraculous.

The path of generation and completion is rooted in deity, or *yidam*, practice. This practice, sometimes called *deity yoga*, is aimed at using visualization and mantra recitation as a way to shift—or transform—the limited, suffering-oriented interpretation of our existence to one that is vibrant, awakened, limitless, and imbued with the power of liberation. The point of this praxis is developing a shift in how we orient ourselves in relation to whatever arises within our field of experience, especially in relation to the narrative to which we have become dependent upon for gravity in terms of the seeming reality of our current self-oriented human existence. As a result, we take the form of a particular awakened being, a

Buddha of some kind—it can be male or female in appearance, peaceful or wrathful, or somewhere in between. The practice is rooted in spending time generating an experience in which our surroundings, as ordinary as they might originally seem, are the enlightened mandala for the Buddha we are practicing. Simultaneously, we generate the form of the deity—alive; real yet luminous; light and not overtly solid; and inherently perfected—while reciting the given mantra for that deity, which has the qualities of further creating a sense that our speech is none other than that of the Buddha of our practice. Finally, we rest our mind into the experience of the deity—this means that we have effected a complete change in orientation from a broken, limited, attached, angry, ordinary self, to an expansive, compassionate, insightful, awakened, realized Buddha-nature. In a way, this is an artful, systemic hack of our ordinary suffering, allowing us to shift perspective and break the habits that continually reinforce our experience of suffering and the suffering that we create (often unconsciously—but not always) for other beings (not just humans). Some visualizations are complex, others are easier, some mantras are long while others are short, some mandalas are cool and healing, whereas others violently destroy our attachments and the places where we get stuck. This generation practice is beautifully evocative and inductive and has the power to short-circuit our habitual reactive response to every little thing we normally experience.

The completion practice lets the experience dissolve, sometimes quickly, other times slowly, so all we are left with is experience of mind in the moment—a moment of deconstruction that reminds us that there is nothing in which we can sink the hooks of attachment. Everything is construction. That which is a positive reinforcement, an artful creation, is nothing but a temporary arising with no real essence.

Generation and completion is an effective ground for practice during the bardo of this life as it cuts away at the seeming reality of all that we are experiencing right now. It aides in the recognition of even, stable realization of things as they are—a realization that undergirds birth, the course of our lives, and our own death. This practice embraces both the cultivation of focus as well as intense detail, mixed with the constant awareness that the source of our focus and concentration has a basis that is expansive and without any independent essence. When cultivating the visualization of yourself as a tantric Buddha, you engage in a practice that is focused upon

truly becoming the being visualized. Your hair, hands, face, and body are generated with a focus and a clarity that disrupt the constant narrative that we and others promulgate with every moment that passes.

It's more than just our physicality that we are challenging; it's the very essence of how we identify, how we view ourselves, and the essential nature of our own qualities. In this sense, we are leaving ourselves open to the possibility of not only realizing but demonstrating our fundamental Buddha-nature. This disruption of our samsaric existence allows us to experience bondage as liberation, hardship as ease, and restriction as freedom. In this manner, while engaging in practice in this way, we also actively seek to train in remembering that our immediate environment is nothing more than the immediate environment of the tantric Buddha that we are practicing. Thus, we are consciously deciding to break with our conditioning—to start something new, to examine what it means to do more than recall our enlightenment but also to train in manifesting our enlightenment.

This is what is meant by *taking the goal as the path*. In doing so, we practice awakening by counter-habituating ourselves to manifest, rest in, and learn how to express awakening. This subversive activity is rooted in developing a level of confidence and constant experimentation through which we attune ourselves to experiencing our primordial purity, naturally arising compassion, and effortless simplicity. We practice approaching the intermediate state through creation and completion by training in, and developing, the practice of generating ourselves as a Buddha in the fullest sense possible while at the same time familiarizing ourselves with the idea that we are as fundamentally liberated as any Buddha could ever be and that all of the enlightened qualities of all of the Buddhas of the three times and ten directions are our fundamental birthright. In these practices you typically recite the mantra associated with the Buddha around which your practice is centered while concurrently resting in the visualization and cultivating the enlightened qualities of the Buddha in focus.

Throughout this practice, at the conclusion of each session, you allow the entire intentionally crafted visualization to dissolve into emptiness, leaving you with the work of resting into the experience of vast limitless awareness. Of course, initially this experience is fleeting, lasting for just a moment. But over time, with greater practice, cultivating awareness in this way lasts for longer periods of time and deepens in a way that feels both natural and

timeless. Comfort—and confidence—in this aspect of the practice lends itself very well to approaching the dying process as an extension of our practice.

The Intermediate State of Dreams

The intermediate state of dreams, or the *sleep state*, represents another bardo that can be the focal point of practice. In the context of this text, the bardo state of dreams is considered the arena of praxis for intermediate-level practitioners. They need to have a certain amount of experience with practice in order to bring the experiences of the dream state into their practice.

Through a variety of trainings, the practice of developing lucid awareness during the dream state is brought onto the path. This practice is more difficult in an immediate sense, as it requires working with awareness and states of consciousness that are fairly subtle. Developing stability in dream yoga lends you the ability to extend your awareness practice continuously through both the waking and the dream state. It is possible, even though it may seem unlikely, that a practitioner with little experience may be able to cultivate a stable experience working with what we could call a level of mind state that is often very difficult to remain conscious of, let alone intentionally cultivate.

Let's move on with the model of there being three different levels of practitioners. The highest-level practitioner may spend their time focusing on the experience of the very subtle aspects of mind, such as the mind of clear light, and cultivate the practice of clear-light yogas to develop the ability to rest awareness upon the arising of the experience of clear light through the practice of illusory body. These practices involve cultivating the very subtle aspects of the experience of mind. In the case of clear light, this occurs in a very general sense and involves resting in the nature of mind itself, whereas illusory body is a practice that is very similar but predicated on a deep experience of yidam practice, as we will see later in the book.

Now we expound on the second category, the intermediate state of definitive knowledge in relation to signs, in three parts.

The First Part:

Having purified one's mental continuum by observing the samayas, someone with low capacity is to meditate on the instructions of the intermediate state, and, either during the [postmortem] intermediate state or in this life during a dream, is able to attain the signs of Buddhahood. As an indication or sign that he will attain Buddhahood in the intermediate state, in this life such a practitioner is able to *visit Buddha fields* during dreams.

Moreover, the external world will arise as dream-like illusions for such a yogin.

The Second Part:

For someone of middle capacity who is practicing meditation on the continuity of their own mind stream, the signs that such a yogin will attain Buddhahood at the point of death are that the stages of creation and completion proceed even during the practitioner's dreams. Sleep itself is replaced by the clear light. The yogin obtains interior signs such as having control over the channels, energy currents, and droplets [of consciousness in the subtle body].

The Third Part:

Someone of the highest capacity is liberated in this lifetime merely by grasping the meaning [of what has been taught]. The signs of such attainment of Buddhahood is: the realization that cyclic existence and liberation is one and inseparable; perfect comprehension of the doctrine of the two truths; secret signs and even the mental impurities arise as intuitive wisdom; the clear light spreads out coincident with the self-arising *dharmakaya* and all ignorance, obscurations, and veils are exhausted. Such a being arises as a teacher of dharma, as a bodhisattva in a pure land manifesting the thirty-two marks and eighty signs of the

sambhogakaya, arising from the yogin's meditation on compassion. Such a one's pure prayer would allow the yogin to see the arising of the *nirmanakaya* even in the impure appearance of beings of the Six Realms.

At this particular point, Milarepa is highlighting the relationship between the capacity to realize enlightenment at various points and when that might occur, and what manner of practice would be related, along with connected relevant signs. You should note that descriptions like this refer to specific tantric systems and do not necessarily have the same valence when taken out of context and replaced with other systems. It is also important to realize that descriptions like this are best approached with gentle curiosity rather than from a place of hard-and-fast definitive absolute truth. In fact, when we honestly look at our practice, sometimes we see blends of these combinations as they relate to what is unfolding in actuality. Furthermore, sometimes the unintended consequence of such descriptions around how any given practice may unfold triggers a need to want to conform to such outcomes, which on one level, is not necessarily a bad thing, but on another level, inhibits the authentic organic blooming of our dharma practice.

A good example of this relates to how we die and what we feel a good death might look like. The Buddhist tradition places considerable importance on the manner in which we die. Much of this is because it is generally believed that how we die, the circumstances that surround our active dying, and our postmortem experience greatly affect whether we may have an enlightenment experience at some point during physical death or in the bardo. Although this text does not go into the same substantial detail with regard to the kinds of experiences as the *Bardo Thodol* does, at this point in the text, what I wish to highlight is how the enlightenment experience arises for practitioners of a variety of capabilities. Buddhism can be a very pragmatic faith tradition; this is being demonstrated here by explaining some of the ways that realization dawns based upon the relative level of experience of the practitioner. This is not to say that leap-over experiences are not possible—they are, even though the topic of sudden enlightenment has been under frequent debate for centuries. Nevertheless, the greatest hinderance for all of us at any given time is our own discursive mind and the limitations reinforced by it. As Tsunma Zangmo pointed out to me, *if you think that you*

are an idiot, you are an idiot. This was her way of concisely pointing out that we define the limitations that cause our own experience of suffering. How we place the mind and relate to our practice, including how we relate to the fruition of our dharma practice, is essential. This means that designations of lowest, middling, and highest capacities are illusory, yet in a very tangible sense, we need to be realistic. As Tilopa says, you cannot get oil from squeezing sand. Similarly, you cannot necessarily experience realization easily within the death experience without some prior practice.

Milarepa continues to point out various signs the three types of practitioner may experience within their practice. In the case of the practitioner of low capacity, they are able to achieve liberation through the mastery of holding the *samayas*—or tantric commitments—related to creation-stage practices while following the instructions related to the intermediate state. Inner signs that this may indeed be the result are connected to the degree to which the practitioner has had the experience of being able to visit Buddha fields within the dream state and have some experience with the practice of what is called *coarse illusory body*.

In the case of the intermediate practitioner, liberation may arise as a result of having developed stability with yidam practice to such an extent that the practice of generation and completion continues into and arises within the dream state. In this case, a sign that this may indeed be a reality is the yogini finding that they can control the subtle inner energy channels and bindu that circulate throughout the network of channels as well as taste the experience of the clear-light mind.

Finally, in the case of the superior practitioner, liberation is automatic. In this case, because the practitioner has realized mahamudra, nothing is left to be done. The practitioner arises perfectly as a guide to help others with all of the qualities of a Buddha—a perfect emanation of the very deity they practice in their yidam practice. For this yogini, there is little to do but rest in the experience of death.

An explanation of the intermediate state of fruition, in three parts:

The intermediate state is explained with reference to persons of the three capacities, in three families, and in the three times, all of which are mingled on the path.

The highest capacity is the intermediate state of birth and death.

The middle capacity is the intermediate state of sending off and welcoming.

The lowest capacity is the intermediate state of entering the womb.

The first, in three parts:

1. The intermediate state of early and late, that has knowledge of birth and death.
2. The intermediate state of early and late, remembering dreams.
3. The intermediate state of the time of dying and becoming.

The first, in two parts:

1. The intermediate state demonstrated by making an explanation through examples.
2. The intermediate state explaining the actual meaning.

The First Part: The Intermediate State Identified by Examples

There is the example of the teacher showing the student “space” to exemplify the meaning of *dharmata*. There are five meanings to “space”:

A. The space of appearance, [as in the sky when] the clouds are melting away and the blue color is appearing; then again, the sky becomes cloudy, and adopts various appearances. This is not the space of reality (*dharmata*).

B. Shapes that have space such as rocks, caves, windows, and the like.

C. “Named space” as when there is a designation of male or female characteristics (as in the “space of the sexual organs”).

D. And the “space within a pierced bead” or the “space within a cross of multicolored thread”: These four are not the space of reality (*dharmata*).

E. But the fifth one *is* the space of reality, but how could we exemplify it? If I could show the sun in mid-winter early in the morning of a Full-moon day, in the span of time from its rising over the mountain tops up to noon (feeling its warmth), the appearance of the mid-heaven is bright and clean. This is an example that would be valid. In this example one sees the naturally existent presence of reality (*dharmata*), dependent on causes and conditions of the three times. In that way, for all the Six Families, stable self-arisen *dharmata* is seen. For the best yogins, on average it lasts for the duration of three meditation sessions [3 × 24 minutes]; for the middle capacity yogin, the duration of two sessions; for the least capable, one session. If one had not received this pointing out instruction, one would not be able to understand that *dharmata* is experientially present in all sentient beings. Another example is taken from the phenomenon of summer rain that washes the dust out of the air; when the

sky clears of clouds, and before the winter storms come on, there is a naturally pure condition of the sky that occurs. At that time there is no [particular] appearance or non-appearance. Color, form, and measure are not coemergent with any basis for perception. This would exemplify the intermediate state of *dharmata*. All of this expounds the intermediate state that exemplifies the actual meaning. Thus, one is to practice the “reality” which is the meaning of things, exemplified by “space.” All of this expounds the intermediate state that explains the actual meaning [without examples].

The Second Part

In all the sutras and tantras, it is said that all sentient beings have the essence of Buddhahood, but because it is naturally hidden [i.e., because it cannot be conceptualized], it does not appear as a [graspable] entity, even for siddhas whose minds are as capacious as space, so it is said. It is also said that all phenomena are like the sphere of space. Yet, Buddhahood does not arise automatically. In fact, one can recognize Buddhahood in the intermediate state of *dharmata* but cannot write it down. Though it is wide as the sky, once directly recognized, it can even be pointed out with a finger. The intermediate state of *dharmata* arises between the end point of one mental event and the start of another mental event. The previous event does not cease, for that which has passed beyond is not eradicated. The subsequent mental event does not arise, nor is it grasped. Between both of them, previous and subsequent mental events, it is free from conceptualization. That is why it is called “an intermediate state.” It is free of beautiful words, free of examples. Here the non-arising *dharmakaya* is truly encountered. Place that within your awareness. But whether you place it or not, apart from any mental functioning, there will be a small amount of unwavering bliss-action. In the midst of that which is distinct from previous and

subsequent mental events, in that essential moment of knowing, there is a mental event which, in a short session of meditation should not be accepted time after time: it is like a demon or a child that steals [your meditative concentration].

Those distracting mental constructs do not touch upon the intermediate state, either before or after, nor do they depend on, nor are they separate from the intermediate state, nor do they oscillate back and forth in the intermediate state. This is why it is called the *intermediate state*, because mental constructs are separate from the mind itself.

Then there is the intermediate state of *cognition*. With eyes unwavering, the mind not grasping, resting such that it is distinction from cognitive acts (*shes pa bya*). But whether resting or not, its own character as mental activity apart from the intermediate state of dharmata cannot be exhausted. Its material character does not exist, nor does it possess color or shape, and the same is true of its immaterial character. Everything can appear within it, but it is not a question of eternally existing things. The nature of a thing is void; it is void of its own nature, but it is not nonexistent because it is self-illuminated. It has no self; upon examination it is not discovered to have a self. It is not without a self, because it is of a nature free of elaboration. It does not acquire extremes and it is free from grasping. It has no center. Since it relies on something, it is lacking something. There is nothing that can represent it, and no examples exemplify it, except such examples as the sky! It is without lovely verbal formulations and without metaphors, but it is not free from words, being the cause of all verbal formulations. The sky is void without awareness; mind is a void with awareness. Meditate on it as various signs void of substance but manifesting various characteristics. Meditate on it continuously, making use of six methods:

1. As space, whose appearance is not dependent on a basis.

2. As a river flowing continuously.
3. As a sky flower, which has no real existence.
4. As the clarity of the heart of the sun.
5. As a lotus unstained by contaminations.
6. As a mist that is disappearing.

Thus, conceptualization disappears as we contemplate dharmata. Coming forth as various reflections, one can acquire knowledge through skillful awareness. The essential expanse of the clear light, the mind in its own nature being clear light without the darkness of signs, unites non-dualistically with the awareness of voidness. Like the sky, the intermediate state is distinct from the mind “before and after” (mental events). Of all phenomena, it is the root of awareness. The *dharmakaya* is the non-embodied state face-to-face with suchness. All needs and desires thus become the precious jewel of perfect renunciation. This is the awareness inseparable from the intermediate state of knowledge, subtle experience arising in the realm of eagles! If subtle experience and lofty realization thus appear in the mind, one obtains freedom and independence inseparable from the essence of knowledge in the intermediate state of *dharmata*.

This portion of the text really cuts into the essence of the bardo and what the entire point of practice at the time of death is about. It is about experiencing liberation, and we have the benefit here of receiving some instruction from Milarepa about where to direct our practice. It is called the *immediate state of fruition* because it can be viewed as the basic fabric that underpins the entire practice. Most pragmatically here, we are looking at the very canvas upon which all mental experience arises—the natural state, our original face, our fundamental Buddha-nature.

As Milarepa continues the explanation of the ways in which the intermediate state of fruition is explained by people of various capacities, he is pointing out the various ways in which the immediate state is often

conceptualized. Understanding from the point of the highest capacity represents the widest view, middling represents a middling view, and of course lowest represents a narrower view of what the intermediate state is and how it arises.

This is the heart-essence of this text in that the intermediate state is described as essentially nothing more than the experience of dharmata, and it captures the simple beauty of meditation practice; especially that of mahamudra. It is as if Milarepa is trying to urge us to come back to mahamudra—that death and all of the processes related to it arise, yet it all arises within the container, or upon the canvas, of completely liberated mind. At the end of the day, we can do nothing but rest in the experience with confidence that the fundamental purity of mind—our essential Buddha-nature—is completely perfect.

The Second Part: In Three Subsections, Before and After the Intermediate State of Remembering Dreams.

1. Memory passing away like a butter lamp in the way it is put out.
2. The way it arises like becoming aware of future kindness.
3. The way the recollection of Shakyamuni arises.

One considers [this recollection] both before and after, as distinct from mind [itself]. It is *in essence non-dual intuitive gnosis*. Thus, the intermediate state of midday becomes of one existential flavor compared to what is grasped in the intermediate state of nocturnal dreams. In fact, in the contemplative absorption of the *clear light*, all ignorance is conquered and the thought processes of sleep cease. In this way, the unchanging *dharmakaya* is gained. In this very body, one attains the supreme state. One has done the deed. One has laid down the burden [of the constituent components of a self. Skt.: *upagatabhara*]. In this way, the contemplative absorption of great bliss spontaneously accomplishes this in the clear light, which is the real meaning [which is also the “real thing”]. By not encountering the time of death and by avoiding the intermediate state of becoming, [one realizes] the contemplative absorption of great bliss accomplished spontaneously, [which is] the clear light. [i.e., one becomes enlightened without dying.]

The Third Part: In three subsections, the intermediate state of the moment of death and existence:

1. For the best of persons, the intermediate state of clear light.
2. For those of middling ability, the intermediate state of meeting at the time of birth.
3. For those of ordinary ability, the intermediate state of entering the womb.

The first, in two sections:

1. The way to stop the appearance of the path [to rebirth].
2. The way the state of the clear light arises.

The first explanation, in two parts:

- A. The coarse dissolution.
- B. The subtle dissolution.

The First: The Coarse Dissolution

Dissolving into both earth and water elements; the body weakens as the earth element dissolves into the water element. The person tries to support himself on the ground on all four limbs. Dirt forms on the teeth, fluid exudes from the mouth, nose, and other orifices. When the water element dissolves into fire, the mouth and nose are dry. The person forgets how to contract the limbs. Earlier in the process, heat arises, and feverish sweat occurs. When the fire element dissolves into the wind element, the texture of the skin deteriorates, and the nostrils split and crack. Bodily heat gathers in one part of the body. If one is to be born in the higher realms, you lose heat in the feet, and retain it in the head; if into the lower realms, you lose heat in the head, and retain it in the feet. The dying person is no longer able to recognize anyone. The wind element in the consciousness constituent dissolves and sends forth a ferocious strong sound. The final breaths are like

gasps. A film spreads over the eyes, which roll upwards. There are gesticulations of the hands. At that time, the mind becomes clear from within while a hiccup occurs in the eyes and nasal passages. The four dissolutions occur in this way simultaneously: place, form, sound, etc. condense and unite together.

One of the benefits of having been a hospice chaplain is that I have had an incredible amount of experience in being present with people as they die. So rich and profound have my experiences been that I think that students of dharma who wish to learn the Tantric Buddhist arts of dying might be well suited to do some hospice work. In this portion of the text, Milarepa describes aspects of the process of actual death. I have spent time examining descriptions of this process, and I have spent time with people as they undergo it. This has been a valuable training for me, and it has been an extreme privilege to learn to feel into this process—one that is subtle and that often begins during the onset of the experience of serious illness, sometimes even before the person (or their doctors) is aware that they are approaching the end of life.

In this regard, it bears noting that there is tremendous benefit in letting yourself become the student of death. If you can, become death's apprentice and experience the wisdom inherent in how we die. In this fast-paced world in which our very attention span has become a space of endless commodification, where it is common to find ourselves unable to concentrate on everyday experiences, it's worth taking the time to feel into the subtle processes connected to the dissolution of the various sense consciousnesses. Just as the intellectual study of meditation praxis does not accurately capture it, this aspect of the death process can be described through the written word, but actual knowledge of the experience, how it arises and how to hold it, has to be learned through living it.

Early on in my spiritual development, I met Dekhung Gyalsey Rinpoche (or Bhöd Tulku as he was known then), a Drikung Kagyu tulku who had been splitting his time between living at the Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim, from where he made home visits to people whose family members had recently died, and setting up a sangha in Australia, where he now spends most of his time. Rinpoche's reputation for being a Phowa master was virtually

unparalleled in Sikkim at the time, and he was highly sought after for his ability to perform Phowa as well as the ritual practices associated with the bardo period. When I came to know him, my root teacher Tsunma Zangmo was quite ill, and he would come do rituals for her. When he did, I would try to spend time with him to ask questions about the death process. He was an intimidating person who could be quite gruff when he wanted, and he held his experience and the wisdom of the tradition in such high regard that he was often very tight-lipped when I asked about the death process.



Figure 2. Dekhung Gyalsey Rinpoche, a Buddhist teacher in the Karma Kagyu and Drikung Kagyu lineages who is well known for his Phowa practice and death-related rituals. He spent time imprisoned in Tibet by the Chinese prior to his escape to India. After the death of Pathing Rinpoche, he agreed to be caretaker for Pathing Rinpoche's monasteries in Sikkim. Photo by author.

One night we were on the roof of my teacher's apartment in Gangtok making small talk; all of a sudden, his entire affect changed, and he pointed to a small, old wooden home just to the east of us. He told me, "Someone in that home just died. Tomorrow they will ask me to come and do pujas." Sure enough, in the morning, someone from that same home came to tell Rinpoche that their uncle had passed away the prior evening, and they requested his presence to do the requisite prayers and rituals.

At another point, after I had received Phowa instruction from Rinpoche, he asked that I come sit in front of him and do the practice. Intimidated and nervous, I sat down in front of him and began. Halfway through he told me to slow down and not hold the visualization as rigidly as I had been doing. I was stunned that he could determine the quality of my visualization and was instantly aware of the fact that he was attuned to my experience in that moment in such an intimate way that all I could do was relax in the way that he told me and complete the practice as he suggested.

My point in sharing these stories is not to propagate a fantastic romanticized relationship to Tantric Buddhist practice, but to show that levels of subtlety are inherent in these practices, that they can be mastered, and more importantly, that they become more evident the more we allow ourselves to slow down and settle into our practice.

As for the dissolutions of the consciousnesses at the time of death, the way that these are experienced, as I mentioned earlier, begins when the mind-body complex begins to separate. Very often, this process begins before what the Western medical world would call physical death. In fact, it is helpful to begin to forget the hard divisions between life and death we have become accustomed to and replace these with wide-graded transitional periods.

In the text, we see that as the earth element dissolves into the water element, the dying person has difficulty supporting themselves. It is not uncommon to find this experienced as increased weakness and fatigue—the person has difficulty holding up their head or limbs and has a sinking feeling. It is possible to see this occurring a few weeks before actual physical death. When hospice patients would relate to me a sense of increased lethargy, or feelings of heaviness, I would make note of this as it often presaged an acceleration of what I would call the “death process.” Additional symptomology noted in the text included dirt forming on the teeth (scum) and the exuding of fluid from the body, both of which are common occurrences, especially weeping edema, the symptoms of which can sometimes be mitigated with medication by the hospice nurses.

When the water element dissolves into the fire element, the dying person experiences heat and dryness, especially in their mouth and nostrils, and they forget how to contract their limbs. I have spent many hours with hospice

patients who suffered from feelings of unquenchable thirst and prickly heat, as if flames burned beneath their skin.

When the fire element dissolves into the wind element, it is said that the skin deteriorates and the nostrils split and crack—in hospice patients, lesions and bedsores are commonplace, as is dryness and cracking of the lips. As the circulatory system deteriorates, it is not uncommon to find that exterior limbs slowly become cold as blood circulation slows. In some cases, fingers and toes become bluish and cold as the heat from the body retreats into the trunk; at this point, the patient also often experiences increased confusion and disorientation.

As the wind element dissolves into consciousness, the aggregate of individuality begins to fade. Sometimes the person going through this experience loses the ability to taste. In hospice situations, the *death rattle* sometimes occurs at this time; caused by labored breathing, it is characterized by short inhalations and long, drawn-out, rattling exhalations. This stage of the dying process is also when respiration ends. Prior to this, in my experience, it is not uncommon for hospice patients to see people. Sometimes they see loved ones who have previously died and have returned to greet them, in a few other cases (rarely) the patients have more malevolent visions that bring on extreme fear. Of all of the hospice patients I worked with, only a handful experienced frightening visions.

The Second: The Subtle Dissolution

The consciousness constituent dissolves into appearances (nang ba). Its inner sign is to appear like smoke. Its outer sign is like the rising of the moon. Then, the forty conceptualizations that arise from desire and attachment cease. Even when near to a lovely divine woman, desire and attachment do not arise. Then the mind is somewhat clear, somewhat unclear. When appearance dissolves into “increase,” then the inner sign is like a firefly, and the outer sign is like the rising sun. The thirty-three conceptualizations arising from hatred cease. Even if one were to encounter one’s worst enemy, hatred would not arise.

Consciousness becomes clearer than before. In the next attainment, mind of black near attainment, the inner sign is like the light of a butter lamp; the outer sign is darkness. The seven conceptualizations arising from ignorance cease, and ignorance does not occur. Consciousness becomes much clearer than before at this time. If one has not had previous meditation experience of voidness, he will be panic struck at this time. When the attainment dissolves into Clear Light, the outer sign is like the light of dawn or day-break. The inner sign is like a sky without clouds; moral afflictions and all tendencies to sleep cease. At this time, there is clear knowledge of voidness without center or edge.

The way the clear light arises:

1. At that time, the *dharmakaya* is made manifest. The main point being that from the top of the head the male droplet in the form of the seed syllable Hum descends to the [secret] place, four finger widths below the navel and the mother droplet in the reddish channel, visualized with a face like a crow, ascends to that place; this is the seed of yogic heat (*gtum mo*), ascending a channel like a fine slash mark on the short letter “a.” As distinct as fire is from the surrounding darkness, consciousness rises in the

empty lotus of the central channel in the heart bringing with it the essence of bliss and voidness. One sees with obscurations the unborn primordial “meaning” and in that way, the *dharmakaya* by nature free from conceptualization, is born in one’s mental continuum (*sems rgyud*).

In virtue of previous meditation experience, one recognizes the *dharmakaya* as the *dharmakaya*.

It is just like when a child sees his mother; he knows who she is, even if he is told by others that she is not his mother; he is not deceived. That is how it is with the knowledge of a yogin who is free from grasping at conceptualizations even for an instant, or whose consciousness is moved by the wind of primordial wisdom. For such a yogin, in that state (*rig pa*), free from obstruction, consciousness is moved by *jñāna* and emerges from the top of the head and goes to the palace of the *dharmadhatu*, or to the field of the pure *sambhogakaya*. Therefore, such a state is called either the clear light at the time of death or the natural (self-dependent) clear light or the resultant clear light or the ultimate *dharmakaya*.

2. The intermediate state of “accompanying and welcoming” for those of middling capacity. [So, if liberation] does not occur through familiarizing oneself with the clear light, one can use guru yoga at the time of death. There are six types of “meeting and welcoming”:

1. The blessing of the lama who “accompanies and welcomes.”
2. The bestowal of welcome from the deity who grants siddhis.
3. The welcome by the dakinis who remove impediments.

4. Welcome from dharma brothers and sisters who secure all necessary requisites.
5. Welcome by the Instruction Lineage that introduces us to the “state.”
6. Welcome by the wish-fulfilling jewel, which is in fact the dharma protector.

The first of these is the blessing of the lama. The lama accomplishes this by his steadiness of thought during the blessing, achieved by meditative exertion in guru yoga, and thus he can give such a blessing.

The guru of meditative contemplation accompanies one. Thus, now one meditates on each of these objects and in the future, you will be liberated by them: this is the “welcome.” In the intermediate state of dharmata, one realizes one’s own mind as *dharmakaya* and attains Buddhahood (i.e., one is liberated in the state of Reality). Likewise, for the deity, the dakini, the dharma protectors, the vajra friends, the lineage of transmission, the wish-fulfilling jewel, all taken together.

3. The Intermediate State of Entering the Womb, for those of ordinary capacity, in three sections:

1. If one is unable to realize liberation through the practices of guru yoga and so forth, becoming frightened in the contemplative absorption of the clear light, driven and bound by the three winds of the roots of ignorance, the deceased wanders in the intermediate state.

In such a case, this is the instruction on how to enter the womb [for rebirth]. There is at the moment of death a luminosity like the rising moon. The winds that hold the vital force are gathered towards this place. Like the rising sun, it is excellent, and the causative winds of the place are

gathered in the same way as fire. Like the appearance of pre-dawn light, that which has been gained is gathered together by a wind of dimmed brightness. The way that the clear light gathers, becomes [an object of] ignorance. Thus, having mounted the wind of karma, being bound by the roots of ignorance of the three winds, when the consciousness constituent exits by any of the nine doors, it is diminished. Except by the force of previous meditation, even great masters who lack power are borne away to wander in the intermediate state, and so forth. So, one should meditate previously on rebirth for re-entering the womb. Consciousness, meditating on a new rebirth experiences the great power of heavenly states and the like.

2. In three subsections, the intermediate state of three families of the three times.

The intermediate state of perfect qualities:

1. The teaching on Buddhahood in the first intermediate state.
2. The teaching on Buddhahood in the second intermediate state.
3. The teaching on Buddhahood in a subsequent rebirth: the intermediate state of finding family harmony from the womb.

The First: Four- and one-half days after death, [consciousness constituent] shining like an opal jewel, becoming like one struck by plague, try to remember the six objects [the three jewels; discipline, renunciation, and deities]. Know that one is dead, having seen one's dead relatives, and so on, one thinks "I am wandering in the intermediate state; let my knowledge of these

matters come to mind.” If I do not rest my awareness on unhappy thoughts, I will not be harmed. I will not go anywhere without recognizing what it is. Dark appearances, like the light of pre-dawn, will occur. At that time, by the force of karma, I will go along amid the four continents and the six realms, and so forth, feeling very sleepy and tired. I notice much suffering, quarreling, starvation, etc., and also karma, the deity Yama, the demon gShed po, and so on. Wherever you turn, you are harmed by these entities and you suffer continuously. Afflicted by the karma of habitual emotions, seeking a refuge, previously one recalls the deity of one’s meditations. Like a fish leaping up from the water, one is transformed into the *sambhogakaya* form of the deity; this is called the attainment of the *sambhogakaya*, in the intermediate state body; this is not a meaningless boast, because this body possesses the seven limbs of the *sambhogakaya*. This body of manifestation is also free from moral obscurations of the mind, and from grasping, having a bright complexion and a good age, having five types of clairvoyance. Thus one knows one’s own and others’ mental continua, entirely knowing all the latent tendencies. One moves without obstructions anywhere because of one’s miraculous power, with the exception of three places: Vajrasana, consecrated images, and a mother’s womb. By emanating one billion rays of light, *one’s body is made of light*. By possessing the *dharani* of remembrance, one knows past and future lives. This body is ornamented with the major and minor marks and is a full arm span in width. By familiarizing oneself with this in the intermediate state, regardless of whether it appears pure or impure.

In this sambhogakaya form the karma mudra mixes nondualistically with inexhaustible great bliss; the mahamudra mixes nondualistically with “uniting and entering”; the desire to attain Buddhahood mixes in this way with “uniting and entering.” The karma mudra mixing with inexhaustible [great bliss] in three parts:

1. One should practice relying on the mudra of wisdom light, relying on the instructions of the mobility of the winds: from the door of complete liberation to the door of the path of liberation.
2. One should practice, relying on a *karma mudra* having the signs of bliss, relying on the instruction of bodhicitta. By the path of attachment, from the door of the downward going door of great bliss.
3. One should practice, relying from the start on both mudras and mixing:
 - a. the instructions on the *nadis* of the place (*avadhuti*) from the door of union both over and under, nondualistically.
 - b. by exhausting whatever is written.

The Second: Mixing ignorance and clear light in the dream intermediate state, for those who are ignorant, in four sections:

1. The least able, mixing *equal taste* with the illusory body of the deity.
2. Mixing illusion and dream in *equal taste*.
3. Mixing sleep and contemplative absorption, its own nature with the clear light.
4. Mixing the union of samsara and nirvana with the taste of desire, with realization attained as *equal taste*.

The Third: Hateful ones in the intermediate state of becoming should mix fear and illusory body. In four sections:

1. Mixing as equal taste: attachment, fear, place of birth, and lama.
2. Mixing as equal taste: the thought of fear attachment and the inexhaustible spiritual experience of initiation.

3. Mixing as equal taste: illusory mind of hatred and attachment with a pleasing body.
4. Mixing as equal taste: the desire to obtain with sin and virtue (take up as opposed to abandoning).

This portion of the text goes into great detail starting with the subtle dissolutions. These are demonstrated initially with a classical description of how they are experienced. Within the context of the death state, they are associated with aspects of mind and consciousness dissolving with increasing subtlety.

Later in the text, as we go through the variety of ways through which we are able to experience vajra-mind, Milarepa touches on the practice of tummo, then karmamudra, through illusory body, dream yoga, clear-light, and the very nature of desire with mahamudra. This represents ways through which we can bring the practice of the Six Yogas of Naropa into the practice of death. One doesn't need to practice each yoga successively; being adept at one goes very far here. Should these advanced and secretly guarded practices be either something that you are not able to practice or represent practices that you don't have a relationship with, Milarepa goes on to share two types of mixings through which the ignorant and the hateful can train the mind toward creating causes and conditions that will allow for a more awakened experience.

The first is attachment and fear; the second is our relationship to sin and virtue. Fear and attachment are explicitly named by Milarepa, with good cause. Fear and attachment cause us to become stuck and inhabit places either within ourselves or even physically that we would rather not inhabit.

I once had a hospice patient named Mike who lived in the Windsor Terrace part of Brooklyn. I had been told by both his nurse and his social worker that he had a meditation practice and that he wanted to meet with me to explore making his meditation practice more engaged and open to the experiences that he was having being on hospice. When I first met him, I experienced him as tired and weary—he was thin and weak and told me that his meditation practice was something that arose for him earlier in his life when he entered recovery for substance abuse and that it allowed him to feel

great focus, presence, and openness. He also shared that he *was not* feeling those things currently; at this point in time he felt guilty for putting his wife through the difficulty associated with his decline. He felt sad and worried about her emotional state as well as what she would go through when he did finally die.

At Mike's request, we walked down to a courtyard behind his building to sit on a bench to meditate together. He shared with me some of the mindfulness techniques that he had learned and asked me for some guidance in that moment. I offered an instruction in which we sat together and, after a period of settling the mind through awareness of breath, tried to expand awareness outward by mindfully focusing on all sounds as they arose. He would attempt to experience sound as far away from him as possible as well as the sounds nearby, or even the sound of his own breathing without judgment in a fresh and open way, as if it were arising for the very first time. This technique has been one in which I find it easy to introduce the experience of spaciousness through working to expand awareness over great distances and resting in that experience.

We sat together for around twenty minutes and then silently walked back up to Mike's apartment, where we checked in about the experience. He very quickly became tearful as he described how freeing that session had been and how scary the experience of freedom was for him at this point in time. He was afraid of letting go, afraid of saying goodbye to his wife and moving on into the next experience. He had captured the feeling so clearly that I, too, was left feeling tearful and aware of what a difficult place he was in.

We had a few more visits like this where we would go down to the courtyard together to meditate; however, after a couple of weeks, this became impossible—he was continuing to weaken and had become less stable on his feet, and the short trip was increasingly dangerous for him. We would instead meet in his apartment, he lying on the couch and I seated on a chair. Our visits were pretty straightforward, I would check in with him to see how he was doing, we would sit in meditation together, and then we would talk about the experience. From time to time he would invite his wife to join us, but this was infrequent—he was still reluctant to share anything that would upset her, and I carefully honored his privacy.

At the end of one session he turned to me and asked, “Have I told you about the man who is waiting for me?” Surprised, I told him that he hadn’t, and that I was very curious to hear about this person who was waiting for him. Mike proceeded to describe a series of visions he had had of a man standing in the middle of the grassy roundabout right in front of his building. He told me that he saw him day and night. We looked out of the window together, and I asked him whether he could see him there. He told me that he could. I couldn’t see anything at all. Mike told me everything about this man, his build, his clothing, and his appearance; he also told me that this man made him feel very weary. Mike was scared of him.

Later, after leaving Mike’s apartment, I found myself thinking about this being that Mike was increasingly preoccupied with, and it occurred to me that perhaps he was something of a gatekeeper or a guide. The next day I called Mike to ask him what he thought of this, and he told me that it was possible but wasn’t sure what that might mean. He told me that he would think more about it and that the next day, when I was going to be visiting him, we would discuss it more. When that day came, we entered into a fascinating discussion about the role of gatekeepers and guides and the offering typically associated with such beings. During the conversation, Mike told me that he was scared to make an offering, because he didn’t want to go. He was afraid—very afraid. At this point, it was also clear that Mike’s fear was paralyzing, debilitating fear—he was trying very hard to not let himself succumb to death, despite the fact that at this point he was so weak that he was completely bedbound and could barely lift his head. I asked him, “I’m curious, what would it be like to imagine just a simple offering to this being?”

“Like what?” he responded. I replied, “Something small, a piece of fruit, or a coin, nothing big, just a token of respect.” Mike asked me to stay with him while he visualized an offering—I sat there in silence with him. After some time, he told me that he was finally able to make an offering—he didn’t tell me what it was, and I didn’t ask. I was aware of the fact that he had just done something very difficult—it was an acknowledgment of what was to come. Aware of the fact that Mike’s decline had been more marked over the past few days, I told him that I would stop by the following day. I did stop by the next day but not to see Mike. He died later that evening, after having

finally made an offering to the gatekeeper who had been waiting for him. I stopped by to visit with his wife to provide some support for her.

As mentioned before, Milarepa describes two sets of mixings. The first involves mixing various forms of practice with the experience of equal taste, which can best be described as an expansive sense of equanimity. The second is specifically mixing fear/attachment with the lama, and fear/attachment with the experience of initiation/empowerment, which also includes mixing the mind of hatred and attachment with equal taste, and finally, mixing concerns with sin and virtue with equal taste to address the importance of cultivating the ability to train in radical openness.

Milarepa thus suggests that we blend all of our intense fears and anxieties with our ability to let go and experience the essence of mind in an open, direct manner. He asks us to put down our very worst fears and anxieties, the way Mike did, to be able to move through the next gate of an endless series of bardos.

The term *equal taste* here points us in the direction of direct experience of mind as it is—vast, open, without reference point. Within the context of awakened mind, everything is nothing but equal taste—equal not because it lacks anything that necessarily distinguishes it from anything else, but rather equal because it cannot be separated from anything else. It is equal in that it is liberated together with everything else in a way that is whole and perfect—*perfect* because it arises in a way which is perfectly unimpeded.

Can we learn to recognize our discursive reactive mind and relax it into awakened mind? This is an essential aspect of how to practice at the end of life and throughout the intermediate state.

This instruction on the nature of the intermediate state: don't forget its words and figures of speech, with a little bit of an experience of clear light. Instruction on the nature of the intermediate state is complete. E MA HO!

SECTION II | SPEECH

Outer Speech

Right Speech

This section is not limited merely to speech; it also includes the process of being active and outwardly engaging the world. *Speech*, in this sense, is more about expression than it is about anything else. Therefore, we will look at how we exist in relation to others. We will explore interdependence from different perspectives.

Central to the concept of speech is the cultivation of what is known as *right speech*, broadly defined as maintaining awareness of the power and impact of speech; it is especially important to develop a more refined appreciation of the effects that our speech, or our lack of awareness with regard to our speech, has on other people.

I think we can safely say that, currently, the speed at which our culture functions and some of the unintended consequences brought about by social media have made communication very complicated. If we're going to approach a contemplative practice around being mindful of speech, around cultivating right speech and the ethics involved in doing so, then slowing down and allowing ourselves the time and the energy to reflect on our relationship to communication is essential. How wonderful it would be to be able to maintain a form of speech that allows our vajra sisters and brothers to know that they're cared for, and to engage in speech yoked with wisdom and rooted in intentionality, nurturing the desire to create the causes and conditions for reducing the suffering of others.

Unfortunately, I see increasing numbers of people having trouble maintaining the skills they need to communicate. Sometimes we may find ourselves speaking without being aware of the impact our speech has on others. Before we know it, we're creating havoc in the lives, or within the experience, of all we come to meet. In a very basic sense, an important place to focus our practice is in having a firm foundation of awareness practices rooted in being able to acknowledge that the sound our voice produces has impact. This is a great place for us to be able to come together and

understand how interdependent we all are. These kinds of practices are also powerful, as they allow us some room to begin exploring why we feel the need to communicate. Sometimes our verbal communication can feel very extraneous and redundant. Resting in silence and building awareness of the impulse to speak can be very revealing; it can also be a meaningful way to take responsibility for ourselves.

Speech ends up being a very useful barometer for measuring our ability to accept the degree to which we can understand our impact. Generally, people who are able to maintain mindfulness and awareness of the quality of their speech and of the impact of much of what they say tend to also be able to demonstrate a level of awareness in other arenas of their lives.

Within the Tantric tradition I describe in this book, the importance of speech is multivalent. We'll see this as we move on to think of speech as a symbolic representation of activity. We begin by looking at what enlightened activity, or activity rooted in the Tantric tradition, looks like. It still has a root in the basic qualities of what it means to speak, what it means to express, and what it means to be active. I think that if we are looking at a kind of a spiritual, counterculture response to a fast-paced world in which sometimes there's little regard for truth, a perfect place to begin our practice is with mindfulness of right speech.

Activity and Power

In 1995, shortly after I met Tsunma Zangmo, she, her niece, my close dharma brother Erik, and I went on a picnic. We took a Jeep from Gangtok to North Sikkim, where we visited a monastery named Phodong, which was built by the ninth Karmapa in the late sixteenth century. It's a beautiful, traditional Sikkimese building, and to this day, it's an important center for the Karma Kagyu practice in Sikkim.

On our drive there, we stopped at various points to walk down to the beautiful turquoise river that snaked alongside the road. We also crossed several bridges, stopping at various points, and generally just took our time. It was a relaxed pilgrimage, a picnic day. When we would stop and get out of the jeep, Tsunma Zangmo would toss colored rice blessed by Karmapa and other lamas into little crags of the rock face on the side of the road. While

doing so, she recited Guru Rinpoche's mantra. I was curious because she would stop walking rather abruptly at times, and with great intentionality, she would throw the rice and recite: *Om Ah Hung Vajra Guru Pema Siddhi Hung*. At one point, I asked her, "Why are you doing this?" She responded that it was a way for her to bless the land so that the blessings of Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyal would continue to be manifest in Tsunma's relationship to the land.

She was interacting directly with the environment in these moments. The environment wasn't necessarily something that was separate from her that she was traveling through. She was in direct contact with the environment and was leaving an imprint upon it—a sacred imprint, an imprint centered on maintaining a spiritual connection to it.

In my experience working with people who are having a hard time with their practice, specifically struggling to integrate their practice into their everyday lives, I find that sometimes people develop a very separated view of themselves and their tradition. Sometimes this might manifest as a separation they've established between themselves and the lineage to which they claim affiliation, or between the lineage or tradition to which they find connection and their immediate environment. I think that this is something that's especially prevalent in dharma practice in the West. The work of integration is difficult, especially when you feel that you don't have the power or agency to help the process along. Tsunma Zangmo was adept at demonstrating agency in integrating her practice in a way that was unique and authentically her.

Undoubtedly, lack of authenticity and power can be a real problem. In fact, sometimes lack of agency can almost be an epidemic when it comes to the struggle involved in generating genuine faith. Not only faith in your tradition, but genuine faith in your own practice being consequential, having power and meaning, and having the profound ability to create fundamental change. We must learn that we have the power to transform not only our own phenomenological environment, but also the way that we experience things through our senses, and similarly, the way that our outward activity affects the environment around us. We are impactful. We are powerful.

When speaking with people about this, sometimes my heart breaks a bit when I hear stories from students who feel stuck within a sense of

disempowerment just because they're Western practitioners. In the Western Vajrayana world, practitioners often feel like they are at a disadvantage because they are Western and because they are not necessarily functioning within the container of a Buddhist culture. I've noticed similar sentiments with regard to lay Western Buddhists who feel a sense of meaninglessness within their practice because they are not ordained nuns or monks. We need to be careful about this. It's important to remember that awakening is not identity-specific; it is also not more constellated around one lifestyle or another. This is especially the case within the path of Tantric Buddhism where we use what we have within our immediate experience of life, no matter what that experience looks like, and no matter what others feel.

When seen as a whole, the image of what American culture is does not particularly appear to be Buddhist at all. Sometimes dharma practitioners can feel lonely and isolated because they feel like a stranger in a strange land. Yet part of the point of practice is to be able to cut through these limited habitual patterns around the way we regard self *and* environment, as well as the energy of coemergence that arises in our relationship to our environment.

With special regard to tantric practices like yidam, guru yoga, chöd, and the like, we're asked to directly shift and restructure this coemergent relationship. Part of these practices is rooted in removing the separation between self and other—practitioner and environment. Another aspect of these practices is the complete transformation of samsaric ordinariness in relation to the way we experience phenomena around (and within) us. We work to cut through the root of this samsaric element of existence and directly engage with what we are experiencing in the moment; we do this with vast expansive clarity so we are able to experience the liberated qualities of the moment.

For me, this is all about agency and authenticity. It's about *authenticity* in the sense that without the practitioner being able to have complete faith in their power, and the power of their practice, they're always going to struggle. Sometimes this struggle is rooted in self-created conflicting emotions related to questions about what it means to be a Western dharma practitioner in relation to a tradition that is obviously rooted in Asia. Often, it's rooted in the experience of difference. Within Western dharma cultures, many dharma organizations are primarily white. When this is the case, non-white dharma practitioners experience (not by choice) an extra layer of meaning-making

around authenticity in relation to the dominance of whiteness in such organizations. It's important to remain mindful that within any given sangha, layers of struggle and differing storylines relate to what it really means to claim agency and authenticity, and especially a sense of power and efficacy within dharma practice. The effects of feeling disempowered by whiteness, white supremacy, and patriarchy are not often addressed openly in Tantric Buddhist sanghas. This is a fundamental flaw and a major blind spot within Western dharma. Therefore, as practitioners, administrators in dharma organizations, chaplains, or whoever we may be, we need to recognize and claim power in relation to our ability to transform ourselves per the blessings of the lineage and the kind of loose sketch we find presented by past lineage practitioners and masters. Sometimes this means disrupting the communities within which we find ourselves.

Over the years, practitioners from a variety of sanghas have reached out to me with their stories of financial abuse, abuse of power, and sexual misconduct. These stories have informed the work I do. I try to respond to such information by working to disrupt the ways in which hypocrisy seems to abound in dharma centers. If we want an environment of engaged dharma practice, we need to bring accountability, transparency, and a deeper commitment so we can stand up and address all that gets in the way of authentic practice.

The process of developing agency, authenticity, and individuation as a dharma practitioner throughout the history of the Buddhist tradition has necessitated periodic conflict between the practitioner and the community through which they have come to dharma. This is a fairly consistent thread we see within the lives of the eighty-four mahasiddhas, as well as the biographies of other dharma practitioners. We often find that the practitioner outgrows the religious tradition faster than the religious tradition can adapt to be able to include the practitioner.

At certain points during the life story of Machig Labdron, for example, we find that she was denigrated for being a mother and for being a woman. These roles were seen as negative. Ironically, over time, as her teachings took root, she was accepted by the tradition until she became regarded, as she is today, as an absolutely vital dharma presence. Although it's complete conjecture on my part, she must have struggled with the ridiculous ignorance of her male counterparts. You see this in the stories of contemporary masters

as well. The point is, part of our dharma practice requires us to begin to take our practice seriously, to integrate it into our lives and to be liberated by it. We need to continue the work of developing a sense of confidence in the changes that are arising within us through our practice, even when these naturally unraveling experiences, these deep, spiritual experiences, might cause us to act in seeming opposition to our tradition.

To *develop agency* means to be able to see yourself as a form of spiritual refuge. To *develop authenticity* means that you must believe that your body, the culture from which you arose, and the form that you are taking right now, no matter how it appears, no matter how it is regarded by your culture, no matter how much noise is made about you, your appearance, your cultural heritage, and your very existence, is all rooted within the framework of fundamental awakening.

The process of individuation asks us to be able to see our own qualities as enlightened. This can be difficult. It is also revolutionary. To be able to understand that we do not need to add foreign enlightened qualities onto, or meld them into, our being, and that deep down, the qualities that arise from us are fundamentally liberated in and of themselves, takes practice. *This is the practice.* It is so easy to get stuck, feel that we're worthless, that maybe in the future we'll have the opportunity to be reborn Tibetan or to be reborn in Asia. Anywhere but here, definitely not New York City, definitely not suburbia, definitely not inner-city Chicago, definitely not Texas.... Anywhere but here, anybody but me. This is the first fundamental Mara we need to try to destroy with love; we need to change this element of self-hatred that is rooted in fundamental ignorance.

If the Buddhist tradition has taught us anything over all of the years of its existence, it's that dharma is inherently multifaceted. It can be owned by no single culture. Dharma can be beautifully filtered through the range of humanity and cultural expression. It can be filtered through diverse cultures and through changing cultural expression.

Sometimes we create the worst violence, and create the worst forms of ignorance, by maintaining a relationship to dharma in which we hold an inflexible view of it; for example, dharma is like "this." It appears like "this." For dharma to survive, it must look exactly like "this." But where is dharma? What color is dharma? What culture is inherently dharma? What

gender is inherently dharma? What class position is inherently dharma? What migration status is inherently dharma? What lineage is inherently dharma? What reincarnation lineage is inherently dharma? What is pure dharma? What is impure dharma?

What I'm not saying here is that "oh, everything is dharma." Yet, at the same time, ironically, everything *is* dharma. It's a funny thing. We argue about the things that we don't understand, or perhaps can't understand. Sometimes we argue out of such limited mind space that we don't allow ourselves the possibility of understanding.

I expect that, in the future, if conditions keep on changing at the rate they are currently, it is likely that some dharma organizations will lose a sense of credibility because they'll become too parochial, too limited, and too stuck in a particular viewpoint or a particular historical location to meet the needs of a diverse sangha. Everything is subject to change—even our dharma organizations. That such institutions aren't reflecting the way phenomena are manifesting at any given time indicates that change is necessary. Such organizations might be beautiful, or have been founded with a noble intent, or they might have lovely architecture, enviable property, or lovely art and lovely ritual traditions, and yet when said organizations and said dharma structures hurt others, disempower practitioners, or reorient practitioners around their brokenness, then I think there's a fundamental problem.

We need to remember that dharma lives to express itself. Dharma arises effortlessly, even at times when its arising is least convenient. So, to some degree, I don't have a tremendous amount of fear or pessimism that things won't change. Things only change. It's just how they change that can be difficult for people to accept, especially when their minds are oriented too much around one particular position or form around which they assume that dharma should arise.

How We Carry Ourselves—Being Pregnant with Realization

My root teacher was an extraordinary woman. She was a poet, a painter, a rebel, a nun, a mother, and a practitioner with a deep understanding of the

nature of mind. I have shared aspects of my relationship with her earlier and will share more here and elsewhere.

In November 1995, both Gyaltsab Rinpoche and Sangye Nyenpa Rinpoche were staying at Rumtek, and Tsunma Zangmo suggested that my dharma brother Erik and I go there to request the Chenrezig and Milarepa guru yoga empowerments from either of these senior lineage holders. We made our journey there; however, when we arrived, the atmosphere was not what we expected. Due to circumstances beyond everyone's control, a group of agitators had approached the monastery and had engaged the Indian military soldiers who had been stationed there to keep the peace. Rumors of a confrontation the next day began to circulate throughout the monastery and the surrounding area.

The night before the agitators approached the monastery again, a large Mahakala tsok was held to pacify the turbulent circumstances. It was presided over by Gyaltsab Rinpoche and had been performed on the top floor of the Shri Nalanda Institute. The tension in the air was thick, and I remember feeling the intense energy from the intense protector practice on the eve of an event that had created considerable anxiety and worry among all present. The day of the protest, Erik and I sat on the roof of the small guesthouse within the monastery gate where we were staying. We watched and took photos of the mob engaging soldiers with rocks and sticks. Eventually the crowd was dispersed and chased down through the emerald-green, terraced rice paddies by soldiers. The adrenaline-producing event at this early point in my spiritual connection to Vajrayana left me feeling alive and energized. In the days afterward, it became evident that we would not be able to meet with either Gyaltsab Rinpoche or Sangye Nyenpa Rinpoche due to the nature of their schedules (unbeknownst to me at the time, the former would become a central teacher of mine later in life), so we decided to leave and go back to Tsunma Zangmo to whom Erik and I found ourselves increasingly drawn to as our root teacher.

We made the Jeep ride back from Rumtek to Gangtok and requested the Chenrezig and Milarepa guru yoga empowerments from Tsunma. To some degree this was an unusual request; it is uncommon to find female Himalayan monastics who give empowerments. She spent some time thinking about it and then consented. Not only did Tsunma Zangmo offer the initiations for these two practices, but she read through the ritual texts and translated and

taught them to us word by word. So we were not just beneficiaries of her wisdom borne from dharma practice, but also of her boldness, her creativity, and her deep appreciation for finding and transmitting the beauty of the word. I regard Tsunma Zangmo as a deeply accomplished yogini, and her spontaneous, fresh, and direct way of teaching, using every moment, became a special treasure to me. No one else could transmit Chenrezig or Milarepa the way that she did—and at the time, all the causes and conditions had aligned in a way that to not accept the jewellike wisdom that she had to offer would have been idiotic.



His Eminence Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche, one of the four heart-sons of the sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu lineage. Gyaltsab Rinpoche is one of the most important living teachers in the Karma Kagyu tradition and lives in semi-retreat at his monastery, the Palchen Chosling Monastery, in Ravangla, Sikkim. He is a master of the tantras that Marpa brought from India to Tibet in the eleventh century. This photo was taken in October 2014 during a visit to the monastery with Author and Lucian Read. Photo courtesy Lucian Read.

Tsunma Zangmo didn't just teach Milarepa and Chenrezig; she also taught Erik and me mahamudra. Keenly aware of each of our grasping minds, especially that unique type of grasping that arises when you are freshly connecting to practice and have a natural and somewhat child-like desire to learn all that you can, she taught us mahamudra in a sneaky way. In

retrospect, I think that I was cursed with an academic mind that tended toward arrogance and overconfidence, something that I have since learned to live with in a healthy, mindful way. I share this because I think Tsunma Zangmo modulated her approach to suit us—she taught some things on the down-low because she knew that, had I been aware of what she was really teaching, I would have made a big deal about it; I would've been very discursive and wouldn't have been able to actually hear what she was teaching.

The three of us spent the afternoons sitting on her rooftop balcony in meditation as the sun passed below the mountains in front of us. With the vastness of space as the operational analogy for the quality of mind, we would sit together, often with a cup of Temi tea, and familiarize ourselves with experiencing the practice of shifting the referential locus from self to limitless space. Afterward, we would sit in silence and then discuss our experiences. Erik and I would share, and Tsunma Zangmo would listen and then comment, perhaps suggesting we move in a particular direction with regard to how we were placing the mind. These sessions were intimate and powerful. They have left a lasting impact on me and inform my own pedagogy when it comes to teaching nonconceptual meditation.

Tsunma Zangmo also offered pointing-out instructions on two occasions. *Pointing-out instructions* can be best described as a set of instructions given to a student so that the student is able to have a direct experience of the nature of their mind. Such instructions are often short and very experiential, aiding the student to have direct insight of something beyond concise verbal description. As a testimony to her skill, she did not build up what she was doing—she just offered the instruction. Both occasions were moving and memorable beyond words, and in both, it felt as if any reference point whatsoever had been removed. As if she removed a veil, I felt a sense of experience that was expansive, without limit, stable, and without the referential positionality in relation to subject/object.

Instructive pointing-out sessions like these are intended to allow the student to experience the nature of mind that the guru can then confirm, comment upon, or provide further guidance on. The dynamics that create the conditions around the efficacy of such sessions have a lot to do with the nature of the relationship between student and teacher. A certain sense of

intimacy, mutual respect, or sense of closeness and a ripening of karma needs to be manifest through the right karmic conditions.

To this end, Tsunma Zangmo shared a story related to one of her root teachers, the previous Kalu Rinpoche. Apparently one of his students from abroad visited him annually for instruction regarding his practice. Each year the student would ask Kalu Rinpoche for pointing-out instructions, and gracefully, each year Rinpoche would consent and provide them—which was nothing short of a great honor for his student—and each year, the student would then complain that nothing happened. According to my teacher, this sequence continued for twelve years! Of course, the moral of the story is that such instructions do not liberate all people at all times; rather, a certain chemistry needs to be in place so that the intended effect can occur. The maintenance of this chemistry, or foundation, is not just the work of the teacher. It is also the work and responsibility of the student. Just as a gardener cannot effectively blame anyone else for what ensues when they stop their commitment to pruning, weeding, and the watering of their garden, the practitioner of Buddhist tantra must also maintain a certain commitment to the necessary work involved in maintaining a commitment to the dynamic relationship with their teacher. This is not as easy as it sounds.

In this context, it is worth bearing in mind that some of the efficacy of the tantric path—a very experiential (and at times, experimental) path—cannot be forced, and in some situations, it can defy reason. Not all teachers or teachings hold the same valence in real time for all people at all times. We are always changing, and the dynamics that help create meaning are not, by any means, necessarily static. Therefore, not every teacher will be the right fit, and similarly, not every set of instructions or practices will hold the same power for all people. It also bears noting that not all dharma teachers, even though they may have the training, are skilled enough to be teachers—but that is a topic for another book.

At one point, Tsunma Zangmo transmitted to us what was another very important instruction: “Now that you have experienced the nature of mind and have been given instructions, you must practice. You should regard yourself as pregnant. Like an expectant mother, take good care of yourself and your practice as you carry your gestating Buddhahood.” In short, she was demonstrating that how we carry ourselves, how we interact with the world, directly impacts how, when, and to what extent the realization of awakening

is born. It will be born at some point in time. This is the truth, and this is also a testament to the positive nature of Buddhism: the *when* is very much based upon us.

Practice and Self-Care

It's important to take care of ourselves. Healing is possible, to a great extent, when we slow down. This is especially the case when we take care of our physical body, our emotional body, and our spiritual body. One thing that Tsunma Zangmo consistently taught me was of the importance of taking naps, and I don't bring this up as some kind of joke, nor did she. Adopting a gentle, supportive, and loving relationship toward ourselves sounds so basic, but when we really look at it, doing so can be very challenging.

Tsunma was very serious about resting, and I think that one important quality that I learned from her was that sometimes the most powerful dharma practice arises when we're gentle and operating from a gentle disposition. I think that within the context of the American capitalist structure, which is hard to separate from the spiritual marketplace, we easily become disassociated from what the root of spiritual practice might be, and we try to rush the product/image that is presented to us.

Sometimes the product being sold is the image of what it means to be a meditator. As such, we find emphasis placed on becoming great, serious, intensive meditators who are able to sit for long periods of time. The kind who squeeze every aspect of spirituality out of time. Such people are spiritual athletes. They're efficient with their time. They work hard and reap the great results of their difficult work. And although I think that obviously, within the course of the history of Buddhism, some people have definitely practiced that way, in today's culture, this product-based way of relating to everything has a negative impact because it implies that unless we're working hard all the time on our spiritual practice, we're not actually practicing.

I don't think this is true. I think that deep spiritual transformation can happen through times of intense effort, and at the same time, much of the more intuitive change, the change that's hard to put a finger on, occurs very deep within us and is not created by constant busy activity. These deep shifts occur

when we're able to be at ease, when our body is able to be relaxed, when our mind is less reactive. When we're less focused on operating from the vantage point of the production of spiritual product, we can focus more on the power of innate spiritual transformation inherent in relaxing into the moment.

Relaxing in the moment was a very common theme when Tsunma Zangmo gave meditation instructions. She focused on us having a sense of seriousness regarding our intention around practice and on us not being lazy. But she also impressed on us that having a healthy read on the situation, including our present circumstances, could help us modulate our relationship to practice so that we could slow down. If our mind is feeling overwhelmed by what's going on throughout the course of the day, then sitting and resting outside can help. Sometimes taking a nap, or taking a bath, or having a cup of tea, or going for a walk is the perfect aide in helping us out of the experience of intensity. I have come to wonder if the root of this need to push ourselves is influenced by a fear that actually, deep within us, is an innate Buddha-nature that seeks to express itself naturally, with ease. I wonder if we can occasionally fear that we will be successful in seeing through the convenient narrative spun by our ego-clinging. It's actually a bit of fallacy to think that realization must be forced—or must be forced into being through a painful and long, arduous birthing process. Actually, it's almost as if Maslow's hierarchy of needs comes into play with regard to spiritual practice. Perhaps the thing that allows spiritual transformation is whatever it is that allows the reactive mind to be able to settle.

The reactive mind can't settle very easily when we're stressed out and exhausted, when we're struggling with our identity or with our ability to recognize that we have a sense of agency and an authentic connection to the fact that we, through our practice, are agents of internal and external change.

It's a form of self-care to have faith that realization is inevitable. Having faith and recognizing the existence of Buddha-nature is a form of self-care. Recognizing the wisdom behind very basic meditation instructions like Tilopa's Six Nails is self-care. Reading *namthars*—spiritual biographies of lives of the various masters of the past—is a form of self-care. Taking care of our bodies is a form of self-care. Loving ourselves is self-care. We should have compassion for ourselves. We should love the fact that we, just like everybody else, have this ability to affect deep, powerful, transformational

spiritual change because this naturally arising Buddha-nature is our original face.

It is also self-care to be able to see others in a nonjudgmental way so that we can be present and so that we can become a compassionate presence. This isn't possible without exploring patience and wisdom, both of which are born from meditation practice, and both of which also serve as powerful supports for self-care. Maintaining a sense of humor is also a form of self-care. We need to be able to not take ourselves so seriously so we can practice with joy and with a heart that's able to hold the contradictions of samsara—contradictions that are just crazy, that are insane—this is also a form of self-care.

Mantra: Milarepa and Chenrezig

Another aspect of the intersection between speech and tantric practice is *mantra*. In a basic sense, mantra is the use of sound to create transformation. We're going to look at two mantras: the mantra for the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokitesvara (Tibetan: Chenrezig), and the mantra for Milarepa, as is found in the Milarepa guru yoga. In the case of Chenrezig, the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* represents the cultivation of all the qualities of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. It also represents the purification of all beings within the six realms of existence: the hot and cold hell realms, the hungry ghost realm, the animal realm, the human realm, the demigod realm, and the god realm.

When one is given the transmission of a mantra, the mantra brings together enlightened sound, carried on our breath and on the very intimate energy-wind that exists within our body, and activates our ability to realize the intention and qualities associated with said mantra. The recitation of the mantra is part of an engaged spiritual practice that can include visualization, prayer, and liturgy. Fully engaged practice like this is another way in which we're able to harness the qualities of our being so we can effect spiritual change within ourselves and create an impactful change upon the experience of other beings and on the experience of our environment.

In the case of Milarepa guru yoga, the mantra is *Om Ah Guru Hasa Vajra Hum*. Here, too, reciting the mantra is a way to yoke an ability to rest within

the gnostic grace—the clear spaciousness of the blessings—of Milarepa and cultivate a sense of deep closeness and intimacy with him. This sense of deep personal association with Milarepa—such that there’s an effected transference of wisdom, of blessing, and of presence from his form body to our own physical body and, of course, our spiritual body as well—is a key part of the power of mantra recitation.

The recitation of this mantra is a way of creating an empowerment-like dynamic in which we’re able to receive direct blessings from Milarepa. This, of course, is the same as with reciting the mantra of Chenrezig. It’s a way of remaining in a constant relationship with what it means to be the essence of awakening in the form of compassionate action. The use of breath, the use of sound, the use of tone, and the intentionality with which we recite the mantra all becomes part of the practice. Some mantras are to be whispered, others are to be recited silently, while still others are meant to be recited with increased volume.

Some mantras or sacred syllables are meant to be shouted. The syllable *Phat*, for example, is meant to be shouted in some contexts within the chöd tradition. In such contexts, the Phat becomes a direct way of cutting through the conceptual mind. Voice/sound and intentionality of the intersection between sound and physicality creates the intended consequence, which in terms of the syllable Phat, is a slicing through of the ordinary samsaric, dualistic, conceptual mind. When someone shouts Phat, it’s more than just uttering a sound. It’s more than making sound; they are generating the fresh immediacy of mahamudra.

In this way, sound and the creation of it are extensions of speech in a powerful way; the Buddhist tantrika learns to cultivate that power of enlightenment and use it for the benefit of others.

Inner Speech

Ethics

An essential aspect of what I will call inner speech is *ethics*. The Buddhist tradition is well known for its many contributions to humankind, and chief among them is its emphasis on, and exhaustive presentation of, ethics. The Buddhist ethical imperative is vast, and when you consider all of the ways in which ethics is applied in Buddhism, according to the views of the three vehicles, it offers an endless place to hone and refine our dharma practice. Buddhist ethics is a topic that is vast, profound, and perhaps more in need of exploration within our Western sanghas than ever before. The reflections that I share here are much shorter than the topic deserves, yet I hope that they can help start a discussion that sparks the passion of those more qualified to begin the work of reexamining our relationship to ethics in the West.

When my root teacher and spiritual mother, Tsunma Dechen Zangmo, taught the text for the prostrations and refuge part of the Karma Kagyu *ngondro* (the Four Foundations practice), she spent a great deal of time talking about the different ways in which beings have been our mothers in the past.

In the most classical aspect of this practice, we direct our prostrations to the field of refuge: our lineage forefathers and foremothers. In this way, we seek to enter and become part of a lineage. We join our lineage by repeatedly receiving the blessings of the lineage; in fact, we are instructed to help lead all sentient beings in the meritorious activity of supplicating and reciting the refuge prayer to our specific lineage with us.

For the Karma Kagyu lineage, the refuge prayer follows:

I take refuge in the kind root lama

I take refuge in the assembly of the yidams and deities gathered in their mandalas

I take refuge in the Bhagavan Buddhas

I take refuge in the Holy Dharma

I take refuge in the Noble Sangha

I take refuge in the assembly of dakas, dakinis, dharma protectors and guardians who possess the wisdom eye.

Why do we do this? It is said that all beings have, at one point in time, been our mothers. Given that time and space are infinite, the Buddhist teachings on karma reveal that over this beginningless time, all beings, in one form or another and at one time or another, have cared for us with selfless beauty and have made endless sacrifices, protected us, nurtured us, and also supported and enriched us. Through time immemorial, through the various combinations and permutations of the manifestations of karma, every person we meet has done this for us. Every animal. Every friend. Every enemy. Every being, seen and unseen. And in this way, we are all inextricably linked.

What better way to repay and honor these countless mother-beings than to act as a raft to lead them to the banks of spiritual realization? When we visualize the field of refuge, and as we make each prostration while reciting the refuge prayer, we are doing so with each being who has been our mother. We keep their desire for well-being and happiness in our heart. In this way, in a manner similar to Indra's Net, it becomes impossible to locate a source or an end with regard to our connection with others. In taking a moment to check in and spend time contemplating this possibility, we find ourselves left with a deep feeling of connection and an awareness ornamented with the jewels of empathetic concern for others. Suddenly the well-being and quality-of-experience of others becomes a natural concern.

That we are all interdependent is also driven home in a variety of prayers and sadhanas, such as that of Chenrezig, or Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In Chenrezig practice, you imagine yourself moving throughout the six realms of existence to generate a genuine sense of

compassion and a firm resolve to help alleviate the suffering of beings in all six realms.

Within this type of practice, we vow to benefit all beings who have been our mothers as an expression of gratitude and gentle concern for all those who suffer and who have provided *us* with the selfless love and support that only parents can. These beings who have loved us unconditionally may be experiencing the anger and depression of the hot and cold hell realm, the dullness of the animal realm, the insatiable greed and desire of the hungry ghost realm, the jealousy and infighting of the demigod realm, or the perfect complacency of the god realm, and the variegated suffering that we experience in this human realm within which we find ourselves right now. We vow with intense, heartfelt intention, inspired by the model of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, to be better, to act with skill, to perfect generosity, and to manifest patience and wisdom, tempered with the equanimity created by generating a sense of awareness or insight borne of meditation practice.

Such compassionate activity, the manifestation of the Buddhist ethical framework, requires us to be strong so that we can go against the stream of our prevailing karmic patterning that is rooted in the needs of self over the needs of others. Such activity requires that we be bold enough to disrupt all of the ways that we consciously and unconsciously hurt others. How can we be there for others so that we may cool the anger, warm the depression, enlighten the dullness, sooth the jealousy, and enliven and express the immediacy of the present moment as the ground for awakening?

More to the point, as practitioners, we need to take responsibility for ourselves and expand classical Buddhist ethical systems to address sexual ethics and ethics around undoing racism and patriarchy, and we need to confront our relationship to the environment that acts as a basis, or container, for life as we know it. When I speak with more conservative dharma practitioners who like to think of themselves as traditional in their practice, I feel that they have a lot to learn when it comes to holding themselves and their sanghas accountable when it is time to do the work inherent in confronting whiteness and patriarchy and sexual and financial violence. Time and again, I see practitioners defensively dismissing exhortations to shine a light on these problems and hear them claim that these activities have less to

do with Buddhist practice than they do with identity politics or political correctness.

I understand the discomfort around having someone point out how prevalent whiteness is and how easily white people profit from their location in relation to power in a racist culture, or how men benefit from being male in a patriarchal culture. I know that it's uncomfortable, *and* I have taken the vow to be a better spiritual friend to those I teach, to be an ethical leader, and a trustworthy practitioner, which is why I am not backing down from taking a stance on holding myself accountable for my own ignorance. I encourage the larger Vajrayana community to continue to build upon our ethical framework, to modernize it, and to further develop what it means to generate a personal activity that is rooted in wisdom and compassion—no matter how uncomfortable such changes may feel.

When taking the Bodhisattva vow, we vow that,

beginning today and until I attain the heart of Awakening, I also commit myself to maintain the wish of attaining Awakening. When I attain Awakening, I will lead the beings dwelling in the three inferior realms to the three superior realms. I will lead those in the three superior realms who are subjected to conflicting emotions and karma to tranquility; I will encourage those who dwell in tranquility in order that they commit themselves to the Great Vehicle; I will establish the Bodhisattvas of the Great Vehicle in perfect Buddhahood.¹

In the face of such an extraordinary vow and the attempt to create the causes and conditions for great compassionate activity, how can addressing the stains of homophobia, white supremacy, patriarchy, or a negligent attitude with regard to the environment be seen as a Western imposition onto Buddhist ethics? Indeed, when we familiarize ourselves with the various root and secondary transgressions associated with failing to maintain the Bodhisattva vow, it becomes clear that at the very least, we each need to conduct a personal reexamination of what an engaged Buddhist ethic might look like. I believe that a larger, pan-Buddhist exploration of what an updated Buddhist ethical imperative would look like is necessary so we can address various modern forms of ignorance in our spiritual practice. We can no longer sit on the sidelines and wait for senior lineage holders to make

public statements about what kind of ethics should be adopted; instead, we must model the change that is inevitable.

Tsunma Dechen Zangmo explained another way of examining the concept of how all beings have been our mothers, which differs from the classical presentation we see in Buddhist literature: all beings are our mothers because all beings give birth to our identities—they define and contextualize the way we present and imagine ourselves to be.

No matter how much we try, we cannot exist in a relative way without existing *in relation to* others. By accepting our wonderful qualities, our faults and limitations, and what we are perceived and projected to be by others, an identity is birthed. The quality of our being as it pertains to our *diverse* qualities is defined and experienced through others, through the way that they experience us. We are given context and we are given meaning. What we do with it and how we react to it is up to us.

Although we like to think we are the architects of our appearance, and in some ways, we are the unintentional architects, we are only ever known through the experience of others. This way of looking at the manner in which we have created our identities, the way that we are animated by and get carried away by our experience of self, which is a fleeting momentary illusion, can be best seen reflected in the eyes of another.

Whether I am in jails or hospitals as a chaplain, going about my daily activities as a parent or partner, or teaching dharma somewhere, I am always humbled when I can notice the interdependent, interpenetrating relationship we share with one another. What an amazing thing it is to meet and reflect the pure appearance of another, the fleeting transience, and the deep connection that we all share. It requires a great deal of work to truly appreciate this. I find it especially meaningful when I catch myself reacting and judging or comparing and compartmentalizing the spontaneity of occurrence. But when I *can* rest in naturally meeting others, the sheer simplicity and profundity of that experience reminds me of how extraneous our elaborations of dharma can become.

Samaya

You cannot engage in conversation about activity without exploring the concept of samaya. The Sanskrit term *samaya* refers to a set of vows and pledges associated with initiation into a particular tantric practice. I've used three texts to help provide a broad explanation of what samaya is about and the range around which it arises.

The first text is a song that praises and offers auspicious verses for the long life of the late Pathing Rinpoche, one of my main teachers. I've included this text because it demonstrates, at least in appearance, the importance and possibility of holding multiple forms of samaya activity. The second text is a portion from a chöd text attributed to the eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje, on how the chödpa, or practitioner of chöd, should engage in the activity of the practice. The third text has been taken from Tsunma Zangmo's retreat notebook and demonstrates how formal dharma practice holds the essence of what it means to develop engaged dharma activity.

Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye writes extensively about the pledges and vows as they relate to tantric practice in book five of *The Treasury of Knowledge*. He describes the essence of the vows by suggesting that

Mantric vows are essentially the resolve, accompanied by its concomitant factors,

To train in methods to experience blissful pristine awareness in order to bind grasping to subject and the propensity for movement.

*In short, the ethics consist in the discipline of binding body, speech, and mind with skill in means and wisdom.*²

Later, he describes that

The vow's seeds are planted when the body, speech, and mind are consecrated;

They are formed with the promise to maintain them and blessed by the descent of pristine awareness;

*The main conferral of initiation brings them to the apex.*³

When it comes to samaya, we enter into the realm of various Tantric Buddhist ideas regarding activity. As Lodrö Thaye indicates, the pledges and

vows upon which Tantric Buddhism is predicated involve a conscious effort to train ourselves to change the ordinary samsaric binary relationship between subject and object, or self and other, into the experience of blissful, pristine awareness. Such pledges and vows are based upon the specific tantric practice to which you have been initiated. The commitment to maintaining such vows is planted within the student's stream of being during the conferral of initiation, or empowerment.

Kongtrul continues to explain that the

Vows and pledges assumed during the initiation must be safeguarded like one's own life.

Four pledges constitute the foundation common to all tantras:

*To maintain correct view, refuge, and awakening mind and to receive the mandala's initiation.*⁴

No matter which class of tantra you may be practicing (Kriya Tantra, Charya Tantra, Yoga Tantra, or Anuttarayoga Tantra), maintaining the samayas associated with the received mandala initiation is what maintains the blessings of the guru, lineage, and deity upon which the practice is centered. Maintaining samaya is a vital way through which we hold the power inherent within tantric practice.

This is important to keep in mind for many reasons. One such reason, I believe, is that a good number of people are attracted to Vajrayana because the tradition is rooted in a relatively nondual approach to spiritual practice. As such, sometimes the ethics around the cultivation of nonduality are mistakenly preferred over the ethics of the Mahayana and Theravada paths. We may find that this is sometimes expressed because both the Theravada and the Mahayana ethical imperative connects us to being present for others, engaging in practice for others, and helping to alleviate the suffering of others, postponing our own enlightenment until all others have the opportunity to experience that enlightenment.

It is important to be mindful of falling into ideas in which a subconscious (or astoundingly, a conscious) desire exists to not want to do all of the foundational work found within the vitally important Mahayana and Theravada traditions. We should guard against laziness when we don't feel

like going the full distance with our practice. We need to remain vigilant of being attracted to the nondual ethical imperative found within Buddhist tantra when we feel the need to throw to the wind the importance of relative interdependent connectedness to the world in which we live. Just as samaya is the life-blood through which tantra manifests, so, too, is intention. Even though tantra is celebrated as a “fast” path, it isn’t categorized as such because we can bypass all the work. It is important to understand very clearly the nature of samaya, or the activity commitment of the Tantric Buddhist tradition.

This is all very important because we need to remember that samaya doesn’t exist to control us. Samaya should not be regarded from a Judeo-Christian perspective. This can be very difficult, especially when we have been born and raised within a Judeo-Christian culture. Even if we are not necessarily born into families that practice Judeo-Christian or Abrahamic faith traditions, our culture is rooted so heavily in the Abrahamic ethical imperative that it can bleed into the way we might regard samaya. Of course, this can also impact how we might regard the violation of samaya as well. Ultimately the maintenance of samaya is a profound dharma practice just like any other practice, such as the Bodhisattva vow or the five precepts.

Engaging in the practice of accepting a vow of some kind has more to do with how we maintain awareness of our activity and the way in which we relate to others. Ethics, samaya, and different kinds of adherence to vows are not meant to control us. They’re not meant to deprive us of anything. They’re meant to allow us to train in a way that develops our ability to realize the interdependent quality of our interaction with others, both seen and unseen. This isn’t just related to spirituality, because it includes the way that we relate to a variety of systems—governmental, societal, and familial. Maintaining a healthy relationship with samaya is a powerful way for us to manifest realization.

At the same time, it’s important that we do not obsess over samaya. We should not obsess over vows, but instead approach them the way we would a meditation instruction. Rather than enter into a vigorous, fear-based training in which we may be afraid to act because we’re afraid of consequences or blowback, let’s consider this: How can we step into samaya as it relates to a spiritual practice rooted in liberation? When we approach practice from this perspective, we are learning how to adopt new behaviors that are not rooted

in the same self-serving, dualistic, habitual tendencies that we're wrapped up with on a daily basis.

Engaging in samaya and samaya-related practices is a way of retraining, removing, or reorienting our habitual ideas about ourselves, about our relationship to the world around us, and of course, our relationship to natural awakening. Let us look at some examples of bringing this into practice by beginning with a long-life prayer for Pathing Rinpoche that I translated in 2001.

The Song of Offering Praise to the Lord of Refuge Phul Thung Rinpoche That Resounds Like the Singing of a Ghandharva

Om Soti

I pay homage to the precious lama seated above my
head,

Who compassionately protected the region of Payul and
its inhabitants from harmful demons.

He is inseparable from the fully accomplished one known
as Padma, to the incomparable lama I prostrate.

Outwardly he is the Kadampa known as Phul Thung,

Inwardly, likewise, he is the great tertön Chogyur Dechen
Lingpa,

Secretly he is the innermost essence of Kukkuripa.

I praise the compassionate accomplished perfect lama.

In this age of kaliyuga he is the most excellent protector of
all beings.

As the magnificent great Heruka he has completely
annihilated obstructing demons and their armies.

He is the irresistibly ornamented wheel of the Three
Secrets.⁵

May you remain for kalpas and kalpas.

Gewo!

*This pointed prayer was written by Khenpo Zhuk Gyal on New
Year's in the Iron Dragon Year (1940) in the waxing phase of the*

moon on Sunday morning. May this cut off every activity of the conceptual mind! Gewo! Gewo! Gewo! Mangalam.

This song indicates how it is that you can maintain the various different kinds of samayas at one time. In this song, Pathing Rinpoche outwardly takes the form of a Kadampa, which indicates he is maintaining very traditional moral and ethical codes like those we find in both the Theravadin and Mahayana traditions. But inwardly, he is the great tertön Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa, which is how he is able to hold all of the tantric samayas—all of the root vows associated with Tantric Buddhist practice—in a complete way. Thus inwardly, he holds all of the vows of the great *terton*, a great tantric master. Secretly he is described as being the innermost essence of Kukkuripa, one of the eighty-four mahasiddhas, and who occupies a role of great importance in the Mahamudra tradition. This line points out that Pathing Rinpoche was able to clearly recognize the essence of mind and related instructions or, in other words, all of the activities involved in what it means to maintain awareness of the power of the fundamental awakened nature of mind. This is why, later in the prayer, he is depicted as a great Heruka who has completely annihilated obstructing demons and their armies. He is able to have such a powerful effect precisely because he is able to hold the Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and the Sahajayana—or the essence mahamudra samaya activities. Thus, this brief prayer presents a dynamic, clear way of demonstrating through the literature of the tradition how, like Pathing Rinpoche, you can strive to hold all of these samaya activities in one effort.

In a portion of a chöd practice sadhana attributed to eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorje and compiled by Karma Chagme entitled *The Method for Accomplishment on One Seat*, the samaya conduct for chöd is described as follows:

*I am a wrathful Labdron with a black complexion.
On my crown is Buddha Shakyamuni, the three precious jewels.
At the throat is the holy Lama Dampa in the aspect of an Indian.
At the heart are the sublime deities, the five family dakinis,
And at the navel is the activity dakini with a green complexion.
As I am the actual Dakini Machik Labdron,
I have no concern, conscience or fear outside.
I have no attachment, anger, happiness, sorrow or worldly concerns inside.
There is no distinction between enemies and friends, everyone is the same
because they are my father and mother.
There is no distinction between gods and demons, they are all the same
because they are my concepts.
There is no distinction between clean and unclean, everything is same and
experienced as amrita.
There is no distinction between comfort and discomfort; everything is the
same because it is my own mind.
There is no distinction between this life and the next because I am already
a Buddha.
My natural mind is the unborn Machik Labdron.
This itself, left uncontrived is Dharmakaya.
I am joyful because I have found Dharmakaya within myself.
All these appearances are unreal because they are empty;
Indistinguishable, like a dream that I dream.⁶*

As we see, when we are fully committed to this practice, we make a concerted effort to regard ourselves as no different than Machig Labdron. We hold a certain divine-pride or pure-view in which we represent a continuity of the expression of nondual liberated mind, free from all of the conceptual elaborations that bring about the various sufferings caused by the ways that we misapprehend the nature of our identities and that of the world around us. When we are able to arise like this, we arise unimpeded, uncontrived, fresh, and able to radically accept whatever arises without the need to craft endless narratives. In this regard, we practice from a place of dedicated, direct

authenticity and agency. We bring that which arises in our relationship to the world around us to our practice, and we do not back down.

This example demonstrates how a relationship with the tantric commitments associated with the practice of chöd arises to create a sense of immediate power and realization in the moment. This particular samaya activity is similar to what we examined in the long-life prayer for Pathing Rinpoche, but because this is a tantric practice, this description of the activity to be maintained has much more specificity around how to visualize Machig Labdron at the crown of one's head, Padampa Sangye in the throat center, the different deities associated with the practice in the heart center, the activity dakini in the navel center, and so on.

As practitioners, we then learn to visualize ourselves as Machig Labdron in an activity that is essentially one of tremendous freedom; we have no concern or conscience or fear, we have no attachment, no anger, no happiness, no sorrow. This is a form of tantric manifestation of the limitlessness of the mahamudra view. I have included this activity command here to show just how specific the activity can be. Even though it is specific, it's very wide-ranging, and while we are practicing, it allows us to unlock the way we experience mind-essence and liberation through every kind of activity we encounter through body, speech, mind, essence, and so on.

Next, we will look at a presentation through which we can explore maintaining samaya around practicing with the various ways that our being intersects with ethics and morality. We will do this by looking at a Vajrasattva meditation composed by Tsunma Zangmo in 1989 (I believe) while she was in retreat. This is taken from her personal retreat journal:



Tsunma Dechen Zangmo seated in her shrine room in Gangtok, Sikkim. This photo was taken at some point in the second half of 1997. She died on December 24, 1997, which was both Dakini Day and the anniversary of the parinirvana (death) of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug lineage. Tsunma Zangmo spent a great deal of time practicing in this room. It is also where she spent time teaching the author. Photo courtesy of Dekila Chungyalpa.

Vajrasattva Meditation

[The basis] of purification: to cleanse and clear away from the mental continuum the defilements that pervade it in fine ways. For a sentient being it may simply be an act to do away with the gross stains of anger, hatred, killing, etc. The root lama is the vajrasattva, and recalling the unwholesome deeds of body, mind and speech, a being regrets deeply and vows never to do it again and purifies the defiled ground with the flow of amrita.

For a warrior this purification is the basis to reach the mind of clear light.

The five grounds of purification automatically lead to the realization of “the mode of existence,” thus repeatedly recollecting the mode of existence and repeatedly manifesting the ground “as it is.”

Firstly, the body as a very gross ground of self-grasping; ego-grasping is purified. As the amrita falls on one’s head, one relinquished the physical ego-identity since physically, the body is not an “I”—a warrior knows that the body is only the sense of the deluded “I” arising out of “dependent arising.” One having resided in such houses through many rebirths.

Secondly, in the throat center, the center of feelings is purified. Feelings: anger, love, hate, pride, jealousy, pain all ranges of feelings are what constantly arises as signals to remind the sense of “I”—these are the symbols of being an inherently existent “I.” A sentient being actually identifies himself or other selves as a proud person, angry being, sad person, happy jolly person, etc. However, in truth feelings are only ephemeral arisings, appearing and disappearing like wisps of clouds in the clear sky. One feeling follows another; some strong, some weak, arising and passing in the mind like clouds, blooming changing reshaping disappearing in the sky. It is not inherently existent and as the amrita flows to the

throat chakra one relinquishes the aggregate of feelings as inherently existent “I.”

One next moves to [the] heart center—the chakra of discrimination—the apparently logical ground which gives rise, seemingly, to feelings. A being, if made into parts would mostly be made of discrimination—the active mind ceaselessly discriminating as an “I” and “mine” and other, and like and dislike and good at all moral codes, social codes [and] private codes fall in it. As soon as an object is contacted by one of the five senses discrimination comes to play, giving rise to feelings and [a] strong sense of “I.” Example, many high-ranking monks, as soon as they see a nun would have the discriminating thought that nuns are low on the dharma ladder, and would have corresponding feelings of superiority: thus, becoming an inherently existent male and monk.

These discriminations are what make our present karma: the very “I” that one cherishes is composed of the codes that he believes in, that give rise to personality; a being with personal history, and he carries his history around with him as the photograph of “I” as though it were merely an aggregate of passing judgments and corresponding feelings he makes his personal story—weaving bits and pieces of various colored threads into a tapestry called “Me.” Living happy, miserable, good, unwholesome life, clinging to an “I” that was never there.

One now reaches the navel center, the subtle chakra that is actually the basis of the ego-grasping. The feelings, discrimination arise out of these—the chakra, wheel, of volition or memory, or instinct. This is the taker of all rebirths. A being who performed many acts of cruelty would automatically have the inclination to do so no matter where he was born. Based on this he would live a particular kind of life, making a particular kind of personal history, etc.

For example, one who is under the delusion of being an inherently existent “I” and describes himself as a kind, pious, responsible man, although he also has occasional anger and other feelings—

would so strongly grasp at this “I” that when he dies, his delusion would carry on as the “I” trying to give itself the self-expression in form body. So on, being born he would find that he is a kind, pious man, etc. having already the negative mold (from previous lives) that caused him to appear [in] the positive (present life) etc.

All aggregates of feelings and discriminations that one superficially calls “I” (for example a good lady says “I am not clever with words—I am not able to express what I mean—” may actually feel good to be thus—thinking that this is being gentle and sweet and needing protection—thus the strong romantic ideal of “I” is clung to) has its basis in the inherently existent “I” that one habitually clings to.

Volition/predisposition are what we tag the “I” on to and based on this the day to day drama of “I” and self-history is acted out.

Were one to look closely, one would find that the predisposition, for example, to romantic notions of “I” are only romantic notions, not the “I.” This tree cannot be felled once—because it is a tree of many lives’ accumulation. Each time one facet of predisposition or habitual tendency to self-grasping arises one destroys it and finds it raising its head again—because, as the name points out, these are habitual tendencies. One may abandon gross obscurations like anger, hatred, attachment to pleasures, comforts once, but even a monk who has lived ascetically would still face these habitual tendencies that instantly sprouts as self-grasping many, many times.

Here one needs to constantly meditate on compassion: generating deep understanding of how beings transmigrate from life to life hugging the spokes of the wheel of samsara so closely and painfully, and how hard it is to abandon the gross afflictions leave alone these subtle afflictions and generate deep desire to release them from the wheel of samsara. The only way to combat and destroy these subtle traces of deluded rebirth is by replacing the “I” with bodhicitta/compassion.

Tsunma Zangmo's use of this Vajrasattva meditation helps delineate and explain the nature of what I think we could characterize as *ultimate samaya*—bringing all of dharma practice and this idea of taking full responsibility, maintaining a sense of accountability for not only our practice, but the way that we arise in the world and the degree to which we are able to remain responsible and work toward the alleviation of suffering of others.

In this portion of the meditation, she describes that the five grounds of purification lead to realizing a mode of existence, which is this way of manifesting the ground—basically demonstrating what authentic, liberated being looks like. It begins with the purification of ego-grasping by visualizing nondual blissful nectar—*amrita*—flowing down onto your head and relinquishing this sense of ego identity that is rooted in physicality. This is the first place with which this process of purification arises, right at the crown of the head.

As it descends, it descends to the throat center, which purifies feelings of anger, love, hate, pride, jealousy—the entire range of emotions that arise—and this connects deeply to this sense of identity around being a particular kind of person and occupying a personal narrative through which we have convinced ourselves that all this is real. Generally, this is expressed in our relationship to emotions that are arising and around whether or not we can accept what is arising, or whether we need to reject or transform what is happening and how it's happening. This moves down farther into the heart chakra and seeks to purify logic and discrimination—the sense of discernment, the whole process of discerning difference between ourselves and others.

What I want to focus on here is what she describes as moral, social, and private codes in relation to the idea of independently existing selfhood. This meditation has proven to be most powerful for me because Tsunma Zangmo is able to bring these ideas of codes into engaged practice. Like with a Venn diagram, she demonstrates an intersectionality that can be traveled through. For example, the intersectionality between the moral codes of a faith tradition and shared social codes that represent the values of the group, which can be further expanded to include the codes of our society or culture, become places to practice.

Moral codes are complicated. The larger reasons for why any group of humans defines the moral stance that it does can be varied. Within any given group such rules, or laws, or however we call them, are not necessarily equally shared. This being the case, let's say that the moral codes of which I speak represent the faith or philosophic point of departure of the individual. Social codes represent the ethos and codes of the culture itself—however that might appear within the broad rubric of any culture, North American, South American, North African, and so on. Private codes fall into the intersection between our private relationship to ethics, faith, spirituality, religion, family systems, and even aesthetics. All of the different ways that we, as unique individuals, relate to the world and then express our relationship to it—either our varying degrees of commitment to aspects of the world or, in other cases, our rejection of aspects of our culture or the group codes around our faith tradition and so forth—is brought onto the path when we approach meditation in this way.

I find it very radical that Tsunma Zangmo uses this intersection in practice. To me, this is where her meditation powerfully demonstrates what samaya is. As we go through dharma practice, we're not just looking at this idea of personal transformation, but through this meditation, we're looking at personal transformation in a way that is coemergent with a sense of taking responsibility for ourselves in relation to group, to culture, and to faith tradition, which necessitates a mature spiritual practice on our part.

When I am engaged in dharma practice, I find an inherent political position being created in the way the moral codes of my faith tradition, the social codes of my culture, and my own personal, private codes intersect. I think this is a powerful and modern read on the vital energy of the samaya code associated with Machig Labdron, who we discussed earlier.

So although we may consider confronting certain social problems—like racism, sexism, gender inequality, patriarchy, discrimination against people due to sexual orientation or preferred identity, and whiteness and white supremacy—when we aren't actively addressing these and bringing them into our dharma practice, the intersection of our practice and these ethical blocks is not being liberated. When we limit our practice in this way, we're not fully embracing and making use of the entire range of the world systems in which we are participating, even if that participation is rooted in disrupting suffering.

Take whiteness, for example. Part of my spiritual practice involves trying to maintain awareness of the effect of whiteness on the dharma circles with which I interact and am part of. I try to remain vigilant of all the ways that I profit from being white.

I am also trying to remain aware of all of the ways in which I benefit from being male or a white male in our patriarchal culture. This helps me tune in to the reality behind the narrative presented to me about myself. This is important precisely because it relates to our ideas about the personal narratives to which we have become very attached. We tend to, very consciously, construct a specific kind of narrative, and, at the same time, remain unconscious of other aspects of this ego identity. We create this identity through our intentional, discursive, conceptual thought, but also, in some cases, it is projected onto us by others. Bringing the complexity of this layer of interdependence into the realm of dharma practice is very revolutionary.

Within the context of the Vajrayana tradition in general, I feel this kind of practice is not being done enough, so the way that Tsunma Zangmo presents this brings me a sense of excitement and gratitude. It is vital that we look at how we can bring our relationship with moral, social, and private codes into our experience of practicing dharma. Tsunma Zangmo, in the text quoted earlier, describes this by saying,

As soon as an object is contacted by one of the five senses, discrimination comes into play, giving rise to feelings and a strong sense of “I.” For example, many high-ranking monks as soon as they see a nun, would have the discriminating thought that nuns are low on the Dharma ladder and would have corresponding feelings of superiority, thus becoming inherently existent male and monk.

This highlights how important it is for us to take some time within our spiritual practice to really examine our entire identity, both those aspects of it that are self-propagated and those that we don’t want to be involved in recognizing because others force them onto us. This becomes a much larger problem when we either deny or are not conscious of our relationship to our identity. And of course, this then translates into these larger ideas about our karma. When Tsunma Zangmo says, “The very eye that one cherishes is composed of the codes that he believes in,” that gives rise to personality and

a personal history that we carry around with us as if it is a photograph of ourselves.

This leads to what Tsunma Zangmo describes as the various colored threads that create this tapestry of how we appear. What is the difference between the various threads that arise for a white male or a person of color who's female? How do those threads that construct that identity, that sense of self, that sense of karmic propensity, come together? To what degree do we regard them as inherently real? How much power do we give them? If we extend this even further, can we take responsibility for creating some of these interdependent narratives so they are more desirable than or privileged over others? Bringing all of this into meditation is tremendously valuable. Ultimately, I believe that if we don't do this, it is hard to know whether our practice is really authentic and if it allows us to be simultaneously connected to the world around us and more directly connected to the experience of others.

As the meditation instruction continues, the purifying light from Vajrasattva reaches the navel center, the subtle chakra, and we begin to purify the basis of ego-grasping. The feelings and discriminations that arise out of ego-grasping—memory and instinct, the very subtle mind, that which journeys as a constant thread from one existence to another, sometimes called vajra-mind—this is what is being purified at this point. The sense of a relatively constant thread throughout the process of being reborn (reincarnation) is what is being purified now.

When we bring purification into our practice on this level, we purify both the potential to have a particular kind of life in the future and the very idea of personal history. Tsunma Zangmo brings all aggregates, feelings, and discriminations around that which is superficially called “I” into practice. The constant narrative thread that tells us “I’m smart, I’m artistic, I’m not that smart, I’m a good reader, I’m a good runner, I’m a good jumper, I’m fast on the uptake, I’m a little slow,” all of this, all of these aspects of self-oriented identity that we habitually cling to are what we use our dharma practice to purify.

When we have active unconscious assumptions or projections about others, whether they are sexist, or white supremacist, or ageist, or any kind, we need to examine and interrogate them and bring them into our practice.

We can't do this if we can't admit that they are there, however. We can't say that these are issues for us if we're going to deny their existence or impact.

In the Tantric Buddhist tradition, we use everything. Part of doing so is using these aspects of our personal narrative and ego identity that we don't want to engage with any longer. We engage with the things that cause separation between ourselves and others, or things that cause suffering for ourselves and others. The idea of taking responsibility for ourselves, our practice, and our own empowerment in relation to Buddha-nature and in relation to the power of dharma ought to be regarded as a central part of our practice. This is ecological practice in the sense that engaged tantric practice wastes nothing, especially our shadows, which become an important part of practice.

Tsunma Zangmo's meditation ends with how important maintaining compassion is; she described doing so as "generating deep understanding of how beings transmigrate from life to life, hugging the spokes of the wheel of samsara so closely and painfully." This is well demonstrated by the fact that even in the midst of our dharma practice, it's very easy to get wrapped up in having too close a view of what's actually going on and not being able to adopt a view of spaciousness. In this context, spaciousness can be represented by a perspective that's connected to the view of mahamudra or a more general kind of balcony-view panorama where we're able to see the larger range of experience and habitual tendencies by which we easily become consumed. Such an open perspective makes it possible to cultivate a compassionate awareness that can encompass the endless combinations of patterning. Such combinations of patterned thought and projection make certain habitual tendencies much more automatic, or in some cases, much more attractive, thereby making them places in which we get stuck and deluded.

This instruction ends with the reminder that the only way to combat and destroy these subtle traces of deluded rebirth is by replacing the "I" with the cultivation of the mind of awakening, *bodhicitta*. As this entire visualization ends, we become an enlightened Buddha. We consciously turn away from our habits that had us occupying a self-existing, samsaric mode of being that was both independent and in conflict with everybody and everything around us. This brings us right back to the centrality of the Buddhist tantric ethos with regard to samaya and how we conduct ourselves. It is vitally important to

take full responsibility for ourselves and our practice, which includes taking responsibility for our body, speech, mind, and other aspects of the way we experience the world and manifest within the world that didn't exist in medieval India or before—that is, on social media and in more public platforms. These days, it is very easy to cause harm in ways that we don't necessarily recognize because we're so wrapped up in our virtual personal narratives.

Secret Speech

Chöd/Charnel Grounds

Whether I'm traveling or at home in New York City, I make it a point to practice meditation in cemeteries. One of the most beautiful places to do this is Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. Since its creation in 1860, it has attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors. This monumental 478-acre cemetery is home to 560,000 graves, including those of Leonard Bernstein, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Louis Comfort Tiffany, Boss Tweed, and many other illustrious artists, politicians, and inventors. It's also an amazing place to practice chöd and to be with death.

Over the years, our culture has very effectively averted its eyes from death. We love to avoid the topics of death, illness, and old age. Perhaps this is convenient because it allows us to feel ever young and invincible. However, a visit to Green-Wood (or any cemetery) helps shake loose the taboo nature that death occupies, effectively reeling it in from the periphery of our experience of daily life. On a recent trip to Green-Wood with my wife and sons, we meandered through the beautiful grounds, observing the memorialized names of those who are no more. The comparatively young age at which many of Green-Wood's residents passed away—at least a third of the graves we saw that day were those of young children or young women who died in childbirth—is particularly striking. As one would expect, a wide variety of ages and cultural backgrounds are represented, further demonstrating, with basic simplicity, the fact that death does not discriminate.

It is easy to accidentally gloss over recognizing impermanence, which the Buddha came to recognize so early in his spiritual quest. Realizing that all beings are subject to birth, sickness, old age, and death serves as the core spiritual foundation upon which the rest of Buddhism, in all of its forms, is based. Perhaps, over time, this can feel a little stale. It is easy to forget about death when we hide it away so well. Just as was true when the Buddha was still Prince Siddhartha, we as humans remain adept at running away from

sickness, hiding old age, and trying to bargain to keep death away from our immediate view. In a sense, death, and even illness for that matter, has become somewhat abstracted, and aging is something that we are told by various forms of media to avoid for as long as possible. Talk about suffering! Nevertheless, we are born, we will experience illness, most of us will experience old age, and all of us will experience death—there's no real hiding this fact. However, joy is to be had, and we can find this joy when we come to terms with the fact that these profound events affect everyone, that we are all linked together by these similar existential events, and that there is a certain beauty in knowing that not only are we not alone, but we are surrounded by countless other beings who share similar existential circumstances.

On one occasion a number of years ago, I went to Green-Wood to practice chöd because I had the day off and doing so felt like a personally meaningful way through which I could resolve a certain anxiety that I felt regarding my upcoming clinical placement at New York Presbyterian Weill Cornell as a chaplain-intern. It was a new beginning for me—one that I wanted to approach in a thoughtful and centered manner.

Chöd is a form of meditation practice that was developed by Machig Labdron, a female Tibetan Buddhist master who lived in twelfth-century Tibet. As a child, she was precocious and grew up to become an accomplished yogini who, in formulating the meditation practice known as chöd, yoked Prajnaparamita literature with elements of Tantric Buddhism into a system of meditation that developed the unique reputation as the only dharma that was formulated in Tibet and then, according to legend, spread southward into India. As the inspiration behind the synthesis of chöd lies within both the Mahayana tradition (through the Prajnaparamita Sutra, or the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra) and aspects of Vajrayana (Tantric Buddhist practice, including the practices of Vajravarahi, Tara, Palden Lhamo, Manjusri, and Chakrasamvara), it is a very well-balanced and multifaceted practice. Indeed, you can approach chöd as a complete path. It is a highly ritualized practice, most notably known for its use of a large damaru drum, a horn made from a human femur (called a *kyangling* in Tibetan), and a bell (called a *drilbu* in Tibetan). It is also a musical practice with a number of different melodies to which the practice is sung.

Traditionally chöd was practiced in charnel grounds and other fear-inducing sites. Such sites were common in India and Tibet, as many mountain passes, crossroads, trees, and other sites were thought to be inhabited by malevolent spirit beings. Charnel grounds in particular were regarded as frightful not only because one commonly found bodies in various states of decay and decomposition, but also because wild scavenging animals were easily found feasting on human remains. They are excellent places to face your fears. In fact, it is said that the Buddha instructed many of his students to go to charnel grounds in order to contemplate impermanence amidst the decaying bodies of other humans.

Needless to say, such places aren't really easy to find in twenty-first-century America—so one has to be creative. During a conversation I had with Lama Tsering Wangdu Rinpoche one evening in a taxi while I was escorting him to the dharma center where he was going to be teaching, he lamented that the cemeteries in the US weren't the same as the chöd sites were in Asia. Indeed, this is something that I had noticed when I visited active charnel grounds in Sikkim. That being said, I feel that, in the West, our charnel grounds are different. They might not be actual charnel grounds, but rather they are places that illicit fear and anxiety. They might be sites that are home to hardship and suffering, or sites associated with violence and intolerance. These we have plenty of, and these are excellent places to bring to our practice.

In this section of the book, I share some of my experiences exploring various American charnel grounds where the practice of chöd has proven powerful. In these, we can explore aspects of sacred geography and the intersection between location, faith, and tantric practice.

Some of the beauty of Green-Wood is because many of the grave markers are themselves quite old. Marble doesn't hold up to the elements as well as granite and other masonry material—it is soft, and as it ages, it slowly wastes away, leaving eerie images behind. Some marble grave markers become hard to read, thereby reinforcing the point that this is a place where people are left with very few to continue to witness the fact that they were ever here. Even the stone memorial markers are subject to impermanence.

One of the central features of chöd is the practice of visualizing chopping ourselves into pieces that then form an offering. We slice off our skin and

chop up our body, remove our organs, cut out our eyes, perhaps smash our skull, and allow our marrow to slowly flow. In varying configurations, we present this mandala offering to all of the Buddhas, our lineage masters, dakinis, and the wisdom protectors; to our own personal demons that represent our fears, our attachments, our insecurities; and to local gods, demons, and spirits, as they, too, need care. In essence, we offer every aspect of the matrix of our being to all other beings we can conceive of; what remains is liberated Buddha-essence: nonreferential and timeless. This is a way of dramatically looking at where and what the “me” that we constantly tend to self-identify with actually is. It’s also a way to face the attachment that we all-too-naturally tend to develop toward our bodies, our personalities, and the other ways in which we self-identify as independently existing entities.

What struck me, after I made a certain ruckus in the cemetery with my damaru, bell, and kyangling, as any good chödpa is willing to do, is that just sitting in a state of open reflection on the impermanence of life while at Green-Wood is particularly profound. It becomes evident that we need not only do chöd to necessarily feel the supportive reminder of how fragile and relatively short this life of ours may be. Open, relaxed awareness practices also lead to an experience of unbridled simplicity. Contemplating impermanence and the Four Noble Truths in cemeteries is a wonderful way to find freshness in the joyously simple truths-by-extension that flow effortlessly from such meditations. I have done this throughout India, parts of Nepal, Bhutan, places in Europe, and most cities and towns in the US that I have visited. We need more cemetery practice—more engagement with death and less time spent in fancy dharma centers. Many places we tend to avoid or simply gloss over occupy great seats of power as places through which we can challenge and confront those things that we find inconvenient.

It feels important to make the time to engage in such practices. It seems even more important to find powerful places to do practice that cuts deep—especially into our fear, anxiety, and sense of being good. The beautiful thing is that such powerful places exist right beneath our noses—we have countless locations of fear that aren’t cemeteries.

Another great example of a place to bring into our practice is the Gowanus Canal, the relatively recently designated superfund site that divides Carrol Gardens from Park Slope in Brooklyn. This toxic body of water is an artery

of death and decay that used to be as close to my home as it is to my heart. As a legendary repository of dead bodies (the detritus of organized crime), flood waste from higher elevations in Brooklyn, and just about every kind of heavy manufacture imaginable, the Gowanus Canal seems a ghostlike symbol of where we put things that we want to forget.

On one occasion before I packed my bags with the things I needed for the practice, I spent some time contemplating the Gowanus as a symbol. It is a body of water—a canal, specifically—that is connected to the larger harbor by Buttermilk Channel. The water in the canal stagnates as a result of a broken ventilation pump system at its far end. It is a remnant of the larger heavy industry that once existed in this part of Brooklyn, and it received all of the shipments of brownstone from up the Hudson that made most of Park Slope's beautiful brownstones. The canal also became a dumping ground; you can commonly find all sorts of things floating in the water that, at times, resembles muddy antifreeze. It is a miraculous canal as well; several summers ago, I came to notice that dozens of red jellyfish made the canal their home.

During one of the meditation sessions that I performed there, I felt the need to offer myself to the inner demon who most represents the Gowanus Canal. In fact, I specifically tried to make this session an offering to the local gods associated with this area. I imagine that the god-demon of this particular place is one of the lords of places that are ignored; places where we leave or even dump things that we no longer want; places of stagnation, where oxygen is literally consumed by the waste that we store; places full of things we don't want, yet are unable to fully let go of—a ghostly world of secrets. For me, the god-demon of the Gowanus Canal is the lord of inner wastelands.

The wonderful thing about chöd is the way in which we can access, face, and pacify all of our internal demons. It is very powerful if you choose to try to *really* look for these painful and frightening demons. It is also possible to do the practice while not looking particularly hard; then, while you may make nice sounds with your bell and damaru, not much else happens.

The term *demon* is mostly taken to represent an internal neurosis or emotional focal point that distracts us and provides us with an ability to obsess in a way that makes direct experience of the mind very difficult. These demons, while self-creations, can feel so real that they tend to

paralyze and create huge amounts of suffering; indeed, they can be considered the agents of samsara. They exert great power upon us in the form of fear, jealousy, hatred, pride, and in this case, secret internal toxicity. Part of the practice of chöd involves making a mandala offering of one's body:

The skin becomes the golden earth; the fingernails, the surrounding mountains, the head, Mount Meru, adorned with the two eyes, the sun and the moon; the four limbs, the four continents; etc. This perfect and complete body mandala I offer to the assembly of the lamas, yidams and dakinis. Please accept and grant your blessings.¹

The more realistic the visualization, the better—we are, after all, butchering this prized body of ours, ornamented with the pearls of ego fixation, self-nature, and pride. But after the reluctance, and after the discomfort, what is there? What remains? In offering freely to the assembly of not just the lamas, yidams, and dakinis, but also the god-demons who terrify us most so that they may benefit, so that they may turn their minds to the dharma and become Buddhas in their own right, we have a chance to experience our original nature. This is a way of experiencing the perfection of wisdom.

So how do we touch the inner demon of stagnation? Where is the place within us where we dump things that we don't want, the place that holds our secrets, our inner wasteland? This place exists. It is in all of us. Like a black pearl made from an initial irritant that has grown many protective layers meant to distract and soothe the oyster that is its container, how can we bring this to light? These fears are, in reality, great strengths—they are pearls....

In that moment, on the banks of the green, bubbling, deathly still Gowanus Canal, I found myself inhabiting the precious mandala of a modern charnel ground surrounded by condom wrappers, dead rats, crushed beer cans, and other things left behind. Although at first glance this place may appear different from the charnel grounds of old—places where bodies were burnt or left to decay, places frequented by wild animals, places that elicited fear—upon looking a little closer, this place is no different. It is a place where illicit things are done, where illicit things have been done—it is a dangerous place. It is a place of fear. The canal is off the radar. Once a place of great

beauty, it is now easily overlooked, as if we don't want to have any personal relationship with it.

I am certain the Gowanus Canal is one of the eight great charnel grounds of India reflected in our daily lives in the New York City area. As we will explore in the section on mind, interaction with internal and external geography as it relates to the practice of Buddhist tantra is an important way of relating to activity and to place. In this way, despite our automatic assumptions, the Gowanus Canal occupies a place internally that can offer real growth and healing. What does it feel like to make an offering, and thereby appreciate the parts of us that we have very willingly forgotten, the parts of us that are stagnant?

As I performed the chöd sadhana, made sang offerings (smoke offerings) to the beings that live in the canal and all the beings that the canal represents, and while I hung prayer flags, I found myself recalling all that I had tried to hide, the parts of me that lay stagnant in internal dumping grounds, my own inner pollution. I also recalled people I have met as a chaplain, for whom these dynamics are in play, and I prayed that we could all, every sentient being, bring openness and healing and offerings to the inner demons that preside over this type of activity. May they be satisfied. May this offering pacify them. There is a line at the end of the sadhana that speaks to chaplaining these demons:

*I dedicate to the benefit of all sentient beings in the three worlds whatever roots of virtue I have gathered in the three times: the root virtue of giving my body as an offering; the root virtue of holding the gods and demons in my bodhicitta [i.e., enlightened motivation], and whatever root virtues I have gathered during the three times. Therefore, by depending upon the power of this dedication, may troublesome gods, demons etc., and the mind stream of sentient beings of the three worlds, being cleansed of all karma, afflictions, and defilements, wholly complete the six perfections.*²

With this kind of compassion in mind, the root of our own inner chaplaincy, may we know our inner demons and plant the seeds of Buddhahood in our own inner wastelands so that they become pure lands.

As part of my work to directly engage place/location in relation to Tantric Buddhist practice, especially chöd sites in New York City, I came across

another unique place—a site with a long, varied history as a slave burial ground, the site of the legendary street battles of the late nineteenth-century gang, the Bowery Boys, a crossroads for the homeless, and now the site of recent gentrification and the boutique galleries, nightclubs, and restaurants that follow. Unknown to many, the very earth that supports Bowery Mission, the Salvation Army, the famous/infamous now-closed Sunshine Hotel, and a variety of other fading SROs (single-room-occupancy buildings) and temporary housing for the homeless once held the remains of hundreds of slaves. Indeed, during the excavation for the foundation of the New Museum, the remains of a number of these forgotten people, nameless and homeless, were unearthed. This area is memorialized by the M'Finda Kalunga Community Garden in Sara D. Roosevelt Park, which has been built on the eastern portion of the former burial ground.

Having learned about the complex past of this location and having grown up not too far away with strange dreamlike memories of walking through the Lower East Side in the summer at night with my parents in the early 1980s, this area holds a special power for me. This is especially the case with all of the intense gentrification that is now removing the visual remnants of the powerful history embedded in the very concrete, asphalt, and soil of this place. I practiced chöd here for a while with the specific goal of dedicating the offering of my body to all of the local spirits and protectors of these specific four square blocks. Anyone who has spent any time on Rivington or Stanton Street between the Bowery and Forsyth Street can attest to the intensity of the place. People in various states of suffering wander this area; they struggle with mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction, homelessness, domestic abuse, and many other lingering problems. In a way, and not a way meant to minimize, these people resemble zombies; they are here, but they are living in another world, possessed by intense experiences that may keep them somewhere between the everyday world and one of pain and terror. What's worse, many such people who suffer from the varieties of addictions and other problems are invisible to most who walk by them; they are disregarded and ignored, their suffering is easily explained away or rationalized by sophisticated social theories that diminish and abstract their pain, their suffering, and their deep-rooted desire to escape the pain they feel.

It appears to be no random accident that these few square blocks have been so intense, home to so much destitution and violence (inner, outer, and secret), and that this area was also once a slave burial ground. It makes sense. It's easy for me to feel open to the anger and rage, the numbness and depression, and the chaotic reaction that qualitatively seem to remain in this area; it feels powerful, and it feels very interwoven with the very brick and mortar, the cast iron and wood, and the glass and tar that make up all of the structures that have been constructed over this site.

When I visualized the local gods and demons that approach the offerings that I was to make—enemies hostile to us, obstructing spirits who harm, demons who create disruptive conditions, the Mara of the Lord of Death, and demons of the body—I summoned my own inner demons of anger and rage, of numbness and depression, and especially those of chaotic reactivity. I summoned all of the feelings of what it means to be endlessly disrespected, tortured, enslaved, made fun of, spit on, beaten, and then ignored, disregarded, and even abstracted. I summoned my drunkenness, my addictions, my hustling, and all the ways I lie to myself and everyone around me to get what I need. In my mind's eye, I visualized these demons and their attendant entourage rising above me, finally heard and seen, bringing the raw reality of what this place means, as well as its present constellation of past and present occurrences, their interaction, and the momentum that has been created here.

As I sounded the kyangling, I invited these ghosts ... it felt as if they were truly there.

This burial ground came into use after the one near city hall was closed in the late 1700s. That burial ground was rediscovered in 1991 during an excavation of a site that was going to be used for a federal government office building; human remains were unearthed, and a larger study was done. All construction was halted, and the site was designated a national landmark known as the African Burial Ground. I remember reading an article about some of what was found. Much of it included bodies that were too long for the coffins in which they were buried. Those bodies had their legs broken so that they would fit into more conveniently sized coffins. In a very real way, an act like this, a heinous, final injustice, seems like it would easily anger the consciousness of anyone who had recently died. Indeed, in most Buddhist traditions, it is suggested that if possible, the body of someone who has just

died be left undisturbed for three days. Imagine what it would feel like if some people were to come and break your legs to fit you into a cheaper box? It seems like a final indignity; other than being completely forgotten, which is what happened subsequently. Perhaps the trajectory of such a hard life, the habitual mistreatment and pain, the complete disrespect and deliberate torture, can remain a psychophysical ruin and a crumbling landmark that can be felt by those a century later?

A few years ago, a Tibetan monk friend of mine told me of a place near where he was raised where a family was brutally murdered. That exact location, he told me, became a place where misfortune befell many other people. It became a place to avoid, a place to fear, a place of dread. Needless to say, he never went there; but when you are performing chöd, places like these are great to visit. Places of fear and horror are ideal places in which to make offerings to the beings who reside there. It's a way to touch those same beings within us.

There are many stories of chödpa who are able to completely pacify the local gods or demons who live in such sites. Perhaps this can only be done by pacifying those same demons within ourselves, within the same psychophysical matrix of our being. It may be that the only way that we can pacify these demons, especially the ones encountered on Rivington and Stanton Street, is through knowing our own urine-soaked alleys of destitution, our sense of deep emotional pain, of addiction and neglect, of how it feels to be belittled and ignored, beaten and left behind, to be an insignificant ghost of anonymity. Perhaps it is only by making offerings of compassion and joy to these haggard aspects of ourselves, by witnessing and honoring them, and by allowing them to come to the ganachakra of pure appearance that we can bathe them, clothe them, and see that they are no different from any other aspect of the misapprehended notions of who we are. With that in mind, I would like to share a version of the Bodhisattva Vow from a journal of teachings I received from Bokar Rinpoche and Khenpo Lodrö Donyo in Salugara, India, in 1998:

Until full awakening, I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the supreme assembly. To accomplish completely the benefit for myself and others, I give rise to the mind of awakening. Once this supreme bodhicitta has arisen, I invite all beings to be my guests. I will engage in the pleasing and supreme conduct of a bodhisattva. To benefit all

living beings, may I attain awakening. Just as the protectors of the three times gave rise to unsurpassable bodhicitta, which surely brings about perfect awakening, I will generate genuine bodhicitta. All that is generated I will remember. All that is remembered, I will make vast.

On another occasion, I decided to spend the early portion of a Saturday doing chöd under the Pulaski Bridge that connects Brooklyn and Queens (connecting Kings County and Queens County) and crosses the infamous Newtown Creek. Newtown Creek, for those who are unaware, has the dubious distinction of being one of the most polluted waterways in the United States and it is the site of the second worst oil spill in America; an estimated 30 million gallons of oil flowed into the creek in the 1950s—none of it has been removed. As a result of that oil spill, a century of raw sewage being dumped into the waterway, and various jettisoned unwanted byproducts of heavy industry—such as sulfuric acid, fertilizer, and other chemical admixtures—a layer of highly toxic sludge fifteen feet thick blankets the floor of Newtown Creek.

I made the decision to head to the Pulaski Bridge and Newtown Creek based on three distinct criteria: there had to be a bridge, the place had to have some equivalence to a charnel ground, and it had to invoke fear/discomfort.

One of the benefits of engaging fear, discomfort, and/or sheer terror through the practice of chöd is that we learn how to engage with the intersection of physical place, trauma, habitual reactions, projection, and the latent energy that exists within such locations. We seek to directly engage our own internal demons connected to the trauma of place. Of course, the traditional Tibetan description of such places—mainly charnel grounds and haunted locales—reflects a nod to classical Indian Buddhist tantric references. In our case, living in this moment in the West, we should feel empowered to personalize and reimagine what a contemporary charnel ground might look like. The American Zen teacher Roshi Bernie Glassman did great work with developing Bearing Witness Retreats at Auschwitz. These touch on practicing with the latent pain, sadness, horror, and silence that remain constellated in such locations. One of the ways that I contextualize my work on Rikers Island is around having the privilege to be

deeply rooted within a modern American charnel ground. Such places surround us, and yet we tend to drive or walk by them, interacting with them in a way that lacks a direct path of deep, open, honest observation. Often, we fail to interact with them at all.

As I caught myself feeling slight dread in practicing under the Pulaski Bridge among the oil deposits and industrial traffic that pulsates along the dead creek, I realized that this was a great place to go practice. What better way to be curious about why I should feel discomfort in practicing there? What is the difference between practicing there and at home, or in a park, or even a cemetery?

That the site should have a bridge reflected a larger curiosity that I developed a few days earlier about bridges and trolls. One afternoon, walking in Prospect Park, I found myself reflecting upon the symbolic meanings of bridges and, with the effects of a recent retreat still fresh in my mind, I found myself under a bridge. For the first time in many years, I reflected on trolls often being associated with the space under bridges. They live there and hide under the crossroads-like environment that we commonly find under bridges. Somehow this space elicits discomfort—such spaces seem secret, hidden, perhaps the place where illicit things happen. I wanted to explore this in chöd practice.

I packed my kyangling and damaru, my pecha and bell and dorje, and brought along a bumpa vase with water blessed with many sacred substances, including special pills made by the late Kyabje Pathing Rinpoche for the express purpose of dispelling demons and inner hindrances. In addition to performing chöd, I wanted to offer these substances to Newtown Creek. With my bag packed, I headed to this industrial charnel ground, the site of an alchemical bridge that joins Kings County with Queens County (male and female, salt and sulfur), a bridge that crosses a body of water that, deep under fifteen feet of unknown matter (unconscious mind), may house inner trolls and local gods. Kye Ho!

Upon finding a suitable place for my practice, I considered how the place made me feel. What were its trolls going to be like? When I touched my inner trolls what would I find? I remember from childhood the story of “The Three Billy Goats Gruff;” the story of three goats of ascending size who wish to cross a bridge so that they may feast on greener pastures. The only problem

is that they must cross a bridge that is protected/owned—the home of a nasty troll.

Bridges are places of vulnerability. Their structure is meant to carry us from one stable ground to another; in between (a bardo), we are not standing on solid ground. Perhaps when we are experiencing the bardos of change—the invariable transition from one moment to another, one experience or feeling to another—we are vulnerable to being unseated in a more direct and profound manner. These bardos are bridges, and where there are bridges there are trolls.

In Norse mythology, trolls are generally thought to be large, slow, humanlike beings. Trolls are not known for their intellect. They are impulsive, brutish, stubborn, earthy, and grounded. In a way, trolls seem to personify the weight and anchoring qualities of the earth element, but in a self-defensive, perhaps self-protective, manner or function. Indeed, this slow conservatism, this heavy reactive stubbornness that trolls are known for seems to be made up of the prime emotions *in opposition* to the easy experience of transitioning across bardos, across our bridges from one moment to the next. Trolls want to hold on. They try to exert the magnetism of discursiveness, the force of myopic focus, that prevents us from seeing the larger picture. They want us off the bridge; they try to prevent us from making the transition; they will even try to kill us to this end.

In my experience of everyday life, it seems that trolls show their heads very frequently. This appearance presents when we exhibit a stubborn stupidity, a dullness, and a desire to not embrace change. I easily lose count when I try to reflect on how often these trolls try to unseat me.

That Newtown Creek has a fifteen-foot layer of toxic sludge separating it from the “real” earthy bottom seems particularly significant, if not *essentially* symbolic. What stagnation! It is as if Earth herself is being suffocated. Perhaps just as we suffocate ourselves with our inner-demonic-troll-like stubbornness, our hardheaded personification of gravity, our dull stupidity, and our brutish reactivity, this poor creek-cum-canal is being suppressed and held down. Toxicity has many shades, and it’s easy to focus upon its generic staples: fear, anger, jealousy, greed, laziness. But what of toxicity in its more subtle and elusive forms? Toxic masculinity and the

intensely limited gendering and assumptions around gender, power, and role come to mind.

How do we allow ourselves to stagnate? How do we disempower ourselves? How do we allow ourselves to fail, to be imperfect? How do we let our stubborn trolls steal the vitality of our transitions though the bardos at the time of death?

This is what I set upon to discover; I set about unearthing these demons of Newtown Creek—the demons of stagnation and sedate subconsciousness, as well as the army of trolls that seek refuge and feast under the Pulaski Bridge. They are not far, they arise from within us....

In making an offering of myself to these beings, I sought to directly engage with them using clarity and awareness of the much larger process of understanding them as they arise. This was a process of honoring and respecting the natural occurrence of emotions *as* they arose. It lent itself to being both a process of developing a greater awareness of the play of mind and a means of offering deep witness to my unique inner constellations. Such constellations, wondrous displays, are already perfect—they arise with the same natural clarity and depth as the constellations that we see in clear night skies. There is nothing to add or to take away. The brilliance of their simple appearance is suggestive of immense wondrous beauty. There is nothing to subjugate. Perhaps this is chöd-of-mahamudra: the offering of the suchness of our own minds as witness to it as it arises.

I visualized that with my offering the local deities and the demons themselves came with great ferocity, like a howling wind, stealing portions of my torn flesh and warm organs. Those with more time and resources carefully selected prime sections, the liver and heart perhaps. Others set up camps and carefully roasted various portions of the offering, taking time to set up their own feasts. That these demons may be honored, and receive my offering, helps to liberate them—my emotional habits, self-clinging, and the like are allowed to loosen into nonreferential emptiness.

As I was performing the chöd sadhana, on that day and at that location, the portion of the ritual text that focuses upon offering the remains of the central ganachakra felt very salient and meaningful. I try to allow myself to rest in sadhana practice while I am doing it, and in so doing, I realize that, at different moments and for a whole host of possible reasons, the pecha speaks

with powerful clarity in different ways. So many secondary practices exist within each pecha that as our inner weather changes, many differing modalities *of* our practice may be tailored to best suit us at any given moment in time. If we can view the practice text as alive, full of endless vitality, and imbued with the potential for constantly unfolding compassion, then every time we sit down to recite a prayer or a particular sadhana, we are really engaging directly with the text as a vehicle through time and space. Every time we read a pecha, it can be as if we are reading it for the first time.

This is also another great place where trolls arise. They arise in our practice. Our mind can easily become the slow, dense, troll-mind where pechas feel boring and long, always the same, and perhaps even a little dusty. The pecha becomes a thing, a book, a physical text, the warm humid breath of the dakinis; in this case, Machig Labdron herself dissipates. It is lost when we become dull. The full dynamic interpenetration of individuated hermeneutic bliss fades; the electricity of the rich moment dies. The possibility of realizing the *lama as appearance*, to use the wonderful term that the late Bokar Rinpoche often used to describe the mind as lama (everything that appears, in all of its myriad display, is one of our direct teachers: this is the lama as appearance) becomes compromised.

In recognizing this, the offering of the remainder of the ganachakra felt timely, both within myself and within my immediate environment. So, as I sat under the bridge while trucks rumbled down Box Street, I imagined that the slippery flesh of my ignorance, raw and painful, was mixing with a seemingly endless ocean of my own warm, sticky blood, rich in iron: my desire, my rattling bones, still moist and full of rich marrow, my hatred. I mixed these together and offered it in a vast tormo vessel—my own skull. I offered this to the local gods, the local protectors, to the particular trolls that inhabit the Pulaski Bridge, as well as to my own trolls. This ambrosial nectar, the very last remnants of my body, I offered to this particular place; this polluted earth, forgotten and ignored by many who speed by, is the same earth that supported the Buddha. Somewhere underneath that thick, toxic sludge is the same earth that the Buddha touched; similarly, within us is the same Buddha. The ability to recognize the lama as appearance is always part of us.

After the practice session, I brought my bumpa vase—filled with water blessed by His Holiness the seventeenth Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje;

blessing pills associated with Chenrezig, Amitabha, and Dorje Phagmo; and sacred medicinal substances and pills specially made by the late Pathing Rinpoche for averting the disturbances caused by ghosts, demons, and the previously mentioned inner hindrances—up onto the Pulaski Bridge. While reciting a variety of mantras, I poured the amrita into Newtown Creek that there might be joy. May the magic of this place be known! May the power of its local gods be appreciated, and may they, the local gods, the trolls, and the great teachers of stagnation, of dullness, and of forgetfulness never be forgotten!

Perhaps every place is imbued with wonderful symbolic representations—dynamic reminders—of our own strengths and our weaknesses. Whether it is Newtown Creek, the Gowanus Canal, or the African Burial Ground, if we look a little more loosely, the lama as appearance is always present. It offers a constancy of potentially liberating circumstances. The charnel ground of the chödpa is everywhere. I am reminded of something that I once read by the previous Kyabje Kalu Rinpoche. He said that the mind is the essential charnel ground as it is there thoughts come to die.

Perhaps then, we carry all of the eight great charnel grounds of India within our very experience of mind.

In a way related to the experience I had of practicing chöd on the Lower East Side at Sara D. Roosevelt Park, where the M'Finda Kalunga Community Garden memorialized the old slave burial ground upon which the park was built, I had the opportunity to practice chöd in Wilmington, North Carolina, in October 2011, a few days before my wife and I were married there. We chose to spend a week in Wilmington so we could have a few days of relaxation in addition to the stressful days devoted to planning and organizing the wedding. And so I was able to spend a morning practicing chöd on the beach during sunrise. For a Brooklynite, the ability to spend time in meditation facing the rising sun on a beautiful quiet beach is something of a luxury.

Wilmington is a beautiful small town that hugs the Cape Fear river, which, like most early cities and towns, used to be dependent upon its waterway for transportation, both out to the Atlantic Ocean and also further inland.

Although I was aware that an active slave trade had thrived in Wilmington, I had not realized the extent of this city's strategic location for such purposes.

Because mooring ships on most of the islands that make up North Carolina's Outer Banks was considered dangerous, the relatively protected Port of Wilmington, situated inland on the Cape Fear river, was a major point for the forced disembarkation of African slaves. In fact, the black slave population of Wilmington outnumbered the white non-slave population by two to one by the mid-1800s. The skills and knowledge black slaves brought were vital to the growth, success, and expansion of the town; it's probable that Wilmington's survival as a vibrant economy is due to it being rooted in a firm economic base built upon the blistered and broken backs of its slaves.

In this respect, Wilmington is no different from a variety of other cities, towns, countries, and empires whose success, basic stability, infrastructure, and rich cultural growth has been secured and "enriched" by its slaves. Indeed, like it or not, the history of humanity is based on a variety of such cases—where enslavement benefitted the culture of the oppressor. Sadly, in many ways, this dynamic continues into the present day.

With this in mind, and returning to the idea of the intersectionality inherent in sacred geography, I decided to spend time doing chöd on the beach not far from the inlet of the Cape Fear river. I did so while trying to remain aware of all the ways that I enslave different aspects of myself, how I relate to race and white supremacy, and the violence and the ways in which privilege alters the way we see others. That Wilmington, with its rich history of being a place where the dreams of humans were crushed and suffocated by a racist ruling class, can offer a ground and support for my practice of chöd is important. Perhaps Wilmington, as a reminder—or symbol—offers us the potential for not only inner growth, but also the exploration of racism, whiteness, and white supremacy from the vantage point of engaged dharma practice.

Even more, for us to bring many people's disassociation from the history of slavery and all the ways it still haunts us into our spiritual practice is a profound approach. The desire to turn away from openly confronting racism and whiteness is something that I find disturbing. Of course, the remnants of slavery are all too evident in our culture, as is the culture of whiteness and white supremacy. It is important to remain mindful of how much has changed as well as how much hasn't over time in the United States.

In an unconscious manner, we commit so much terrible violence toward ourselves out of fear, or a sense of insecurity, or flat-out self-hatred. In many ways, we subjugate aspects of ourselves, whether they are qualities, propensities, or habitual reactions, with the same control as a slave master.

And so, with the warm rising rays of the morning sun as a witness, a glorious bindu drop amid the crashing of waves of the Atlantic Ocean, and with the wind whistling through tall beach grasses, I invoked the mandala of Machig Labdron and Prajnaparamita. With an awareness of the qualities of edgelessness, and without specific orientation within time or space as experienced with resting in the mind's nature, I wanted to stretch myself so that I could include the tragic history associated with the slave trade and all of its ghostly remnants within my practice so that I could give audience and voice to the terror and the brutal subjugation of others.

I tend to feel that with any particular spiritual practice, it is important to blend what our tradition and teacher of the tradition dictate with what is alive *within* ourselves. At the end of the day, it is *our* story, the story that we carry with us, the story that we have made for ourselves and that we bring to our practice. The way that we construct this story, its highs and lows, its holy sanctified ideals, and its skulking demonic shadow beings are what we bring—our desire to do and be good, as well as our fear of failure and being seen as failures.

Equally amazing is how we take credit for the fruits of the work of our unrepentant white privilege. Just as the slave owner assumed ownership of what was tilled in and born of his fields; or the madam at the brothel collected her “hard-earned” wealth upon the broken bodies and broken dreams of her women; symbolically we take too much credit for the fruits of the parts of ourselves that we would rather ignore—the parts that we keep drugged, shackled, and subdued with cruelty. This can be scary.

While we assume our position at the head of the table, decked out in all of the fineries of our best projections of ourselves; while we dine upon the finest foods and receive the accolades that deep down we feel we really deserve; while we entertain our every whim and fancy; our hatred, ignorance, unexamined bias, and our inability to dynamically embrace the parts of ourselves that we may fear that others will come to know often rules with the same tight fist as the cruelest slave owner. And just as such slave owners

were known to rape their slaves, I wonder how we secretly rape the unintegrated parts of ourselves; do we secretly proclaim to love and accept the parts of ourselves that we may indeed love but fear? Perhaps we also secretly hate these parts because we may know that they are integral to us?

Ironically, the most enslaved parts of our psyche may be the ones that we refuse to own; the ones of which we refuse to be conscious. They might also hold immense power and utility if we could just be with them, just accept them so that we can learn to integrate and love those parts of us that we fear and have trouble understanding.

As a chaplain, I occasionally have the chance to witness many people trying to shackle their fears, to hide away their anger and sense of loss, to turn away from their sense of powerlessness, and to try to disguise their shame. I can see this in part because I try to explore these things within myself. It is not easy to notice things about ourselves that we are uncomfortable with, let alone those we loathe or fear. And yet in seeing this in myself and in others, I am often reminded of how naturally we create our own suffering.

I sometimes wonder about how, as Buddhists, it is possible to secretly hide away our aggression and anger, how easy it is to distract ourselves from truly knowing, exploring, and interfacing with the way these feelings arise. Is it the case that we might prefer studying the paramitas as a way of feeling good about ourselves but not really noticing, not taking stock of, how easy it can be to associate with a conceptual modality, a structural paradigm of oppression, rather than engage in an ethic that genuinely arises from our heart/mind complex? Sometimes the appearance of engaging Buddhist practice offers us the false sense of not being slave to unconscious dominance of others. In this way, the overly friendly, overly compassionate Buddhist who is unaware of the horrors bubbling just under their surface can also become a slave owner by brutality repressing drives, emotional impulses, and feelings. If not observed carefully, Buddhist practice affords you wonderful ways of running away from yourself (if that is what you want to do). Additionally, there is the hard work of bearing witness and taking responsibility for the horrors of slavery and the long lasting impact that it, and white supremacy, has on the lives of people of color. Practicing chöd in relationship to the violence, the pain and ignorance that slavery represents ought not just be approached on a symbolic level, but on a heart level so that

healing (something we as Americans have yet to understand what this might look like) can be possible.

In offering my steaming organs, the sun and moon of my eyes, the deep vital essence of my marrow, the mountain range of my fingers and toes, the ocean grasses of my hair, my flayed skin, the ground of the mandala offering, on that beach, I contemplated true freedom. If I am to free my inner-aggression and ignorance, shouldn't I do so in a way that allows me to have a relationship with them in the future? Wouldn't that presage deep growth and acceptance around just why I ghettoized aspects of myself? And in having some sense of how and why I do this to myself, around my conception of myself, doesn't this offer a wonderful means of connecting with others who find themselves with a whip in their hand or fist raised in the air toward themselves?

In consciously releasing our kleshas, with awareness, in offering witness to how we maintained them for years, perhaps even a lifetime, I wonder if we can also allow them to remain part of us as a living memory that stays in a relationship with us as liberated beings? May we never forget our ignorance, lest we fail to be able to aide others who struggle through the same wilderness. If this is the case, then the story of our aggression toward these ways of feeling is an important and powerful thing to honor in a certain way. Knowing these stories around and within ourselves can create a natural sense of connection and intimacy with others if we truly aspire to walk the bodhisattva path. It may very well be that this awareness of our emotional history is central to honestly approaching the paramitas. Otherwise it can be very easy to inadvertently use dharma as a tool to subjugate and maintain anger, aggression, and ignorance. We may want to release our shortcomings and banish them from our sight so that we never have to see our folly; this, however, prevents us from any honest growth and real witnessing of the story of our relationship to slavery, real and symbolic.

I suspect that as we become more familiar with freeing ourselves from our destructive habits and with trying to maintain relationships with them, including accepting the hard truths that can become precious gifts, we can relax our grip on needing things to be a particular way. In letting go, forgiving, and remaining in relationship, dharma doesn't become any one thing in particular; it becomes all things.

Tantric Conduct

The secret element of speech is *conduct*; in this section, we could say vajra conduct. To help demonstrate this point, I will share a song composed by Kyabje Bokar Rinpoche, one of my teachers from Sikkim, called “Instructions on Pointing Out the Faults of Self with the Iron Hook of Mind.”

This song came from a text that Pathing Rinpoche wrote and gave to me when I was visiting India in 2000. I had been traveling in India and decided to visit him in Sikkim, which was always an elaborate proposition as he had a way of moving about quite a bit. Luckily, somebody told me that Pathing Rinpoche was at his home base in Barapathing. I hired a Jeep and drove out there. During this visit, we had no translator, so we had a meal together and he gave me this text and indicated, nonverbally, that I should study it. Over the course of that year, I translated the first of three songs the text contains.

I subsequently returned to India and asked for the advice of Khenpo Lodrö Donyo, the abbot of Bokar Rinpoche’s monastery, for guidance around the finer points of the translation. We sat together, reviewed my translation, and compared it to the original Tibetan text. He clarified any mistakes that I made.

I am including this song here because it demonstrates how to put the tantric view into practice. In this regard, this song is important and valuable for its clarity. I will provide commentary following the song.



A rare photo of Kyabje Pathing Rinpoche, with meditation belt and khatvanga (ritual staff). Pathing Rinpoche was a well-respected sorcerer and Buddhist master across Sikkim and Bhutan. I first met him in 1997 when he came to visit Tsunma Dechen Zangmo to do prayers for her. Rinpoche was regarded as the nineteenth incarnation of the mahasiddha Kukuripa and an emanation of Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa. Photo courtesy of Erik Bloom.

Instructions on Pointing Out the Faults of Self with the Iron Hook of Mind

In general, everything in the universe, outer, inner, and secret, I offer to satisfy and benefit the six classes of beings.

The whole field of accumulation, the three Jewels as well as the three kayas, the entire universe I offer to the inner and secret deities, may they be satisfied.

To the male and female yogis and yoginis I offer vajra food and vajra water, may they be satisfied.

Primordial Awareness, the mandala of pure amrita, I offer so that those in the lower realms may be satisfied.

The body mandala deities who are the union of bliss and emptiness, who are primordial awareness, may they be satisfied.

Everyone, in an outer and inner sense, is a dakini; to them I offer this melodious song, may they be satisfied.

As a last resort to stop all filthy activities I offer this tormā, may the six protectors and local deities be satisfied.

In this context sing this vajra song if you like.

Just as the many male and female deities, dress in the disguise of a heruka. When prostrating do so in accordance with our noble tradition.

First, make a humble request as follows:

Ho!

Please consider me. *Three times.*

The lord of empowerments, Samantabhadra's great mandala of perfection is good and noble.

As stated in *The Pearl Necklace*, the ocean of the supreme assembly, both outer and inner, come and join together in an excellent manner to make the offering complete.

Visualize that the offering assembly enters and confer empowerment into the mandala. One should exert oneself in singing this song. Thus, I ask you to pay attention to the reality of the inconceivable power of the ocean-like display of this vajra song.

Karma and aspiration, dependent origination and the like appears as it does.

In this way, make offerings to the assembly when renouncing that which is to be abandoned.

Wholly let go of finding amusement in creating conflict.

Reville material things and so on, reproach that which is rough and coarse.

Just like Guru Rinpoche, the Lord of Uddiyana, one should arise with the power akin to a wolf when coming to the ganachakra.

Endowed with the three authentic perceptions, the female goddesses of the ganachakra should be visualized as having the essence of amrita. If you do not realize this, you will be reborn as a preta.

In this regard, endowed with the three authentic perceptions, think of the Lama as heruka and the Buddhas with their consorts.

Think of the vajra siblings, fellow practitioners, as male and female deities.

Recognize the blessings of the Ganachakra.

Do not be separated from the three circumstances.

May we never be separate from the yidam; our ordinary body.

May we never be separate from the mantra of speech.

May we never be separate from realizing the nature of mind.

May we be free from the three doubts.

May we be free from any doubt regarding the tantric texts which are the enlightened speech of the Lama.

May we be free from any doubt as to whether ganachakra is clean or unclean.

May we be free from any doubt concerning secret conduct.

The three things that are not to be done.

One should abandon carelessness of conduct.

One should not allow aversion (hatred, anger) and envy to consume the mind.

Conceptual thought (discursiveness) is not appropriate.

It is improper for Bhikshus to take meat and beer with fear or based upon discursiveness.

It is improper to continually engage in Brahmanic pure expression out of conceptual thought.

It is improper to engage in actions and conduct which is upon worries of good or bad.

These are the three unwholesome actions not to accumulate.

For one who follows the path introduced by the Lama, do not accumulate unwholesome actions.

The path of the spiritual instructions is profound, do not accumulate unwholesome actions.

Do not accumulate unwholesome actions towards vajra brothers and sisters or phenomena in general!

These are the three things not to give freely.

Do not give secret blessed substances to others.

Do not give away the oral instructions.

Do not perform offerings when not suitable.

These are the three secrets.

Secretly, one should make offerings when the feast assembly gathers.

Secretly, one should manifest great numbers of deities.

Secretly, perform activities and deeds that lead towards liberation, this is the essence.

These are the three things not to practice!

Do not call upon the Lama without respect and devotion.

Do not call upon the feast gathering in an “ordinary” way.

Do not apply unwholesome forces [actions and thoughts] towards vajra sisters and brothers.

Thus, in knowing what to adopt and what to abandon, the magnificent blessings of this ganachakra will flood rotten karma everywhere and siddhis will arise.

Recognize this!

Sing this feast song if you like; through it you will realize the essence of dependent origination, karma, and so on. May you receive inspiration from this vajra song.

In the sky of emptiness this sun dawns,

Appearing, but not remaining, it will proceed to cross over.

Similarly, according to books, precious human rebirth has happened in this lifetime, not an “ordinary” birth.

As soon as one is reborn, one does not remain, death arrives.

Over a long period of time one remains, not accounting for one’s actions.

One should approach the path with zeal and diligence while sowing the seeds of Dharma.

Keep Meditating!

In the marketplace people go this way and that, continually abiding in daily hustle and bustle.

At all times separate yourself from the company of others.

Create an example similar to past masters.

At all times do not remain separate from the master.

Right now, accompany the master.

Discuss the profound Dharma so that you may resolve for yourself its excellence.

Just as the honey bee gathers the sweet essence of flowers without regard for the honey gathered by others, it is just so regarding material goods in the present lifetime.

Do not desire the accumulation of wealth gathered by others; attachments to the desire realm should not be great.

Whatever you have in terms of wealth, let it go!

Commonplace work and responsibilities, what?!

Due to sporadic effort one will miss the fruits of the autumn harvest.

Similarly, through sporadic effort and enthusiasm towards the practice of meditation over the length of a whole

lifetime, one will not experience awakening.

Do not engage in practice which is either too tight or too loose.

Constantly, day and night, generate enthusiastic diligence, keep meditating!

Achieve the freedoms and advantages that this human birth can bring here and now!

In this and in later lives, accomplish the aspiration towards liberation.

In your free time guard that the frame of one's mind does not let it become thin and weak.

Harmonize your mind with its experiences through the practice of meditation so that they dissolve together.

Through this ganachakra of liberated conditions, may we receive the esoteric revelation of this song of spiritual experience now in this very lifetime.

Here, at this ganachakra pervading the entire sky, may all sentient beings conquer the undying Dharmakaya citadel.

Gewo!

Written by the authentic Phul Chung Tulku, known as Pathing Rinpoche, incarnation of the Mahasiddha Kukkuripa.

*Translated by his student Karma Tenzin Changchub Thinley (Repa Dorje Odzer) in the Western pure land of Brooklyn, with the gracious guidance from the venerable Khenpo Lodrö Donyo.
All errors are mine. Sarva Mangalam!*

In the first portion of the song, Pathing Rinpoche states that we should offer everything in the universe—outer, inner, and secret—everything that we experience, everything that arises in relation to our experience, to satisfy and to benefit all the beings in the six realms. Not just humans, but ghosts, hell

beings, animals, demigods, gods, beings who are seen and unseen, beings on this planet and on other planets and in the entire field of accumulation. This offering is made to the three jewels as well as the three kayas, the entire universe. It is an essential mahamudra offering to the inner and secret deities that reside internally within our bodies, within the system of chakras, and those that ride the inner energies that circulate throughout our subtle vajra body.

In this way, we are also making this offering toward creating internal and external balance. We are creating internal balance in the sense that we are allowing all of the deities within the body to be satisfied. When they are satisfied, we align into a much more awakened relationship to everything that we meet within our field of experience. To our vajra family—all of the beings that walk the tantric path of awakening with us, including all of the male and female yogis and yoginis that we associate and practice with and who co-create the experience of spiritual family—to all of them, we offer vajra food and vajra water so that they may be satisfied. We offer the experience of fundamentally awakened mind—the experience of primordial awareness—which is characterized as a mandala of pure amrita. All experience becomes a mandala of pure blissful nectar, which we offer so that all beings, and especially those beings in the lower realms, may be satisfied.

Such an offering can also be internalized to some extent, if we wish—as an inner form of chöd—so that this offering also satisfies our own clinging, our own hungry-ghost nature, our own hell-being nature when we're experiencing these modes of being. The body mandala deities are the union of bliss and emptiness; they are none other than primordial awareness, than the nature of our experience of everything that arises. May these deities be satisfied.

The song goes on to point out that every being, in an outer and an inner sense, is a dakini. They are the embodiment of enlightenment. To them, we offer this melodious song. May they be satisfied. And as a last resort to stop all of our filthy, mistaken, self-centered egocentric samsaric activities, we offer a *torma*, a ritual offering cake, so that the six protectors and local deities may be satisfied. What is being pointed out here is that we are asking that our own stupidity and our own ignorance be obliterated. May it all be liberated, may it be completely obliterated into mahamudra experience.

The song continues, “just as the many male and female deities dress in the disguise of a heruka when prostrating, do so in accordance with our noble tradition.” We should take the form of the heruka, take the form of the spiritual hero or heroine—in Tibetan, the *pawo* and *palmo*, respectively. We should adopt the point of orientation of enlightened agency and of authentic enlightenment arising in our own form. Thus, no matter who we are, where we come from, what our ethnicity or our race or our gender or our sexual orientation might be, whatever that is, it, too, is enlightened. It, too, is none other than the primordial awareness of mahamudra, which is the display of the dance of dakinis and the awe-inspiring brilliance of herukas.

Thus, we should visualize this assembly of all of the dakas and dakinis and that of the three jewels as the cloud-like mandala of Samantabhadra’s good and noble qualities. In an outer fashion and an inner fashion, they come together, joined, to make this offering complete. Then the entire assembly enters and confers empowerment onto the mandala. The mandala is that of basic space, this edgeless, limitless experience of primordial awareness, which is nothing other than our own mind.

As we reflect on the song, we should keep in mind that this is not an ordinary reflection. This is the reflection of complete enlightenment, an expression of total perfection, of is-ness and now-ness. The recitation of this song obliterates all negative karma. It solidifies the experience of mahamudra. The recitation of this song confirms our Buddha-nature. The points contained within this song reaffirm the enlightened qualities that each of us is endowed with.

The song goes on to state that karma and aspiration, dependent-origination (the way in which everything is interconnected or interdependent), and the like, appear as they do, and that we should make offerings to the assembly when renouncing that which we plan to abandon. Karma and aspiration, the natural arising of consequence, of action and reaction, continue endlessly, and all the ways we get stuck on this wheel of samsara—the wheel of action, reaction, and consequence—become the focus at this point. We make offerings to the assembly so that this cycle can be broken. Through determined recollection of awareness, we become able to recognize this cycle for what it is, and then we renounce that which is to be abandoned, which is not to say that we’re renouncing the world, but that we’re renouncing the ignorance that leads us to solidify the experience of the world.

We are renouncing the way in which we are habituated to coming back and forth through ignorance; through the lack of agency, through being endlessly triggered back into action, reaction, consequence, over and over again. We are breaking this cycle.

“Let us wholly let go of finding amusement and creating conflict and revile material things and reproach that which is rough and coarse.” Here the song demonstrates the importance of embodying the Vajrayana ethical code, of letting go of creating conflict within the sangha, of letting go of coarse behavior, and of manifesting, with agency, our Buddha-nature. We should enter into this activity with the power of a wolf—with strength, determination, and intention. We need to remain empowered by maintaining awareness and appreciation for our latent radiant clarity—the glow of our fundamental awakened nature.

From the locus of spiritual power, we should maintain the three authentic perceptions—the three ways that we shift our perception from the ordinary to the extraordinary. In this way we reorient the way we relate to the goddesses in the ganachakra as well as the lama and our fellow dharma siblings: every female participant or goddess of this ganachakra should be visualized as nectar. Similarly, every male pawo or heruka should be regarded as nectar. To not do this is to be caught back up in this attraction and revulsion dynamic that creates the hungry ghost, or *preta*, experience that we are seeking to disrupt.

We should think of the lama as no different than the heruka, no different than the enlightened yidam, and no different than the Buddhas with their consorts. Our vajra siblings, our fellow practitioners, male and female, should arise as deities in this ganachakra. In this way, our point of orientation is that this place is no different than the mandala of primordial purity, that everybody who arises within this context is completely enlightened and liberated, and that we are manifesting the Tantric Buddhist ethos and ethical imperative therein, thereby dissolving ordinary samsaric, egoic experience.

We vow to never be separate from the yidam, which is none other than our ordinary body, and we vow to never be separate from the qualities of enlightened speech and sound. Everything that arises is enlightened speech and sound. We vow never to be separate from realizing the nature of mind. This is the essential samaya of resting as the deity. Always, and in every

moment. Doing so allows us the ability to relinquish the sense of smallness and ordinariness and brokenness that plagues us. Instead, we are arising as an enlightened Buddha with the ability to access a sense of divine pride—or the direct, simple appreciation of our latent true Buddha-nature. Through doing this, we, ourselves, plant the seeds for the fruition of illusory body. This is about cultivating the experience of enlightenment: all sound is mahamudra, all speech becomes a play of mahamudra; our mind, rather than being caught up in action, reaction, and consequence, is reoriented to the expansive, primordial, fundamentally pure quality of mind, or mahamudra.

Pathing Rinpoche exhorts us to declare freedom from the three doubts. May we express a desire to be free from any doubt regarding the tantric texts—which are no different than the enlightened speech of the lama—may we be free from any doubt as to whether or not the ganachakra is clean or unclean, and may we be free from any doubt concerning the secret conduct. The secret conduct is pointed out to us through the specific samayas of our practice, through the specific vows and pledges associated with the cycle of practice with which we may be engaged.

By being free from doubt, we're walking into an experience of complete enlightened agency. What does it mean to be free of doubt, to have confidence, certainty in the view, certainty in the tantric texts, certainty in the ganachakra, and certainty regarding the conduct of the deity, the conduct of chöd, and the conduct of mahamudra? When mahamudra becomes our practice, our conduct is blown wide open—it becomes everything. Conduct becomes experience. May we be able to accept everything within our field of reference and rest in radical acceptance. May we be free of the three things that are not to be done. May we abandon carelessness of conduct. May we not allow aversion, hatred, anger, or envy to consume the mind. With regard to conceptual thought, may we allow it to completely dissolve because it's not appropriate. This last point refers to the vow to cultivate the mahamudra view: the fruition of the tantric path so we may rest in nondiscursive, expansive, primordially pure awakening.

Next, we see that it's improper for *bhikshus* or *bhikshunis*, monks or nuns, to take meat and beer with fear or to have discursiveness when alcohol and meat are included within the tsoks or ganachakra. It is equally improper to engage in Brahmanic purity based on conceptual thought or based on a discursive need for cleanliness. The need for purity is solved when we can

realize the purity of our mind. It is essentially improper to engage in actions and conduct that are based on being worried about whether or not things are good or bad.

I think that this particular instruction is incredibly salient in this particular moment when it comes to the ideas we may have about Buddhist practice and the world and how the two should intersect. We can look at this from the various stages of ethics. We saw earlier, from the long-life prayer for Pathing Rinpoche, that somebody can inhabit the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana ethical codes simultaneously. To be able to hold all three vehicles is a sophisticated way of approaching the path. I think that within the world of contemporary marketplace Buddhism, people tend to want the positive experience, cultivate positive actions, and engage in purity, Brahmanic expression perhaps, and shun that which is questionable, like the taking of meat and alcohol in tsoks. This part of the song is really about pushing us into developing confidence in our ability to walk a nondual path, which is both exciting and also very hard to do without screwing up. It's hard to do this without harming. This part of the song is about reorienting back to freedom—removing preoccupations with purity and goodness and coming back to the experience of mind, which is nondual. Mind is neither good nor bad—it is beyond concept. The experience of mind acts as a stitch ripper and cuts through the ways we struggle within the attraction/aversion addiction to good and bad.

Then, in the next stanza, we explore three unwholesome activities that we should avoid: unwholesome actions toward the lama, unwholesome actions in relation to the spiritual instructions, and unwholesome actions in relation to vajra sisters and brothers. Again, this is not rooted in discursiveness; it's a way of pointing out that the lama, the instructions, and the vajra siblings are the roots of our practice. Without these, what is there?

May we celebrate and develop a sense of joy, love, competence, and appreciation for the lama, especially the qualified and nonabusive inappropriate lama. May we appreciate and find joy and lightheartedness around the instructions, even when the instructions challenge us. When we say this, it's not because we're bad, but because the instructions challenge us to live free from conditioned discursive thinking, which causes us to be constantly invested in our own reactivity.

Pathing Rinpoche then asks us to look at the three things to not give freely. We should not give freely blessed substances to others; we should not give away oral instructions; and we should not perform offerings where they are not suitable. This really has less to do with lack of generosity and more to do with appropriate conduct. Thus, in order to become fully ripened beings, we need to be able to provide instruction to people at the right time. The same instruction, when offered to a wide variety of people, will be received in different ways. Some people will find definitive meaning when they're ready for an instruction, when all of the causes and conditions spiritually and environmentally meet.

Similarly, if they request them, you can give somebody some of the most profound nondual tantric instructions, but if they are not ready for them, such instructions can actually cause harm. They can cause people to engage in practice that causes their minds to become *more* discursive. In some cases, they become so overly focused and preoccupied with nonduality that it may cause harm to others, thereby creating suffering and confusion. Suffering and confusion created in this manner are not one-sided because the unqualified individual who causes harm through the guise of nonduality tends to reinforce their own position or ignorance by participating in such actions. This is something we see with very unskillful gurus in all of the sexual abuse and abuse of power situations that we've seen in recent years. Not only do such people cause untold harm, suffering, and confusion, but they also dig themselves further in the pit of ignorance as such teachers commonly regard their own activity as justified and an expression of nonduality. This gets even messier and more unfortunate when undereducated sycophantic students of such teachers defend them, no matter what, even though their own logic or reasoning or understanding of the tantric path is questionable.

Next, we learn about the three secrets: secretly we should make offerings to the feast assembly, we should make offerings to the assembly of the vajra sisters and brothers, and through visualization practices, we should manifest great numbers of deities so that our offerings are vast and exhaustive. We should perform activities and deeds that lead toward liberation, especially activities that generate merit and, in a sense, overwhelm the ways that our frame of reference can become habituated toward the limitations of miserliness and impotence. These three secrets involve performing activity—especially going out into the worlds of our respective daily lives and

performing vajra activity. One of the vows that the song is instilling within us is that we must be *active*. This practice is not about just sitting and quietly reflecting. Nor is it about bookish study. We should reflect on our practice, be well informed about our practice, and go out and act so that we may cultivate, in real time, all of these qualities through the richness and the full power of our practice. This is about going out and being engaged, not being theoretical.

Pathing Rinpoche next highlights the three things not to practice. We should not disrespect or lack devotion to the lama, nor should we call upon the feast gathering in an ordinary samsaric way, and we should not engage in unwholesome actions and thoughts toward our vajra sisters and brothers. The point here is about creating a sense of pure-view or divine-pride so we can shift the point of departure with regard to our practice. We do this so we can learn to maintain an atmosphere of enlightened sanctity between ourselves and the guru, ourselves and the community, and ourselves and our spiritual brothers and sisters.

The song goes on to point out that when we know what to adopt and what to abandon, the blessings of the ganachakra will flood rotten karma everywhere, and siddhis will arise. We should recognize this; the time is always now. This song is all about the immediacy of engaging in these practices, of putting down our broken, tired, exhausted story and opening up to these practices, opening up to the ethical imperative of the tantric practice, opening up to Buddha-nature, opening up to the fact that we are able to engage in everything that arises, desired and undesired, because this is what practice is all about. Within this action of engaging both good and bad, we afford ourselves the opportunity to develop intensely strong spiritual practice.

Then we're asked to contemplate the fact that this precious rebirth, this life that we're living right now, is, at its root, not an ordinary life, because we have the ability to enter into practice in this way. At the same time, however, as soon as we are born, death begins its dance, coming closer and closer, for a reunion with us that hasn't yet been put on our calendar—we don't know when it will happen. Although we don't know when it will arrive, we should remain mindful of the fact that when we're not accounting for our own actions, and when we're not applying zeal and diligence while on the path of dharma, we're creating problems for ourselves because we are essentially

wasting a moment whose preciousness we do not understand or appreciate. Therefore, we should be diligent. We should be confident. We should reorient ourselves back to the fact that we don't know how long this life will be. Rather than look at this as something that is depressing, let's consider that right now, we have the time that we have, and we should use it. Let's account for ourselves! Let's develop a sense of accountability around our practice and keep meditating.

In the daily hustle and bustle of this business we call life, as we see in both the Guhyasamaja tantra and in Illusory Body practice (which is said to be based upon the Guhyasamaja tantra), we should cultivate a practice of the three isolations: isolation of body, isolation of speech, and isolation of mind. We isolate our body by maintaining awareness of the body and by placing it in a meditative posture; we isolate our speech by resting in the naturally arising enlightened purity of all sound; and we isolate our mind by cultivating the experience of radiant, blissful clarity.

When we train in this, even in the midst of great busyness, or on a crowded subway, or in an airplane, or wherever, we find that the experience of awakening is available. When we practice like this, we are creating a sense of liberated body, speech, and mind. In all of our postindustrial glamour, we can create an example similar to past masters even though the activity we appear to be engaged in may look ordinary. Although we look ordinary, we are actively dissolving our ordinariness and stepping into our practice in a way that makes it powerful. Even in the midst of what seems like complete boredom, completely inane, American, middle-class bullshit, we're actually dancing the path of herukas.

Pathing Rinpoche reminds us that, at all times, we should try not to remain separate from the master. If you can, accompany the master, or serve her and discuss the profound dharma when you can with her so that you may resolve all doubts and confusing points for yourself. This instruction is rooted in learning that we should take complete advantage of having access to the teacher. Tsunma Zangmo once told me, "Every time there's a great teacher nearby, you should go and see them for clarification of the dharma. If you don't, you should throw yourself down and die." In other words, it's a waste of energy and time when you do not take advantage of resolving doubt and confusion.

Similarly important is learning what it means to remain close to the master, even when the master dies. When our teachers are alive, we generally know where they are and what is involved in connecting with them. When our teachers die, the relationship changes to some extent. I've learned the importance of this through the death of Tsunma Zangmo, the death of Bokar Rinpoche, and the death of Pathing Rinpoche. Despite the fact that they have passed away, I am able to maintain a sense of closeness and intimacy with them, their teachings, and the examples that they demonstrated even though they are no longer in a physical form that I can interact with.

The next stanza focuses on reducing the desire to accumulate wealth, as well as the covetous desire for the wealth gathered by others. The root of this stanza centers upon the idea that attachment to the finer things, including attachment to name and fame and wealth, what I like to call *dharma empire*, shouldn't be what motivates us. We don't have to look that closely to find lavish dharma centers and teachers with luxury vehicles and great wealth—on one level, nothing is inherently wrong with these things (especially in a capitalist society), but becoming intertwined with wealth, property ownership, constantly generating income, and so on can have a rather insidious impact at times. Over time, it's amazing how we find ourselves turning away from what we would rather be doing because we can be using that time to make more money instead, or how fame changes the way we may practice or teach dharma. We have seen this, to some extent, in some of the scandals around teachers who start off with a very pure and positive intention, who then become well known and begin to make a lot of money, and who soon find themselves in situations they may not be equipped to successfully navigate without causing harm.

Rather than get so involved in this dynamic, just avoid it. Let go of the desire to accumulate dharma empire.

Pathing Rinpoche reiterates this by saying, “whatever you have in terms of wealth, just let it go.” He then moves on to suggest that we remove ourselves, as best we can, from common work and responsibilities. He continues to remind us that when we don't fully engage in all the work required for a bountiful crop, we will have a sporadic harvest. Some things will come out well; other things might not bloom or fruit. Similarly, if we're sporadic in our practice, and in our relationship to the tantric view in our practice of meditation, all the work we are engaged in will not yield awakening. In a

sense, we need to apply the same amount of effort to dharma practice that arises in relation to distraction.

The art here is not to engage in practice that's too tight or too loose. We need to be free. We need to allow ourselves not to become discursive. Day and night, we should allow our practice to be diligent. By doing this, we achieve the freedoms and advantages that this human birth can bring here and now. This relates directly to the fruition of Buddha-nature, which is the experience of enlightenment. We have the ability to experience enlightenment within this lifetime; yet, if we simply decide to practice in a sporadic fashion, it's not going to happen. This is why it says we should harmonize our mind with experiences through practice of meditation so that they can dissolve together.

The song ends with the final stanza: “through this ganachakra of liberated conditions, may we receive the esoteric revelation of the song of spiritual experience now in this very lifetime. Here, at this ganachakra, pervading the entire sky, may all sentient beings conquer the undying dharma kaya citadel.” The meaning here is that this is it! This song provides the secret conduct, the samaya activity, that we should engage in if we want to reap the benefits of Tantric Buddhist practice. This is why I have decided to include it within this book.

I also included it because of the lama who wrote it. Pathing Rinpoche was a great tantric master and a hidden yogi. He was known throughout Sikkim as a powerful sorcerer. When I first met him, he was already in his nineties. According to Rinpoche, he came down to Sikkim from Tibet in the 1930s, two decades before the Chinese invasion of Tibet. At the time, he was on pilgrimage and he was wandering. While wandering, he decided to stay in a cave in Barapathing, Sikkim, did retreat, and then reemerged. I've visited this cave in which, according to Rinpoche, he spent forty collective years of retreat time. Indeed, I saw where he sat, and the stone had been completely rubbed smooth. The cave is also home to a natural spring that he told me contains both the urine and the menstrual fluid of Vajravarahi.

Over the course of a few years of getting to know Rinpoche, and through talking with him, I learned that his lama was Skuksep Lochen Chönyi Zangmo (1865–1953), the great chöd practitioner who is recognized as an incarnation of Machig Labdron as well as one of the major Longchen Nyingthik lineage

holders.³ He shared amazing stories of what she was like; according to him, she could shoot fire out of her nose when she needed to start a larger fire.

At one point, Pathing Rinpoche was approached in a dream by a local protector in Barapathing, who told him that he should tell the local villagers to stop slaughtering animals—that doing this was upsetting this being—and if they were to stop, then he would become the protector of the valley. Pathing Rinpoche managed to convince the villagers to stop slaughtering animals, and he had a sculpture crafted of the protector as he appeared in the dream. After experiencing other visions, Pathing Rinpoche learned that the protector in his dream had actually been a monk who had been murdered by thieves while on pilgrimage from Tibet. When he died, his consciousness was angry and irate and was causing problems for the local villagers.

The statue that Pathing Rinpoche made of this protector used to sit on his shrine in his retreat cabin. At one point, His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa came to see Pathing Rinpoche and, upon seeing the statue and recognizing the nature of the protector, he told Rinpoche that this protector was very powerful and that he should cover his image. The sixteenth Karmapa then had a sleigh made for Pathing Rinpoche for when he got older. That sleigh still exists. It's kept on the second floor of a very small monastery in Barapathing where Pathing Rinpoche stayed.

Rinpoche was an incredible master and combined many beneficial qualities through his practice. The various forms of activity that he displayed include being a powerful sorcerer, a skilled Buddhist chaplain, and realized dharma teacher. The qualities that Pathing Rinpoche manifests represent the activity of the Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhist path in a combination that I have never seen since meeting him. As we have already seen, he was regarded as the nineteenth incarnation of the mahasiddha Kukkuripa and an emanation of Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa. Because this song was given to me by him, and because it was written by him, I have full faith in these words and that if we're able to engage in this practice this way, we will be able to yield the results.

Vamacara Practice

At its core, the Tantric Buddhist path demonstrates a variety of techniques through which we can experience fully awakened mind. Unique to tantra, whether it is Hindu or Buddhist, is this concept of using *everything*. As we have seen, the tantric path can be regarded as the ultimate form of commitment to recycling. In our practice, we are not recycling physical resources, we are recycling emotional states, spiritual states, the ways that we get stuck and become upset, and the way we relate to aversion and attachment. In short, we are practicing with our *kleshas*.

Within the tantric path, we also, at some point, need to embrace the transgressive. In some cases, the transgressive element of practice exists only as a visualized phenomenon. In other cases, it's something to be acted upon, in which we actively engage in a transgressive relationship with what is impure or unclean. We do this to be able to experience the moment of engagement with the impure, the unclean, or that which is challenging—to explore the nature of mind in relation to the act of transgression and its corresponding results. One way we can do this is through lhakthong (a Vajrayana form of Vipassana) as a way of maintaining direct insight toward a greater sense of clarity and personal practice experience with regard to the nonduality that undergirds the way we are conditioned to experience reality.

In some cases, ingesting impure substances becomes a focus of practice. In the most classical sense, as it is seen in the biographies of the mahasiddhas in early India, this can include ingesting alcohol, various forms of flesh, and even feces. Among mahasiddhas, ingesting meat might have become a form of transgressive practice. Such substances were considered dirty—alcohol because of its ability to alter the mind state and meat because of transgression related to the vow of not bringing harm to any beings. In other cases, spiritual practices such as *Karmamudra*, in which one engages in sexual activity as part of one's spiritual practice, exist within the tradition as practices in which the practitioner challenges the assumed mores related to Buddhist practice—especially if the practitioner is an ordained monastic.

A considerable amount of controversy, not just in our current era, but throughout the entire public existence of Tantric Buddhism has been generated around practices that involve transgressing societal or religious codes. This is what happens when a tradition, which has best existed on the margins of what we might call more widely practiced Buddhism, is thrown into the gaze of general culture. Within the world of general Buddhist

spiritual practice, Tantric Buddhist practice, for quite a while, especially very engaged nondual Tantric Buddhist practice, has existed within the margins of the larger tradition.

Yet, in the diaspora, the Tantric Buddhist tradition was kind of inserted directly within the focal point of contemporary Western spirituality from the 1960s until this very moment. It has been a tricky relationship to hold, because tantric practices—especially the more transgressive they get, are meant to be kept secret. Tantric practice is not necessarily meant to be engaged in in a public way, although there are stories of people who have done this.

In the past, part of some practitioners' practice included the act of publicly displaying their transgressive behavior in order to experience being spurned and derided by the populace. They'd then use the resulting impulses and reactions that arose while they were being denigrated and abused as a focal point of dharma practice.

In this context, if an angry Brahmanical mob were to deride you for being impure, or for lacking any kind of seemingly spiritual qualities, rather than try to convince them that you are very spiritual, you would simply accept what was arising, even if the mob were to get violent, and you'd rest your awareness within the experience of what it is like to be beaten. In this kind of radical acceptance practice, you place awareness upon the reactions arising from being thought of as crazy, worthless, an aberration, and so on. In such situations, do we feel the need to bolster ourselves and say, "Oh no, no. I'm actually a tantrika, and this is a special practice, blah blah blah?" Can we just accept it and embrace whatever it is that arises?

Now, this being said, a lot of history deals with clashes between the point of orientation of the Tantric Buddhist tradition and that of mainstream Buddhism. I think we're beginning to see this in the West as well, in the rise of abuses of power, sexual abuse, and other bad behavior which, on one level, are clearly abuses and systemic problems that need addressing. Yet within the very strict pure-view perspective of the Tantric Buddhist imperative, occasionally we find people making the argument that some of these practices are justified because they are being done by Tantric Buddhist teachers. This is a slippery slope.

What I'm not suggesting here is an automatic defense of people who abuse other people; I'm highlighting the complexity of addressing these problems within traditions of Buddhist practice that embrace the nondual. This can get very complicated very quickly in a changing Western Buddhist culture that has a very valid and demonstrably powerful focus on ethics, accountability, and transparency, especially as these relate to spiritual practice, spiritual growth, and the responsible arising of spiritual communities.

Unfortunately, I think that there is no good, convenient answer. Within the tantric tradition, a tremendous amount of energy exists within the tension connected to the paradox between the experience of the pure and impure. At the end of the day, the Tantric Buddhist path is a path of nonduality, and it is a path that, at one point, might require the practitioner to engage in Vamacara (Tibetan: *durtro*) practice. This is something that you may engage in through the practice of chöd, for example. It is something that you may practice if you take the activity command of a Tantric Buddhist yidam very seriously. This may be something that you bring into your practice of Mahamudra, or Illusory Body, or other more “advanced” secret tantric practices.

This behavior is something that practitioners of Buddhist tantra have entertained over a thousand years and that Buddhist practitioners in the West must contend with now as well. We need to be able to develop a relationship with the transgressive—a relationship that is mature, well informed, and responsible. This is also something that we need to keep secret and out of the public eye. Not necessarily because it's abusive, although there is plenty of room to use tantra as a way of trying to justify unskillful behavior, but because it's really hard to understand. At the end of the day, aspects of tantra are hard to justify in the eyes of the larger culture. But that's the nature of these practices. This is why so much transgressive imagery appears in a lot of Tantric Buddhist art.

As far as the context of this book is concerned, what I want to address is the existence of these practices and that they exist in a way that is necessary and has great power for transformational change. I also acknowledge the conflict that can arise as a result of these practices. It seems reasonable to call for more open discussion around them and how the larger Buddhist community can (or can't) wrap their mind around them. We can't argue only from an ethical imperative that just advances the point of departure from the

Theravada and Mahayana traditions when we are engaging in Vajrayana tradition.

I also think that we need to be able to hold all of these in one form, or one practice, with the requisite skill to be able to alternate between them when we need to. In other words, what does it mean to be able to be a Vajrayana practitioner and have a deep Mahayana moral base? Similarly, what does it mean to be a Mahayana practitioner who's willing to get a little messy and bring your own reactive mind around impurity and active transgression of spiritual and moral norms into practice?

Careful consideration of this topic is very important. What does it mean to be responsible as a tantrika? I think that entering into these nondual practices in a responsible way when our teachers advise us to engage in such activities is vital. Given the controversies of the recent years, the one thing that social media has shown us is that the Western Tantric Buddhist community maintains a considerable amount of naïveté and lack of knowledge regarding some of these more tantric samayas. This can be a source of spiritual pathology by which either Tantric Buddhist teachers or their sangha members claim the reference to everything being available for use, including the wealth and bodies of others for their own benefit. We have seen such spiritual pathologies play out not only with regard to the abusive behavior of a variety of tantric teachers, but also the solipsistic defenses used by the students of such teachers who tend to be blinded by a lack of understanding of Tantric Buddhism or a complete inability to understand their own relationship to power.

At the end of the day, a naïve reading of these activities can be very harmful, especially to those who find themselves in situations where abuse has happened, and in which the tantric system has been manipulated for the benefit of a teacher or a community. In this regard, although the Vamacara (durtro) practices that we find within the tantric tradition are a type of secret heart-essence of nondual practice, we should engage in them in controlled, safe settings so we do not blow up communities or create dynamics that cause abuse. It may be that Tantric Buddhist communities should never have been created to be as big as some have become without us having a skillful structure that helps us avoid people misusing the teachings for their own profit. To enter into such practices with this kind of level headed departure involves blending in a more Mahayana ethical container with an engaged

Vajrayana practice. Although I think that, ultimately, engaged Vajrayana practice is absolutely essential, we need to be responsible about how we do this. Likewise, we need to be curious about why we might be so attracted to these nondual activities. Sometimes the reason has less to do with us being deeply realized beings and more to do with us not wanting to take responsibility for what it means to develop an actual ethical form of practice. This is something to look out for.

SECTION III | MIND

Outer Mind

Pure-View and Sacred Geography

Sacred geography is a compelling topic for me as a practitioner and as a dharma teacher. Pilgrimage is both powerful and meaningful and was a key part of my initial contact and formal introduction to Buddhism, which occurred in Bodh Gaya on the Indian subcontinent. Bodh Gaya, for the uninitiated, is a village in Bihar. Within it is the Mahabodhi temple and a distant relative of the Bodhi tree under which Siddhartha practiced meditation and eventually experienced enlightenment. The temple is sacred not just to Buddhists, but to Hindus as well, and the experience of being twenty years old, watching throngs of various pilgrims come from all over India, all over the Buddhist world, and from just about everywhere else, was a meaningful way for me to understand the power of pilgrimage as well as the significance of a place like Bodh Gaya.

Pilgrimage, as a larger phenomenon, is neither new nor unique to Buddhism; as humans, it seems that we have a tendency to want to return to places that are significant to us. Sometimes such locations are of spiritual significance, sometimes societal, and most often, interpersonal and intersectional. Examples of such pilgrimages include making your way to Mecca for the Hajj if you are Muslim; visiting Washington, DC, or taking your children there so they can appreciate the way our nation governs itself; traveling to the place where your parents were born, or where they died; visiting a place of cultural and historical significance for yourself, your personal narrative, or your values; and so on. Geography allows us to honor the meaning that we value in our lives. We live within time and space and within the latitude and longitude that time and space afford us; we intentionally—and perhaps sometimes unconsciously—plot the course of our lives and identities within their dynamics. How many times has a particular season or specific date reminded you of an event that occurred in the past around the same time? Tsunma Zangmo passed away on Christmas Eve, 1997, which, at that time, was also a Dakini Day and the anniversary of the parinirvana of Tsongkhapa, the late-fourteenth-century founder of the Geluk

lineage, and I am always reminded of that great loss whenever Christmas approaches. On the other hand, the Fall months feel like a time of rich growth for me—they always have—and once the crisp cool air of October approaches, I invariably feel great inner significance and potential. These are two examples of how I plot meaning and interact with residual memory and my experience of time.

Pilgrimage is a form of spiritual practice that one engages in to touch the past; it is a way to feel linked to those who have come before us and of charging the present moment with their power. Your pilgrimage might take you to the Wailing Wall, St. Peters, the Kaaba, Bodh Gaya, a sacred mountain, a river, the ocean, a tree, or even an imagined site—something symbolic, a living, pulsating image such as a mandala.

The Buddha predicted that students following the path would visit the place of his birth, the place of his enlightenment, where he first taught, and where he would die. He stressed that this may be something that we do if we want to, if it brings meaning, inspiration, and context to our path. It was a suggestion, not a directive, and ultimately, it was a very insightful reading of what was to come. Within the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, found within *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, or the *Digha Nikaya*, we find the Buddha saying:

Ananda, there are four places the sight of which should arouse emotion in the faithful. What are they? “Here the Tathagata was born” is the first. “Here the Tathagata attained supreme enlightenment” is the second. “Here the Tathagata set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma” is the third. “Here the Tathagata attained the Nibanna-element without remainder” is the fourth. And, Ananda, the faithful monks and nuns, male and female lay-followers will visit those places. And any who die while making the pilgrimage to these shrines with a devout heart will, at the breaking-up of the body after death, be reborn in a heavenly world.¹

Within the context of the practice of Tantric Buddhism, pilgrimage appears in a more visionary manner. In addition to the four major sites associated with the Buddha’s life, various *pithas*, or seats (places of power and meaning associated with the dissemination of Buddhist tantra), became included into various lists of sacred places. For example, there are twenty-four pithas throughout the Indian subcontinent that are associated with the places where the Buddha revealed himself as Chakrasamvara and taught the

cycle of Chakrasamvara and related practices. The pithas, while relating to actual places, also correspond to places within our bodies that have an internal energetic significance. The exact location of these pithas varies depending upon the specific practice lineage, but the mirroring of external and internal meaning in relation to these sites is relatively constant. In some ways, and according to some teachers, pilgrimage can be done without ever leaving where you already are because all of the major pithas exist within the matrix of our energetic body. This approach is touched upon by the Buddhist Mahasiddha Saraha who once sang:

*This is the River Yamuna,
This is the River Ganga,
Varanasi and Prayaga,
This is the moon and the sun.
Some speak of realization having traveled and seen all lands,
The major and minor places of pilgrimage.
Yet even in dreams I have no vision [of these].
There is no other boundary region like the body;
I, virtuous, have seen this for good and with certainty.
Stay in the mountain hermitage and practice self-restraint.*²

This could be considered the more essentialist approach to pilgrimage and sacred geography; wherever we are, we are essentially seated on the vajrasana under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya. Of course, there is no better place to be than this, and Saraha's approach is excellent. However, it can be important to recognize that although the position of Saraha is the position of fundamental awakening, such a location of awakening can feel unrealistic to those new to the path. What then? Well, then there is the benefit of pilgrimage. We can go to a place of significance to try to touch upon the inspiration that such places offer us; there are so many, and perhaps they do not have to be in Asia.

In his book *Sacred Ground*, Ngawang Zangpo has addressed, in a very detailed manner, the thoughts of Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye on the importance of sacred geography. Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye lived in Tibet from 1813 to 1899. He was a famous meditation master of the Kagyu,

the Nyingma, and the Sakya lineages. Through his wide and open attitude, Kongtrul helped define and spread the *Rime*, or the nonsectarian view of dharma, in response to a general atmosphere of sectarianism among all schools of Buddhism in Tibet at the time. He was a compiler of *termas* (revealed treasure teachings) and was a *terton* (treasure discoverer) in his own right. A renaissance man, Thaye not only helped shape and preserve the Kagyu lineage but all forms of dharma in Tibet.

Kongtrul identified a variety of places in Tibet as reflections of the twenty-four pithas in India. This change in perspective had the effect of being quite dynamic in that it placed Tibetans directly in the center of their own world of sacred geography. Quite suddenly—relatively speaking—the Tibetan plateau and the surrounding environment went from being a region bordering Holy Mother India, to having the same power itself, the same network of energetic geography. Of course, some brave souls still made the journey to the twenty-four pithas in India, but many visited the sites that Kongtrul and his dharma friends, the great Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa (treasure revealer of the Chokling Tersar) and Jamyang Kheyntse Wongpo, (the great Sakya polymath), felt were equivalent.

For some, this type of translation/reorientation was too much. In fact, the great Sakya patriarch, Sakya Pandita, took issue with the possibility that several pithas could be located in Tibet. *Sacred Ground* is an excellent book for exploring the thoughts and teachings of Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye on the subject of pilgrimage and inner spiritual geography. Ngawang Zangpo translated Kongtrul Rinpoche's *Pilgrimage Guide to Tsadra Rinchen Drak*, an amazing text that treats, in great depth, the nature of that particular pilgrimage location as well as its inner and secret significances as it relates to various energetic centers found throughout the body. Within this text, Kongtrul explains how sacred places are also reflected within the spiritual body:

To illustrate this, the moon, sun and Rahu circulatory energies descend through the major channels that have the nature of enlightened body, speech and mind. These are twenty-four channels (in three groups of eight) that branch off from the main right, left and central channels. The twenty-four major channels (including one called Undivided at the forehead, for example) appear in the outer world as the twenty-four great sacred places (including Jalandhara).³

He continues by saying that,

In general, ultimately no place lies outside the pervasive display of the pure lands and forms of enlightenment. Therefore, those whose vision is pure can witness the Buddha's infinite miraculous powers even in inanimate objects. As is said,

Who brings the Buddha to his mind

Will before him Shakyamuni find.

This means that for all who have faith and devotion toward the Buddha, all forms and sounds appear as the display of the body, speech and mind of enlightenment. Therefore, the thoughts, This is a sacred place, or This is not a sacred place, amount to the distorted discursive thoughts of an impure mind.

In particular, that the primordially existent sacred places constitute sublime sites for engaging in the conduct that leads quickly to awakening is stated in the precious tantras: there existence is therefore undeniable.⁴

This final point aligns with the reference to Saraha earlier in which we see that, in reality, all places—outer, inner, and secret—are sacred space. Ngawang Zangpo also includes a chart listing the manner in which the pithas correspond to the body according to the Chakrasamvara Tantra in which we see the classical Indian pithas of Jalandhara, Oddiyanna, Kamarupa, and Dévikotri. These are to be found within the crown of the head, the right ear, the armpits, and the eyes, respectively.⁵ This dynamic, in which enlightened mind and sacred space become embedded within our bodies, has powerful implications. This very incarnation—the relationship between flesh, bone, lymph, emotional body, and energetic body—creates the potentiality of vast power and depth of realization that can be considered innate, or indigenous, to the continuum of experience unique to this life.

This constant reflection of the qualities of the liberated mind onto, and into, the body also occurs in relation to the spatial qualities of the earth around us. As we saw earlier, the melding of spiritual power with the geographic qualities of the world around us can take the form of a constantly unfolding field of practice and empowerment, which transforms the experience of the moment from the ordinary to the mythic. The possibility of

our experience of mind and the way that it relates to space and time has no limits, as we are about to see. Of particular interest in this regard is a reference to a note found in Mattheiu Ricard's translation of *The Life of Shabkar*:

It must be remembered that sacred geography does not follow the same criteria as ordinary geography. Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910–91), for instance, said that within any single valley one can identify the entire set of the twenty-four sacred places. Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche (1903–87) also said that sacred places, such as Uddiyana, can shrink and even disappear when conditions are no longer conducive to spiritual practice. The twenty-four sacred places are also present in the innate vajrabody of each being.⁶

The implications of such a view are that should the tantrika be willing and able, the present moment has the potential to be the seat—or pitha—for the experience of realization. This point is similarly driven home in *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture*, a collection of essays edited by Toni Huber. These essays offer a rich exploration of issues surrounding pilgrimage sites, sacred geography, and *geomancy*, the practice of divination rooted in the layout of the physical environment. Of particular interest is the essay by David Templeman entitled “Internal and External Geography in Spiritual Biography” in which he explores the relationship that the mahasiddha Krishnacharya had with the twenty-four pithas, especially that of Dévikotri. Templeman considers the importance of these sites as internal loci and suggests that although pilgrimage to these sites was indeed important, there is little evidence to support that many siddhas visited all of them. In fact, Templeman suggests that some sites more than others are of particular significance and have been over time, while others are dangerous, home to subtle harmful beings (wild flesh-eating dakinis) that need to be appropriately tamed before we can occupy that particular location. In the case of the mahasiddha Krishnacharya, his untimely end occurred at the site of Dévikotri, which had a reputation for incredible, unpredictable volatility that was well known throughout India at the time.

The idea that internal places of volatility, with beings that need to be subjugated, reside within our own inner geographical plane is interesting. It raises thought-provoking questions around how trauma is stored in the body

and how this living organism to which our consciousness is linked directly responds and relates to both the experience of suffering and the experience of awakening. Templeman also provides a three-paneled chart in his article listing the twenty-four pithas according to the Chakrasamvara Tantra, as explained by the great teacher Jonang Taranatha and the Sakya master Kunga Drolchok. This chart indicates that Dévikotri—this very powerful site—is located within our energetic body in the area around both of our eyes.⁷

What I find most compelling about this subject is that it has a lot to do with how we relate to the world around us, how we import meaning to this world, and what we allow ourselves to be in relation to time and space. Developing a relationship to the environment so that it holds the imprint of the awakened mind can be a powerful way to take back our relative experience of the moment. It is transformational and revolutionary. The essays in Huber's book and the work by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye describe the Tibetan cultural views and Tantric Buddhist approach to sacred geography—these two are not, by any means, identical, as Huber points out in his essay. Huber suggests that Tibetan culture influenced Vajrayana, making it distinct from the Tantric Buddhism that developed in India and spread to Tibet.⁸

Although the distinction is subtle, it speaks to how meaning is translated. It may be that just as there can never be a one-to-one translation of a text from one language to another, a one-to-one translation of a spiritual path as it moves from culture to culture is similarly unlikely. I wonder: How does Tantric Buddhist sacred geography translate to our experience of Buddhism in the West?

I think that it's clear that Buddhist sacred geography is as present in the West as it is in Tibet or India, and I'd also add that we should map it, live within it in a more open way, and make it ours. Just as bringing death onto the tantric path is a vital way through which we can embed the path within our culture, developing an authentic, playful, and liberated relationship to sacred geography is a vital part of our practice—even though this type of view is less emphasized in the contemporary Western Buddhist world. In a sense, we have a sophisticated ability to appreciate geography as it relates to politics, natural resources, and various oppressions related to colonialism—yet we have much work to do in relation to developing the inner visionary relationship to the world around (and within) us. This requires us to slow down and take time to experience the world and deepen our practice.

If Jalandhara is a site that corresponds to the crown of my head, Oddiyana a site that corresponds to my right ear, and Devikotta to my two eyes, all the while also representing sacred places reflected upon the Indian subcontinent and/or the Tibetan Plateau, where would they be reflected upon the geography of the United States? Or more playfully, perhaps, Brooklyn? It seems that some of this has to do with fully owning and bringing Tantric Buddhism *home*. In so doing, I am curious to see how this type of reorientation occurs. Can we do for ourselves what Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye did for Tibetans?

As Tantric Buddhism takes root here in the United States and continues to flourish, I would love to see all of the twenty-four pithas of the Indian subcontinent reflected here. I think that when we can do this, we will have an authentic, indigenous, Western Tantric Buddhism. Perhaps as we learn to slow down and engage in our relationship with our surroundings, this will be more evident. I'm very curious to see how this aspect of tantra translates to Western culture; it seems like there is great potential.

Obstacles and the Experience of Mind

At this point we will be looking at a portion of a text written by Gampopa, a student of Milarepa who, according to classical biographical narrative, has come to be remembered as one of Milarepa's two main students. The other is Rechungpa, a *repa*, or lay tantric yogin much like Milarepa.

When Gampopa met Milarepa he was a monk, but he hadn't always been ordained. In fact, earlier in his life, Gampopa was a physician. As the story goes, the region where he was living was ravaged by a plague. Eventually his wife and children fell ill and, before they died, his wife told him that should he survive, he should devote his life to dharma because this life is fleeting and one of suffering. Despite his repeated attempts to treat them, his family died, and with the pain of this loss alive in his heart, he eventually was ordained within the Kadampa tradition and devoted his life to dharma practice. Later, he began to feel the need to gain exposure to the tantric teachings and came to learn of Milarepa—what he heard inspired a sense of faith in this yogi and he sought out Milarepa. Eventually they met, and Gampopa became Milarepa's student, received initiation, transmission, and instructions, and went into retreat to practice. Realization dawned within the

mind-stream of Gampopa, and he became an ever-closer student of Milarepa. After Milarepa's death, he settled into a retreat place on Mount Gampo (hence his name) and eventually developed a following.

Because he was a monk, the early sangha around Gampopa and after his death tended toward the monastic, but during his lifetime the sangha was most likely fairly mixed. At that time in the community, there were probably not such hard and fast distinctions, or preferences, I should say, between being an ordained monastic or being a yogini or yogin. Gampopa was responsible for composing a number of important texts that would become foundational for the Kagyu tradition that was arising around him. One of his most well-known works is *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, which is the first *lam-rim* (literally, paths and stages) text in Tibetan. Lam-rim literature serves as a road map for the Buddhist path—these texts are like guidebooks that aide the practitioner as they traverse the path. We will be looking at one section of *A Precious Garland of the Supreme Path*, which is a slightly earlier text, one that Gampopa may have used as a model for *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*. The portion that we will be examining is dedicated to bringing obstacles that arise in meditation onto the path.

In this text, Gampopa spends time looking at obstacles in three ways: obstacles that can be avoided, obstacles that can be transformed, and resting in obstacles as they arise.

I've always found that this instruction, ever since it was taught to me by Khenpo Lodrö Donyo, the abbot of Bokar Rinpoche's monastery, to be a very profound set of instructions and also a way for me to check in with my practice to see where it is that I'm operating from at any given point in time. The context within which these teachings were written says a considerable amount about their location within practice. In 1997, I had the opportunity to begin attending a mahamudra seminar that Bokar Rinpoche taught annually in Bodh Gaya and later in Salugara, West Bengal. During these teachings Bokar Rinpoche would teach from his text *Opening the Door to Certainty*, a condensed version of the ninth Karmapa's *Ocean of Certainty*. This particular exploration of treating these three types of obstacles resonated with me in a very profound way, and still does, especially as the instructions relate to bringing the practice of mahamudra into our daily lives. This instruction has also been powerful for me as a chaplain, as a parent, and as a liver of life.

Let's now explore Gampopa's take on obstacles. The three ways that he asks us to look at obstacles are from the point of understanding if it is skillful to avoid them, transform them, or rest in them.

When obstacles arise, try avoiding them: The root of this instruction is more or less a mirroring of the ethical discipline Gampopa found in the Theravada tradition. Here, Gampopa suggests that when we are faced with an obstacle that is too challenging, one that we may not be ready for, or one that has a valence that will unseat us, sometimes the best medicine is to avoid the situation altogether.

For example, we might find ourselves in a meditation session, or off the cushion in the midst of our lives, in situations that are extremely challenging. We might be experiencing situations that create discord or are painful or confusing, which make our own relationship to practice difficult. We might find ourselves in situations that we don't have the capacity to bring into our practice. They might be things that are incredibly triggering or overwhelming. These obstacles might take the form of particular family relationships, or particular physical locations, emotional locations, or relationships to substances—they might also take the form of traumas or our relationship to a particular trauma.

The essence of this instruction is to develop the skill and confidence to identify obstacles for which the best remedy might be avoidance. We're not avoiding what is arising as a means of hiding but to allow ourselves the self-care to not delve into what is too powerful for us. What might burn us out—or perhaps even worse, spin us off into unskillful or self-destructive reactions. When we spend time contemplating this instruction, and we really look at what it means to become aware of the different things that we're experiencing in our meditation practice and the things that we may be bringing into our daily life, developing the confidence we need to skillfully avoid such situations is an asset.

When obstacles arise, try transforming them: This mode of response to obstacles that Gampopa introduces was explained to me by Khenpo Rinpoche as being more in line with the tantric tradition.

In fact, you could even suggest that this response is the standard as per the tantric tradition in that we use visualization and other creative means to transform the experienced obstacle into something that becomes easier to interact with.

This creative response allows us to access what we may have previously been unable to access. Transformation allows us to experience hardship so that we can bring it into our meditation practice by creatively transforming the situation through visualization, mantra recitation, and the cultivation of pure-view. Using yidam practice, through which we learn to develop the sense that one is a tantric Buddha (as we'll be looking at in the next portion of the book), can be vital to developing skill with this instruction.

Familiarizing ourselves with the arts of transformation empowers us to learn how to, for lack of a better term, hack our mind. This is especially the case with regard to hacking our habitual tendencies, or what we could call the experience of mind, which is highly patterned by the habits and assumptions that we have come to solidify over the course of life. These are long, long, drawn-out habitual patterns, a type of calcification that keeps us convinced that this self is *real*. Such patterning convinces us that we are, in this particular moment, a particular *type* of person who goes through life in a particular *type* of way. This patterning, which is reinforced in so many ways—both conscious and unconscious—is the root of our suffering.

The act of transforming the static dynamic of suffering is something that you can do through deity yoga. You can also do this through chöd, tonglen, and a wide variety of lojong slogans. We have a multitude of ways to transform experiences that arise that we might react to with less skill than we desire or intend.

When obstacles arise, try resting in them: The third modality in Gampopa's approach to how to deal with obstacles as they arise is to simply rest. This profound response to obstacles asks us to begin to acquaint ourselves with the nature of mind and the fundamental nature of awareness. The mind is the backdrop, or the container, for all experience that arises.

When we're able to engage with obstacles in this way, we enter into the practice where we're able to allow ourselves to develop some insight into one who experiences the difficulty or the obstacle.

Where is this individual? Perhaps we might look at the form this obstacle is taking and the degree to which this obstacle has any inherent existence independent of anything else. In this way, finding ourselves in situations we might otherwise have avoided becomes a practice of using our experience as the focus of meditation. In doing this, we might find ourselves looking at our near-automatic habitual reactions as they arise from moment to difficult moment. Within this space, we have the opportunity to rest in the nature of mind and see things for what they are. We begin a practice of dissolving our patterning and the habits that we've relied upon to help define this moment and the vast history that has brought us to this point in time.

This instruction is powerful because it challenges us to learn how to let go and how to remain present. Such an approach to practice also asks us to learn how to develop a sense of fearlessness in relation to everything that's happening—physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually—in every aspect of our being, and the way the experience interacts with ideas of how we should be, or ideas about how the world should be, becomes part of the basis of our practice.

If we were to go back to Tsunma Zangmo's reflections on Vajrasattva practice and the varieties of codes that we find affect the way we arise in the moment—moral codes, personal codes, and societal codes—this instruction asks everything to arise in a way that is free and unimpeded. All of our coded behavior, our coded response—including the coded identity that we have projected onto ourselves and the world around us and all of the projections that people project onto us—become the nexus of dharma practice. This sense of identity, this sense of reality, and this sense of permanence that we are currently experiencing is what we bring to practice if we can sit with stability and embrace what arises with insight, compassion, and patience. When we can practice like this, we are opening the treasure casket of mahamudra and exploring what it means to live from a perspective of radical acceptance.

Using the metaphor of cutting, we can choose to sever the roots of the tree of our emotional and thought reactions at their very base by resting in that which arises in the moment. Through a combination of shamatha and vipassana, we allow ourselves to settle deeply into what's arising, how it's arising, how that appearance arises, and all of the subsequent subtle assumptions, layers, and reactions—layers and reactions in relation to space and in our relationship to time—and our ideas about personhood and location.

These three techniques that Gampopa highlights in his *The Precious Garland of the Supreme Path*, especially as they relate to problems as they arise in the path, are useful, not only just in our time on a meditation cushion, our time in retreat, but also to our more embodied and more authentic experience in going about our daily lives as practitioners of Tantric Buddhism.

This particular set of instructions helps us develop a flexibility, as if we're developing new muscles, to be able to know how to respond, when to respond, and what way is the most skillful for responding to the way that we may be suffering.

As we look at what it means to experience the freshness of mind and the nakedness of our true nature, these three instructions become incredibly powerful tools through which we can begin to dig more deeply into every particular experience we might have in any particular moment. I think that, especially within the context of the modern American setting for the practice of Tantric Buddhism, this instruction is very meaningful if we feel compelled to examine our relationship to whiteness or our relationship to racism and patriarchy. Through learning to rest into this experience in this moment with a sense of radical acceptance, while also bringing to mind how it is that we benefit from whiteness, or racism, or patriarchy, it is possible to gain deep wisdom around how these patterned systems of power relate to the projected images of who we think we are.

When we begin to embrace a skillful use of what it means to avoid, transform, and rest in difficulties as they arise, we develop an ability, almost as if we're dancing, through which we can move, almost like a stitch ripper ripping the stitches that hold together the assumed reality that we all find ourselves in at this particular time.

Of course, these instructions also relate very powerfully to caregiving. When overwhelmed in caregiving, take a break. As you develop the ability to sit with the difficulties involved, whether it is caring for a loved one who's sick, caring for someone who's dying, or perhaps caring for yourself, interacting with and playing with what it means to transform any given experience becomes a way of bringing relief. Under these circumstances, we don't do this as a way of disassociating from the experience but as a way of taking all of the data that we're processing and reorganizing it out of a samsaric model into an awakened model.

The use of the last instruction with regard to resting with whatever's arising allows us to rest with the difficulty of saying goodbye to loved ones when they're at the end of life, coping with the difficulties that may be coming as our roles and our assumptions about who we are change, and being comfortable when ideas that we have about our relationships change. Resting in those experiences and walking into the next moment with a sense of bravery informed by the natural ease of knowing our mind is deep practice.

Yidam Practice

The practice of deity yoga, or yidam practice, is one of the jewels of Tantric Buddhist practice. The term itself is a contraction of the Tibetan: *yid kyi dam tshig*. The term *yid* refers to *mind* or *intellect* and the term *dam tshig* (pronounced *damtsik*) is Tibetan for the Sanskrit term *samaya* and can also mean *pledge* or *vow*. Thus, the term *yidam* can be understood as the practice of holding the samaya or pledge of the mind. The term *samaya* should be familiar from our exploration in the previous section of the book.

Let us look at how yidam practice is a way with which we seal the mind through the application of samaya. Yidam practice is rooted in a fundamental restructuring of the way in which we experience, relate to, and move throughout the phenomenal world. It is a way of transforming and training in familiarizing ourselves with enlightened expression of body, speech, mind, and essence. To be fair, there is no way to do the topic of yidam practice justice in just one portion of this book. Many books can be written about yidam practice, and over the course of the last millennia, a great many texts on this practice have been.

I think that some of the practice of deity yoga or yidam practice can be reduced to a simple explanation that I'm going to attempt right now.

My father is an artist. When I was young, I grew up in SoHo in a big loft. My father had a studio right in the middle of the loft, and in order to get to my room, which was in a converted elevator shaft that looked out over Grand Street, I would have to walk through his studio. Quite often he would be wrapped up—completely engaged—in the process of painting. In some cases, he would tape his brushes to the end of four-foot dowels so that he could paint from the vantage point of somebody who was standing and looking at the entire canvas. Usually these canvases were between eight and twelve feet wide and about six or eight feet high.

My father would often have a Walkman on. This was back in the day of cassettes, and when the Walkman was the size of a big book. He loved this device, and he would listen to music as he painted. Throughout my childhood, he would talk to me about painting and would make time so that my sister and I could learn to paint, and occasionally, he let us paint on his own canvas. Witnessing, learning about, and engaging in the process of artistic creation—especially by being raised amid constant creativity—had a profound effect on me. Unbeknownst to me, and in a way that I have only begun to understand recently, creativity and the artistic process informs the way that I relate to dharma practice as well as how I teach dharma. Indeed, for a long time, I wanted to be an artist; however, over the course of time, as I grew, and as my interests deepened and matured, I realized that there is room for the same amount of creativity in engaged spiritual practice as there is in being an abstract painter or sculptor or potter or weaver or musician. In fact, I do not understand how the tantric path can be traveled without creativity.

At one point I remember my father telling me why he listened to music while painting—he felt that it kept part of his mind occupied so that another aspect of mind would be able to arise through the creative process. On some level, the most outer distractible, and/or distracting, aspects of his mind were consumed by the music to which he was listening. This consumption of distracted, or discursive mind, allowed some other, deeper aspect of being to arise onto the canvas through the application of paint, color, and texture.

In this sense, for him, the creative process was this way of going deeper and trying to learn how to experience, convey, and create from a place of deep-rooted spiritual agency and authenticity. In a certain way, yidam practice is very similar. Not surprisingly, yidam practice is generally divided into two separate phases: *creation* and *completion*. In some translations, *creation* becomes *generation*, but what is being referred to is the same, the creation, or generation, of oneself as a Buddha or tantric meditational deity.

Let us use Chenrezig as an example as he is commonly found and not that complex. In the practice of using Chenrezig as a yidam, we engage as visualization sequence through which we construct an awakened way of being. In some *sadhanas* (ritual texts), the build-up to a self-visualization as Chenrezig can be very progressive. In these cases, we visualize a lotus blossom, upon which sits a flattened moon-disk, upon which is a particular Tibetan syllable that represents the root-essence of the deity. Generally, this syllable radiates a light that turns into offerings for the various manifold Buddhas of the three times and ten directions. This light comes back to bless us and then cycles back out as a way of blessing all sentient beings throughout the universe. At this point, we visualize ourselves as the Buddha of compassion, Chenrezig—he's white and has four arms. He has two center hands, which clasp a wish-fulfilling gem. His upper right hand holds a rosary, and his upper left hand holds a lotus flower. He sports a five-pointed crown of jewels. Silk streamers are in his hair, and it is up in a topknot. Seated within the topknot is the Buddha Amitabha, who presides over the Western pure land of Dewachen. Chenrezig's legs are crossed in what we call lotus position or *padmasana*. He has a deerskin loosely draped and tied around his midsection. Five colored lights stream out from his being—white, red, blue, yellow, and green—and they represent the purification of body, speech, mind, activity, and essence.

Of the creation stage, the erudite and prolific Jamgon Kongtrul instructs us:

In the meditation of creation stage there are four aspects of which you should gain at least some understanding: the basis of purification, that which is to be purified, that which purifies, and the result of the purification.

The basis of purification is the eternal, non-composite realm of reality that fully permeates all beings as the buddha nature.

Sentient beings thus also possess the qualities of the Body of Reality, such as the marks and signs that exist as an integral aspect of awareness: this is the basis for purification.

That which is to be purified is the incidental blemish of delusion arising from ignorance without beginning, which obscures this buddha nature.

An example would be the sun obscured by clouds.

The sunshine is the capacity to manifest inherent qualities.

The clouds are incidental blemishes that could clear away.

*Emotional and cognitive obscurations and those of meditative absorption are what is to be purified.*²

That which purifies, according to Kongtrul, is the sequence of constructing the visualization and related rituals, which he summarizes the following way:

From the initial meditation on the deity visualization up to the dissolution,

Each ritual has its own sequence, but to generalize:

*the basis on which purification takes place is the buddha nature itself; that which is purified is the delusion of the infant consciousness from the time it enters and is born through the time of the intermediate stage of death.*¹⁰

What Kongtrul is highlighting is that the completion stage of this type of tantric practice has a way of teasing out the fundamental ignorance that prevents us from being able to recognize our original face, which is none other than Buddhahood. The gradual construction of the visualization is a highly creative process that takes some getting used to. When we step into these practices, it can be helpful to be gentle with ourselves rather than try to power through—we should take care to not oversolidify what we are doing.

One common instruction that is ubiquitous to the tradition is that as we visualize ourselves as Chenrezig, for example, we must try to make the visualization real, yet rainbowlike. Real, but dreamlike; real, but illusory. We should not be focused on the bones within the body of Chenrezig and all the internal organs we might imagine him to have, but we should recall that his body is a transformational body, a body of light and energy. We should also keep in mind that this is also the true nature of our body.

Kongtrul further continues,

*The clear form of the deity is the luminous appearance of your own mind,
and the unclear, dissatisfying experience is also your mind!
So also, mind is the one who desires clarity and tries again,
and mind is the wisdom deity and guru.
Everything is mind's appearance, and yet mind itself is uncontrived.
The beauty of this ultimate essential point of the approach of the two
stages is that no matter which of the many creation stages you do,
if you apply clear awareness and mindfulness that is merely undistracted,
when the meditation is clear, it arises as the clarity-emptiness and when
obscure, as obscurity-emptiness.*[¹¹](#)

This refers to the result of the purification to which Kongtrul referred earlier. This result of purification is not necessarily a result that one achieves—this result happens to have been present with us the entire time that we have been alive. We just haven't recognized it. Thus, as we generate the visualization of ourselves as Chenrezig, begin the rituals of offering and related prayers as are standard within most yidam sadhanas, and focus the mind through visualization and the mantra recitation of Chenrezig (*Om Mani Padme Hum*), we ought to do so with vitality and energy as well as lightness while we are also aware of the potentiality inherent in every moment. There is something very erotic and blissful in coming to realize that every moment is infused with awakening—every moment is imbued with great power and meaning, even the dull moments.

Within the context of yidam practice as expressed through the practice of Chenrezig, we have the power to transform speech and all that we hear into the completely liberated compassion of Chenrezig's pure land. This whole

environment in which we find ourselves becomes transformed into a mandala of perfect purity, of essential, naturally arising compassion. It is naturally arising in the sense that we do not need to exert great effort. Naturally, it is compassionate, naturally it is perfect. Our form does not need to be painfully transformed—as if we are great sinners in need of redemption—from our normal everyday body, full of aches and pains and limitations and delusions. Our body of ignorances, our body of obsessions and jealousies, our body of anger—this is naturally transformed into the settled, relaxed, empowered body of blissful, naturally arising compassion.

This transformation begins to be affected in the very beginning when we take up these practices and the related rituals. Whether it is the construction of the visualization, the description of the mandala, or the activity that Chenrezig engages in, going through all the different six realms—the hot and cold hells, the hungry ghost realm, the animal realm, the human realm, the demigod realm, the god realm—natural liberation is present at every moment. As we engage in such practices, in the beginning there's a little bit of artifice, some irony around the creation of an identity, which is liberated and used to supplant the samsaric identity that we created and that is projected upon us by others. That said, it takes some effort to change the way that we experience the phenomenal world. We could even say that it might initially take an equal amount of force to apply against these habits of imperfection that we've developed over time. These automatic reactions are rooted in self at the expense of others, at the expense of the environment, at the expense of the world around us. Kongtrul notes this by stating:

*In general, creation stage is a contrivance,
but the path of contrivance leads to the authentic natural state.
With the mental conviction of the lack of reality in the root or ground
of deluded grasping to deluded appearance,
resting in a pristine state is completion stage itself, the actual natural
state.
The first stage is the provisional meaning and the latter the definitive
meaning.*^{[12](#)}

As we settle into this liberated environment, this mandala, the very reflection of a type of sacred geography that we covered earlier, let us try to

settle in a way that is free from worry and reacting. There is no place for fear and no place for anxiety. Every inhalation becomes an inhalation of perfect, unified, enlightened bliss. Every exhalation becomes perfect compassionate resolve. There's no difference between inner or outer. There's a place of great peace, a place of great, naturally arising power and spiritual power.

This is the root of yidam practice. There are many different kinds of yidam practices—Chenrezig, Vajravarahi, Vajrakilaya, Hevajra, Chakrasamvara, and so on—the list is as extensive as it is a demonstration of the compassion of the tradition. Yet at the root, yidam practice revolves around the experience of simplicity and the cultivation of an effortlessness of being. This is the real power and benefit of yidam practice. This being said, as Western practitioners in a capitalist marketplace of spiritual practices, it behooves us to remain mindful that simplicity is best—we only need one yidam. It's easy to feel that we need a few, perhaps one for when we're feeling wrathful and a healing one for when we need healing. It's easy to accidentally find ourselves in this place, and should this experience arise, it is helpful to remember that engaged dharma disrupts this kind of grasping. When we are grasping, let us bring grasping into practice. When we need healing, let our practice heal us. Engaged practice is powerful when it is creative and when it empowers us to play with what is arising in the moment.

When we look at yidam practice from this place of deep creativity, with gentleness and ease, as if we are dancing, or painting with ink on a gigantic canvas, moving gracefully, with intention and effort, our practice takes root in such a naturally beautiful way. There are no rough edges. The wind of our mantra polishes the rough edges of reality; the repetition of our visualization smooths our jerky relationship to the other. Naturally arising compassion settles our obsessive, compulsive fear about being able to do the right thing. The fundamental quietude of the moment eases the deep angst that arises when we're anxious and awkward with the way life flows. This is the heart of yidam practice. This is the heart of what it means to transform body, speech, mind, activity, and essence. This is also the way that the experience of completion stage practice begins to manifest within our lives.

The Lama as Appearance

As I mentioned earlier, in the late 1990s, I had the opportunity to attend Bokar Rinpoche's annual mahamudra seminars offered in Bodh Gaya. At the time, Bodh Gaya was a much different place than it is now. It was smaller and more intimate, and the main road actually ran right through town, along the Mahabodhi Temple, making it a noisier place than it is now. It was a small, at times sleepy, town, which would pulsate under the strain of various cycles of pilgrims coming to practice at the site of Buddha's enlightenment. At the time, Rinpoche would offer his mahamudra seminar in a tent on the grounds of the nearby Nepali Temple, and we would spend time doing meditation practice under the Bodhi tree as a group most days. This was also when the Kagyu Monlam was run by Bokar Rinpoche. At that time, the Kagyu Monlam was also a much smaller and a far more intimate affair.

I remember one late morning session very fondly. The nature of Bokar Rinpoche's teaching and the profundity with which his words seemed to open up my experience of the moment at that time made me able to appreciate the light, the sound, and the smells of the large tent in which these teachings were being held and made them feel extra vivid. Bokar Rinpoche was teaching from *Opening the Door to Certainty*, which is his distillation of the ninth Karmapa's much larger work, *Ocean of Certainty*. Rinpoche wrote his short work at the request of a group of students who were in the Kamstang (Karma Kagyu) cloistered three-year retreat that he supervised at his monastery outside of Darjeeling. At the time Bokar Rinpoche would teach from this text in the mornings, and in the afternoons, Khenpo Lodrö Donyo would teach from Gampopa's *The Precious Garland of the Supreme Path*.



Kyabje Bokar Rinpoche (seated on right) and Khenpo Lodrö Donyo Rinpoche (seated on left) during the annual Kagyu Monlam held at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, India. Bokar Rinpoche was considered one of the greatest contemporary mahamudra masters and was the retreat master for the Karma Kagyu Lineage and holder of the Shangpa Kagyu lineage. Photo courtesy of Erik Bloom.

During one memorable session, Bokar Rinpoche was teaching on the four special preliminaries in the mahamudra tradition. These are broadly grouped as the Causal Condition, the Empowering Condition, the Objective Condition, and the Immediate Condition.

The Causal Condition

The first special preliminary is perfectly mastering our mind stream and cutting away any attachment or bond so that we can cultivate a sense of disinterest for this world—a genuine wish for liberation. This special preliminary is referred to as *causal condition*. The causal condition, according to the ninth Karmapa in his *Ocean of Certainty* is “the cause [for mahamudra practice] to be free from taking things to be real and to be without any attachments.”¹³ It stresses renunciation and suggests that practitioners should dwell alone in a secluded place, thereby renouncing any activity that may create outer or inner obstacles.

This causal condition is rooted in working to create an authentically arising sense of renouncement, maintaining a dissatisfaction with what samsara offers. Sometime this is called *remembering samsara's defects*. In a relative way, samsara has a tremendous amount to offer. It can offer us wealth and physical comfort. Sometimes it appears able to offer us emotional

comfort. Despite the fact that samsara might appear to bring us benefits, any such benefit is fleeting and not an authentic source of happiness. The seemingly positive qualities of samsara are very temporary, and the way in which we achieve such meaningful positive outcomes is often predicated on creating more suffering for ourselves, because we often lack the necessary insight to effectively end our own suffering. Sometimes the decisions we make in the attempt to cause the reduction of our own suffering actually end up creating greater suffering for others. For this reason, the causal condition for genuine practice is a deep-seated natural renunciation.

The Empowering Condition

The second special preliminary is called the *empowering condition*. Bokar Rinpoche points out why it is called this:

Because the path which brings us to realize mahamudra depends solely on the lama, we need to be directed by an authentic spiritual friend this master assumes four aspects.^{[14](#)}

Then he continues by describing some of the more specific qualities of the lama who acts as the principal link, as it were, to the breadth of the practice of mahamudra. The first condition is that the lama is a human being who belongs to a lineage:

That is a lama belonging to a perfectly pure lineage through which the continuity of grace, direct instructions, and so on, have been transmitted without interruption from Vajradhara to our root lama.^{[15](#)}

Of vital importance within the practice of mahamudra is a teacher who has received the instructions, practiced the instructions, and also received the blessing of the lineage and their own lama. This is not necessarily something as tangible as, for example, obtaining a certificate that gives you permission to teach, or one that proves you have been ordained or something like that. Receiving the blessings of the lineage and of the master is inherently intangible; these blessings can even arrive in dreams. Similarly, they can arise in our meditation experience, our sadhana practice, or as we're walking down the street. They can arise while riding the subway. The blessing of the lama is the thing that animates and allows everything to gel. For instance, you may have a teacher who has access to the instructions and

who has been very well trained, but they might not have blessings, and so although they're a wonderful source of knowledge, they may not necessarily be able to actually transmit the nature of mind and the experience of the nature of mind to you. A lama can also hold a pure lineage but be disfigured by their greed, their need for power or dominance over students, or an insatiable sexual appetite—you are much less likely to receive authentic blessings that fertilize the seeds of mahamudra from such a lama. Moreover, the lama must be able to effectively point out the nature of mind, as well as have the ability to help you through your own delusions and defective thinking/practice.

Having all of the right conditions in one person is essential. Thus, the teacher should hold pure lineage, experience the continuity of blessing, hold the direct instructions, and so on in a manner that's been done without substantial deviation from the tradition. One of my teachers, especially concerning mahamudra, was the late Bokar Rinpoche. Bokar Rinpoche received the teachings from a number of people—from His Holiness the sixteenth Karmapa, from the first Kalu Rinpoche, and all the way back to Tilopa, and from Tilopa, directly from Buddha Vajradhara. The thread of continuity is very important. There is a saying that the blessings of the mahamudra lineage are transmitted through the warm breath of the dakinis. It's almost as if they're sitting right behind us whispering the instructions. That whispering is a whispering over time and space, and the blessing of the lama and the blessing of the lineage represent the conduit through which this transmission occurs. Wangchuk Dorje adds,

A spiritual mentor endowed with these [qualities] should be sought out with one-pointed faith and confidence. This accords with the words of Naropa: The qualification of a guru is to belong to a lineage.^{[16](#)}

Then there is the experience of the lama as awakened word, about which Bokar Rinpoche writes this:

When the certainty inspired by the Lama's teaching is obtained in our mind, and when we experience that this teaching is in no way contradictory to the word of the Buddha, all the teachings of the Buddha can manifest as direct instructions.^{[17](#)}

In this way, the master is awakened word. Therefore, the scriptures and the canon become a direct way of interfacing with the wisdom of the Buddha and with the experience of awakened mind. When we have achieved certainty in the instructions of our lama and are able to ascertain that the instructions accord with the larger tradition, then all such teachings of the tradition become the lama as awakened word. Part of this dynamic includes the student having tested the teacher, and the teacher having tested the student, so that there is a compatible relationship. There's a feeling of mutual trust and intimacy in the sense of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to one another so that authentic transmission of mind essence can happen.

At this point, we are able to go out and experience teachings in a direct way from all of the sutras and from all of the tantras. These texts become direct teachings, almost as if interfacing with them is a direct revelation. You can read the Heart Sutra, for instance, and actually receive the blessings and the instruction from it as if you're receiving it directly from the Buddha.

Similarly, you can read the songs of Milarepa and receive the wisdom and the essence of what Milarepa was trying to convey in a way that is direct, natural, and spontaneous. In a sense, we are also playing around with how literal we make the world around us. The world is not as solid as we sometimes assume it to be. As we begin to parse out and interact with the lama or teacher in increasingly subtle ways, we slowly awaken ourselves to the possibility of being in constant presence of the lama at all times. This lama is a lot more than just a physical body; the lama is direct presence. The lama is the same stability as the Buddha Akshobhya, vast and expansive.

In the next section of the text, the lama who manifests as symbolic appearance is described. Bokar Rinpoche writes that

given that all material phenomenon of samsāra and nirvana, outer and inner, whether elements or transformations of elements, show us the aspects of the path by signs and by metaphors. There is nothing other than the lama.^{[18](#)}

Here we see that everything that arises in the physical world as appearance, including the nonphysical world, and everything that arises as dream is the lama or the teacher as symbolic appearance. In this way, when we see a leaf fall from a tree, the leaf is a direct experience with lama. The falling leaf can be a teaching on impermanence. It can be a teaching on

stillness. It can be a teaching on whatever arises in that moment. The earth is the lama, water is the lama, air is the lama, fire is the lama, space itself is the lama.

Every particular experience that we allow ourselves to be open to becomes a way through which the lama reintroduces, again and again, the nature of mind. The arising of phenomena is our direct teacher, as are all of the ways that we disengage and turn away from what's happening in this particular moment. When interacting with the lama in this particular way, there is no separation. Everything becomes dharma. Everything becomes the path. We cannot separate ourselves from awakened mind when we are practicing like this.

When I first received these instructions in a group, I remember just how amazing they were. It was very moving and powerful to learn that the essence of dharma is written in the clouds and in the sand by ants as they walk. That the essence of dharma is written by birds as they fly through the air, or as they feed their young, and that it can be found in the oceans or within ourselves on a cellular level, as all of our biological functions arise, resonated with me in such a distinct way—I had only felt this moved a few other times in my life. The essence of dharma continues as we close our eyes and experience the dream state and when we die; the essence of dharma is constantly present. The lama is constantly present. There is no separation. There is no fear. There is no room for fear.

The fourth way in which the lama arises is as the lama as ultimate nature, or lama as dharmata. Of this, Bokar Rinpoche writes the following:

Through the direct vision, the realization, and the sure and unmistakable understanding of the nature of our own mind, we realize the ultimate nature of all phenomena.^{[19](#)}

When our practice settles and deepens, and when we become more able to experience what it means to hold the vastness of mind and understand the expansiveness and clarity of mind, it is said that we are meeting our mind with that of the lama. Geography is no longer a problem. Time and space are not problems. The lama may have passed away years ago, yet we can still rest in the nature of their mind as our mind. The lama may have been dead for 900 years, or 1,000 years—the mind of Maitripa, for example, is none other than our mind. Everything that arises is nothing more or less than the arising

of the mind's constant stream of enlightenment. This being the case, it is all too easy to fall out of connection to this realization. We get distracted by ideas about time, we get distracted by concepts relating to distance, we get distracted by all of our needs, and we get distracted by our fears, our insecurities, our anger, all of our clichés, all of our emotions—all of these things.

The Objective Condition

Then Bokar Rinpoche goes on to describe the third special preliminary. This next condition is known as the objective condition of

not entering into the considerations of philosophical systems, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, and not tarnished by concepts, we practice only with the essence of mind, as the primordial mode of being, the play of the three Bodies.^{[20](#)}

I love this point and think that the more that we are able to engage our practice, the more we are able to come to deeper realizations about the nature of the lama, the nature of mind. At this moment philosophical discourse becomes unnecessary.

When we just rest, there's nothing else we really need to do. We don't need to define this experience. We don't need to claim it. We don't need to philosophize about this experience or show how another tradition may not support it. We don't need to elaborate on this moment. We can just be. The objective factor in mahamudra is a practice of working with what is arising in mind, and being, experiencing, resting, and not crystalizing our experience.

The Immediate Condition

Then we come to the fourth special preliminary, known as the immediate condition, which is defined by Rinpoche as

when we accomplish the body of the practice, without conceiving an object of meditation or a meditator, we only maintain the essence of ordinary awareness without accepting or rejecting anything, without hope or fear and without mental fabrication.^{[21](#)}

The immediate factor is all about experiencing the essence of ordinary awareness without accepting or rejecting anything and without worrying

about whether we are meditating or not. This part of the instruction asks us to remain free and loose and rest in whatever experience is happening right now.

This can happen with the most basic practice. It can happen as we cook or as we care for loved ones. This can be done while we care for children or the elderly. This part of the instruction asks us to rest freely when we work in jails and prisons, when we work in finance, or when we are in retreat. This can be done at a monastery and in urban areas. There are no limits. The immediate factor is the experience of directly realizing the way mind arises. It is the direct way of experiencing the lama's appearance. It is about being beyond time, beyond description, and being accessible at all times.

The immediate condition is that which transforms samsaric existence into a field of play for mahamudra realization. It transforms what seems lowly and dull into rich green pastures upon which we can feed our practice. It transforms poison into water so that we can quench our thirst. It's the assassin of ambition. It brings everything into focus. When we are able to experience this kind of focus around what life is, and how appearance arises, it is much easier for us to move about the world with compassion and to turn our work from ordinary samsaric work into Buddha work.

Inner Mind

Padampa Sangye's Treasury of Bliss

Padampa Sangye's song that's included here is called "The Vajra Song That Is a Heart-Summary of the Sacred Doctrine of the Pacification of Suffering." As per the tradition, the song was apparently sung by Padampa Sangye to Milarepa, the great early Kagyu meditation master and yogi. Padampa Sangye was one of the eighty-four mahasiddhas. According to his biographies, he traveled from India to Tibet five times. It is also believed that during one of these trips, he met the great female tantric master, Machig Labdron, who was the person to synthesize the chöd tradition. Much of her synthesis of chöd was based on a combination of the practices found within the Shije, the pacification of suffering lineage that Padampa Sangye brought to Tibet, her own dharma practice, teachings given to her prior to meeting Padampa Sangye, and especially her study, practice, and internalization of the Heart Sutra.

I use this song in this book because it speaks to me on many levels; one of the levels is in the way that I relate to the work that I do. I spent three and a half years as a home hospice chaplain, and now I work for the New York City Department of Correction. Both of these places, hospice and jail, are places of great intensity.

In the case of home hospice, much of my work involved a considerable amount of moving around the periphery of our culture by always being around death. In contemporary Western culture, we try very hard to separate ourselves from death. When I was in hospice, I traveled from place to place for all the people that I served, primarily homes in Brooklyn and Queens and an inpatient hospice facility in Manhattan, and for any Buddhist patients that were on our hospice service. There were times when I might have two or three patients actively dying at the same time. I found these to be times of great personal frustration and growth, especially in the beginning, when I realized that I had to decide whom to go see and that I could not be physically present for everyone. I could only effectively make it to one home

in time to support the person who was dying and their family members. These situations created a sense of moral injury or moral distress for me, which while frustrating and confusing, provided fertile ground through which I grew a great deal.

Prior to a patient's active dying, I would have already built a relationship with the patient and/or their loved ones. When I first came to work as a hospice chaplain, one of my initial struggles was trying to live up to my own ethics; I value being able to be there for people when they're at the end of life in an effective and meaningful way. Sometimes that wasn't possible. These dilemmas caused periods of struggle for me; I had my own personal internal conflicting dialogue, you could say. I also think that, on some level, I, like many others, had a visceral reaction to the physical image of death, sadness, and grief, which makes hospice challenging.

As with hospice, I have become habituated to correctional settings, but in the beginning, I was aware of an undeniable rawness that arises in relation to the rawness of the human experience and the rawness of the emotions that everybody on both sides of the gate is feeling in jail settings. It's not just those who are incarcerated who suffer, but also those who are charged with providing care, custody, and control of the inmate/detainee population. A certain intensity manifests when we experience images of bars and people being confined. Perhaps this is more the case now than at any other time within our culture; to some extent, such intense feelings are conveyed by the division within our culture between law-enforcement and non-law-enforcement views in a much more general sense.

I want to touch upon the visceral responses that arise in relation to death, the fear of death, and incarceration not in terms of value judgments, but to offer Padampa Sangye's song as an instruction that can aide us as we negotiate the way we might suffer in relationship to that which is difficult and challenging. Being immersed in death and incarceration is an important facet of my spiritual practice, my spiritual formation, and my karma. These areas are where I focus my practice, but we all, very likely, have different places to which our practice (or chaplaincy) is connected.

I am overjoyed that my friend and fellow yogin colleague, Westin Harris, agreed to let me use this text and include it in this book. I particularly value the inclusion of Karmapa Mikyö Dorje's notes on this practice. It's so easy

for us to forget that these instructions were well worn over time. Padampa Sangye taught this song, which can be thought of as a distillation of his own spiritual practice. It has since been taught and passed down over time, eventually to eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje, and it continues to be taught to this day.

Let us take some time to be with the words of yogin Dampa Sangye.

གྲུབ་ཐོབ་དམ་པ་སངས་རྒྱས་ཀྱིས་ནལ་འབྱོར་གྱི་དབང་ཕུག་མི་ལ་རས་པ་ལ་གདམས་

པའི་དམ་ཆོས་སྤྲུག་བསྐྱེད་ཞི་བྱེད་སྤྱིང་པོར་བྲིལ་པའི་དོ་རྗེའི་མགུར་བཞུགས་སོ།།

***The Vajra Song That Is a Heart-Summary of
the Sacred Doctrine of the Pacification of
Suffering***

***The Siddha Padampa Sangye's
explanation to the Lord of Yogis Milarepa***

Translation by Westin Harris

དམ་ཆོས་སྤྲུག་བསྐྱེད་ཞི་བྱེད་འདི། །གདོན་གཞོན་སྤྱིན་པོ་མོ་འདུལ་ཅ་ན། །བརྟུལ་ཞུགས་ཀྱི་འཕྲུལ་འཁོར་
འཆའ་བ་ཡིན། །ལུས་ལ་ནཆ་བྱུང་ཅ་ན། །དབྱིངས་རིག་གཅིག་ཏུ་བསྐྱེད་བ་ཡིན། །རྣམ་རྟོག་ཐུགས་སྦྱེས་ཅ་ན། །
ཉོན་མོངས་ལ་འབྱུང་འཛུལ་གཏོང་བ་ཡིན།

This is the sacred doctrine of the Pacification of Suffering

—
When subduing harmful demons, male and female, it is
constructing the magical circle of yogic conduct;

When the body becomes ill, it is binding space and
awareness as one;

When subtle conceptualizations arise, it is cutting through the afflictions;

།གཅིག་ཕུར་སྐྱོག་ཏུ་ཉལ་ཅ་ན། །རིག་པ་བརྟེན་པར་འཛོག་པ་ཡིན། །མངའ་འཁོག་མེད་ཏུ་སྒྲིད་ཅ་ན། །གངགར་
གྱི་ངོལ་བལྟ་བ་ཡིན།

When sleeping alone in private, it is residing in raw awareness;

When in the midst of a crowd, it is directly confronting whatever arises;

།བྱིངས་ན་པར་གྱིས་གསེང་བ་ཡིན། །འཕྲོ་ན་རྩ་བ་གཅོད་པ་ཡིན། །སྒྲིང་ན་བྱིངས་སུ་འཛོག་པ་ཡིན། །ཤེས་པ་
ཡུལ་བྱིར་འབྲང་ཅ་ན། །དེ་ཉིད་དོན་ལ་བལྟ་བ་ཡིན།

When dull, it is awakening with *PHAT*;

When distracted, it is severing the root;

When excited, it is relaxing into the expanse;

When chasing after conceptual objects, it is observing the truth of suchness.

།དམ་ཚེས་སྤྲུག་བསྐྱེད་ཞི་བྱེད་འདི། །ལྟས་དན་བྱུང་ན་གཡང་དུ་ལོན། །རྣམ་རྟོག་ཇི་ལྟར་དགེས་དགེས་མཛོད།

།ནཚ་བུང་ན་བོགས་སུ་འདོན། །འབྱུང་བ་ཇི་ལྟར་དགེས་དགེས་མཛོད། །འཆིབ་བྱུང་ན་ལམ་དུ་སྒྲོང། །འཆི

བདག་ཇི་ལྟར་དགེས་དགེས་མཛོད།

This is the sacred doctrine of the Pacification of Suffering

—

When bad omens occur, receive them as auspicious;

Whatever thoughts arise are treasuries of bliss.

When illness occurs, this brings benefit;

Whatever manifests is a treasury of bliss.

When dying occurs, take it onto the path;

The Lord of Death is a treasury of bliss.

། དམ་ཚཱ་སྤྱལ་བ་སྤྱལ་ཞི་བྱེད་འདི། ། ཏུས་གསུམ་རྒྱལ་པའི་དགོངས་པ་ཡིན། ། རྩོམ་འཆང་གི་གསང་ཚིག་

ཡིན། ། མཁའ་འགོ་སྤྲེ་བཞིའི་སློག་སྟིང་ཡིན། ། རྒྱུད་སྤྲེ་བཞི་ཡི་གདམས་ངག་ཡིན། ། སྟན་བརྒྱུད་གནད་ཀྱི་མན་

ངག་ཡིན། ། མན་ངག་ཐབས་ཀྱི་ལྷེ་མིག་ཡིན། ། དམ་ཚཱ་སྤྱལ་བ་སྤྱལ་ཞི་བྱེད་ལགས། ། ཞེས་གསུང་པས་རྩེ་

བཙུན་ཐུགས་ཤིན་ཏུ་མཉམ་པར་བྱུང་ཏོ། ། ༥

This is the sacred doctrine of the Pacification of Suffering
—

It is the insight of the victors of the three times;

It is the secret speech of *Vajradhara*;

It is the vital essence of the four classes of *Dākinīs*;

It is the instruction of the four classes of *tantra*;

It is the critical advice of the aural lineage;

And it is the key to the methods of that critical advice.

That is the sacred doctrine of the Pacification of Suffering.

Jetsün Milarepa was utterly delighted by these words.

འདི་ནི་མན་ངག་གི་གནད་བསྟུས་པ་འདི་རྗེ་འཇམ་དཔལ་འཕྲུལ་ཏེ། དེ་ལ་ལྷ། གདམས་པ་འཛིན་བ་གསུམ།
 ཉམས་ལེན་གྱི་འཛོག་ལུགས་གཉིས། གོགས་སེལ་གྱི་མན་ངག་གསུམ། བོགས་འདོན་གྱི་ལམ་ཁྱེར་གསུམ།
 གདམས་པ་འཛིན་བ་བརྗོད་པས་མཛུགས་བསྟུ་བའོ། །དང་པོ་ནི། གདོན་བགོགས་ཞི་བྱེད་བརྟུལ་ཞུགས་ཀྱི་འཕྲུལ་
 འཁོར་འཆའ་བ། རྣམ་ཞི་བྱེད་དབྱིངས་རིག་གཅིག་ཏུ་བསྟེ་བ། རྣམ་རྟོག་ཞི་བྱེད་ཉོན་མོངས་ལ་འབྱུང་འཛུམས་
 སུ་གཏོང་བའི་གདམས་ངག་གོ། །གཉིས་པ་ནི། གཅིག་ཕྱར་སྟོང་དུས་རིག་པ་བརྗོད་པར་འཛོག་པ་དང་། མང་
 པོ་འཇིགས་པ་ཏུ་གང་གར་ཐུག་ཐུང་དུ་འཛོག་པ་འོ། །གསུམ་པ་ནི། བྱིངས་ན་མཁའ་ཀྱིས་གསེང་བ། འཕྲོ་ན་རྩ་བ་
 གཅོད་པ། བོད་ན་དབྱིངས་སུ་འཛོག་པ་སྟེ་གསུམ་དང་། ཞར་བྱུང་དེ་ལས་འཕྲོས་ནས་ཤེས་པ་ཡུལ་ཕྱིར་འཕྲོ་ན་
 དེ་ཉིད་གཅེར་མཐོང་དུ་བལྟ་བའོ། །བཞི་པ་ནི། ལྷས་ངན་གཡང་དུ་ལེན་པ། རྣམ་ཐོགས་སུ་འདོན་པ། འཆིབ་
 ལམ་དུ་སྟོང་བའོ། །ལྷ་པ་ནི། མདོ་རྒྱུད་ཀྱི་དགོངས་འདུས། མཁའ་འགྲོ་འཕྲོག་སྟེང་། སྙན་རྒྱུད་ཀྱི་མན་ངག་
 ཡིན་པའི་བསྟུགས་པ་བརྗོད་པ་འོ།

[Karmapa Mikyö Dorje's Notes:]

This is the extraordinary vajra speech which summarizes the vital points of instruction, of which there are five:

1. The three root teachings:
 - i. That which pacifies demonic obstructions is the yantra of yogic conduct.

- ii. ii. That which pacifies illness is blending space and awareness as one.
- iii. iii. That which pacifies conceptual thinking is the advice to release, and thereby flatten, the afflictions.

2. The two systems of practice:

- i. On the occasion of being alone, rest in raw awareness.
- ii. ii. In large crowds, directly encounter whatever arises.

3. The three instructions on dispelling obstacles:

- i. When dull, awaken with PHAT.
- ii. ii. When distracted, cut the root.
- iii. iii. When excited, rest in the expanse.

* Additionally, when fabricating objects of knowledge, turn to the naked perception of suchness.

4. The three enhancing practices to carry along the path:

- i. Receive bad omens as auspicious.
- ii. ii. Illness brings great benefit.
- iii. iii. Take death onto the path.

5. The final summary which expresses the greatness of the teachings:

- i. The gathered intentions of Sutra and Tantra.
- ii. ii. The vital essence of the *dakinis*.
- iii. iii. The expression of praise which is the instruction of the aural lineage.

།འདི་ལ་ལ་སྟོན་པ་མི་བསྟོན་དོ་རྩེས་མཛད་པ་འི་བློན་ཡིག་ཀྱང་སྣང་།། །།ཧྲྰ་སྤྱུ་ཏཱི་བཛྲ་སྤྱུ།། །།

*Explanatory notes by Latöpa Mikyö Dorje. OM SUPRA TISHTHA
BADZRA SVAHA.*

This song cuts deeply into how we can take our meditation practice off of the cushion and place it within the context of direct action. Direct action can be anything for anybody. It can be the disciplines of chaplaincy or social work for some people; in these forms it is direct compassion in action. For others, it's direct spiritual presence—I have a student who has been on a wandering retreat for an indefinite amount of time inspired by one of my teachers, Lama Wangdu. For others still, direct action might be the work of bearing witness. When we enter into these paths of direct action, they become forms of practice that force us to examine and train in radical acceptance. It's one thing to say, "Oh, this is radical acceptance." It's another to actually be open to what's arising in the moment and accept it.

In the moment of experiencing and accepting, right before we accept things as they are, we need to learn how to develop the ability to *contextualize* and *release*. In this regard, contextualizing is an aspect of awareness, and release is necessary for us to be able to move into the next experience, the next moment. Release doesn't mean that you let go and not remember anything. It doesn't mean that you don't effectively take in what's being experienced. Release means you just move to the next moment, and to the next, and to the next without grasping. We'll be looking a little bit more at this in the section on mahamudra.

The first stanza of this song focuses on subduing harmful demons, male and female. Lord Dampa tells us that what allows us to subdue harmful demons is constructing the magical circle of yogic conduct. Harmful demons aren't actually demons per se. They can represent a wide variety of interpretive actors in relation to the way we look at practice. On one level, the demons can represent our kleshas and the whole variety of klesha combinations that affect the way we react to phenomena. They can also represent the nature through which we experience the six realms of existence. Harmful demons also relate to psychological, emotional, and spiritual states that can manifest

as anything that causes conflict internally and externally. When we're contextualizing our practice, I think we do need to be a little careful to make sure that we're not oversimplifying. We're not just reducing Buddhism to a psychological path. Our practice must still hold the same full spiritual/religious and philosophical valence that the tradition has.

In the first line of the song, we subdue all these klesha reactions, all these sources of conflict, subtle and gross, by building the magical circle of yogic conduct—basically engaging in Tantric Buddhist practice in a systemic way. As we've seen up to this point, this could mean yidam practice, the preliminaries, or full-blown mahamudra practice. It could also be chöd, as we explored earlier. In whichever tantric practice we are engaging, the magical circle of yogic conduct enters into the actual practice of dharma, taking it off of the cushion and definitely out of the armchair and the dharma center and into the world. In this case, into the world means into our everyday existence. In order to effectively perform the radical change that's referred to in the enlightenment process, we need to apply a considerable amount of focus and effort, concentration and energy, especially in our initial training.

The next portion of this stanza discusses illness and conceptualization. Padampa Sangye says, "When the body becomes ill, it should be regarded as binding of space and awareness as one." When subtle conceptualizations arise, we should address them by cutting through the afflictions. When the body becomes ill, bind the experience of illness, that myopic, self-oriented, self-reactive, self-focused, self-centered place; bind it with space and awareness as one. In this case, awareness is recognizing this quality of having direct knowledge of, or insight into what's arising. Binding with space is the applying a *lhakthong*, or special insight, vipassana practice. Lhakthong practice allows us to understand the experience of mind as appreciated and known through liberated unblemished awareness as vast as space. It is edgeless. It is limitless and without particular location. It is as if while touching one thing, you simultaneously touch everything that arises, beyond time, beyond space, beyond conception. When illness arises, which typically is a time in which you become very self-oriented, rather than being self-oriented and wrapped up in the samsara of the particular moment, rest in the nature of space.

I've had many experiences with hospice patients who struggled with shortness of breath, either as part of the central aspect of their illness or as a secondary symptom. Anybody who has experienced shortness of breath or has cared for somebody who is experiencing asthma will recognize that it is incredibly anxiety producing. Under these circumstances, it is vitally important for caregivers to be able to help control the patients' environment, because experiencing shortness of breath is terrifying and beyond uncomfortable.

There is a correlation between the intensity of focus on and anxiety around the experience of shortness of breath and all of the emotional and mental disturbances that arise. In a certain way, this mirrors Maslow's hierarchy of needs: when our body is not feeling well, it's hard to focus; we tend to hold a very myopic, self-oriented view, and under these circumstances, resting in the spaciousness of mind is not easy or automatic.

Gö Lotsawa was a great meditation master from the Drukpa Kagyu tradition. He, according to one of his biographies, often used his experience of illness to reorient himself around practice. When he would become sick, he would greet it as a friend he wanted to get to know better and spend more time with. Embracing illness became vital to his practice and allowed him to work through attachment, aversion, and ignorance as they arose within the context of illness.

Similarly, when subtle conceptualizations arise, Padampa Sangye's advice is to cut through these afflictions by resting in the nature of mind; that which pacifies conceptual thinking is the practice of releasing obsessive thinking. Just let it go into the largeness of the container of mind. When we find our conceptualizations to be very frenetic, similar to what we experience during illness, by resting in the nature of mind, we allow ourselves to become more categorically aware of all of the qualities of mind and the ways that we assume this existence to be inherently real/true.

Let's use the sky as a metaphor; when we're aware of the vastness of the sky, sometimes the volume of the clouds doesn't seem so large. They don't take up so much space. Here Padampa Sangye is pointing out to us that our neuroses, our kleshas, the self-centered and self-reifying thoughts and emotions that arise with illness, and the subtle conceptualizations can all be pacified through simply experiencing the mind and maintaining yogic

conduct. Using the Tantric Buddhist commitment to conduct and action creates immense energy within our practice. Being able to step into our practice in this way is what allows for the pacification of suffering.

Dampa Sangye then points out that when sleeping alone, or when being alone, we should try to reside in raw awareness. In this way, the instruction is a little bit like what we saw with regard to the three isolations in the Guhyasamaja tantra: isolation of body, isolation of speech, and isolation of mind. When you're alone, rest body, speech, and mind in the experience of raw awareness. When in the middle of a crowd, in the middle of busyness, directly confront whatever arises. These two points really require some element of prior practice because they are places where we can get easily stuck in our dharma practice.

Now, when you're in the middle of a crowd, when you're with someone on a medical ICU, when they come out of surgery and are on a surgical ICU, or when they are in a psych ER, or a jail facility that's on lockdown, it is beneficial to provide nonjudgmental, compassionate, spiritual presence for all present. In the case of a hospital chaplaincy, this ought to extend beyond the patient to their loved ones, if they are present, as well as to the staff who are attending to the crisis. Remaining aware and being present with everything that's arising helps us hold space for others. In such situations, Padampa Sangye is urging us to allow body, speech, mind, and essence to be able to take in everything that's arising.

Being able to do this requires us to directly confront, with awareness, what is arising with natural radical acceptance. We let things arise and then let them shift as they naturally do. When practicing in this way, it's important to remember that every experience that arises is not permanent; we don't shift from one emotion to the next, only to occupy that new emotion in a permanent way. Over the course of a day, we experience hundreds of emotions, perhaps thousands. At the same time, every single conceptualization that arises, one after the other, usually follows a thread of related thinking based on reactions, the experience being had, on habit—all of these different things. These all become fodder for our larger work of developing a relationship with the nature of mind.

In experiences of dullness, Padampa Sangye asks us to awaken by shouting, "PHAT"! When distracted, we should sever the root of distraction.

When excited, we should relax into the expanse of the nature of mind. When chasing after conceptual objects, we should observe the truth of suchness. This stanza focuses on applying practice. When we're feeling dullness, we should allow awareness to come down like the obliterating syllable, phat. This obliterating syllable reduces everything to its natural state. It can be helpful to visualize this syllable as the sharp sword of awareness coming down with vital, final force. May it completely obliterate the experience of dullness!

Likewise, when it comes to distraction, we try to sever the root of distraction. We do this by focusing on awareness, by cultivating a sense of mindful knowing, of mind knowing itself. Mindful knowing of our ability to remain aware. What and where is awareness? Where is mind? Where is the edge of mind? Where does mind end? Can it have an ending? Does it have a beginning? What happens to mind when we die? At birth? Does mind just start?

This wild and free and fresh way of being is Padampa Sangye's song offering to Jetsün Milarepa. In the story, Jetsün Milarepa hears the song and is absolutely delighted. The song then continues, and Padampa Sangye declares by singing that the sacred doctrine of the pacification of suffering is such that "when bad omens occur, we should receive them as auspicious. Whatever thoughts arise, they are the treasury of bliss. When illness occurs, this brings benefit, whatever manifests is a treasury of bliss. When dying occurs, take it onto the path. The Lord of Death is a treasury of bliss."

In a manner very true to the form of the Tantric Buddhist tradition, this instruction asks us not to turn away from the entire variegated experience of existence. This means not turning away from death, not turning away from illness, and not turning away from superstitions. Superstitions are based on a conceptual framework that we feel the need to honor all the time; let's let superstition and assumptions go! The truth is this is not actually the way things are. Padampa Sangye is pushing the envelope—he is asking us to adopt the clothes of yoginis and yogins and dance out into the middle of the street. Forget normal conventions!

This reminds me of descriptions my teachers have shared with me about how some yogis, after receiving meditation instructions, would go out into the world and provoke people. People would then yell at these yogis; in

some cases, the crowds would physically abuse them, or throw things at them, or deride them. Upon receiving the verbal derision of whomever it was that they were bothering, or as they were being physically assaulted as a result of getting on somebody's nerves, or as they found themselves in actual danger as a result of very unconventional behavior, they would bring that experience into their practice.

Such yogins or yoginis were operating from the same perspective as Padampa Sangye. Using all of the reactive energy created by the heaps of abuse thrown at them is a powerful, and extremely difficult form of spiritual practice—definitely not one appropriate for everybody. This practice is only relevant for people who have a stable meditation practice, good training within the Buddhist tradition, and who are able to engage in these practices without becoming so unseated that they lose it. This is why, in both the Tantric Buddhist and Tantric Hindu tradition, elements of practice involve seeking out that which is transgressive. This, in turn, is about direct action—going against the stream, so to speak, in terms of culture, religion, and spirituality in order to confront the neuroses, the kleshas, the demons, and the ghosts that are created when we don't confront our fears and our anxieties. Such practices are rooted in taking responsibility for all that is unexamined.

This reminds me of a time when the previous Bokar Rinpoche was alive. He gave me a series of teachings over a number of years. I would come see him in India, he would give me the instruction, I would do some retreat in India so the practice could solidify and I could resolve any questions I had with him directly, and then I would come back to the United States and practice for however long it took to get to the next phase of practice. I would then come back, describe my experiences, we would check in, and then he would give the next instruction.

At one point, he asked about my meditation practice. As I described it, I began to tell him that I had started to try to take the practice off the cushion and really engage it while riding the subway to and from work in the mornings and in the afternoons. I described what it's like to ride a crowded subway in New York City during rush hour, especially when the train stops in the station, the doors open, and there is barely room for one extra person to get on the train, and yet dozens still try to push in. The dharma of everybody being squished together.

In these moments, I would try to focus on generating the experience of the deity upon which Bokar Rinpoche was teaching. I would bring my awareness to the recitation of the mantra, silently, and try to transform sound and speech in the train into the sound and speech of the deity. Then I would focus on my own body as having all of the qualities of the deity. I would concentrate on not being too real, on being illusory, like a rainbow, like light body. I tried training in the practice of occupying no particular vantage point, the practice of resting in the experience of the enlightened arising of the deity. This also included transforming the environment into the mandala of the deity; the perfect abode of the deity, a Buddha-field.

The crazy, crowded, screeching subway car, full of people elbowing one another by accident, stepping on each other's feet, breathing on each other, coughing on each other, all of these things, became transformed into an experience filled with constant potential awakening. When I told Bokar Rinpoche about this—I wasn't claiming that I'd experienced transcendent, blissful awakening, but that there were shifts in experience—he got very excited. He was quick to say that this is one of the most important parts of practice. He told me that when in long, extended retreat, it's easy to have a disjointed view of what our practice is like, because we're cloistered. We're not wrapped up in the daily hustle and bustle, and the challenges that arise, especially in contemporary urban life, where there's an assaultive quality to the entire range of senses coming in. He emphasized that approaching meditation in this way was a great way to practice and reiterated that it was not very uncommon for people to leave retreat, go into a chaotic place, and find themselves very unseated, uncomfortable, and unable to fully come back to their meditation practice.

This is the power of Padampa Sangye's instruction. This instruction seals the deal, as it were, the deal in which we are asked to go from taking our practice out of the armchair, off of the cushion, and into the world. Basically, we try to actualize our dharma practice—we take it out of the theoretical, philosophical world—and flush it out. This, of course, involves being exposed to the continual failures of getting triggered, feeling shut down, and fighting with everything that arises. Yet, when it comes to the process of learning how to familiarize ourselves around the essence of the nature of mind and with how realizing the nature of mind relates to the experience of the world around us, this practice becomes essential.

When we're doing this practice, death becomes a treasury of bliss, illness becomes a treasury of bliss, bad omens become a treasury of bliss. Everything that arises, because it becomes something that we can practice with, not in the sense of objectifying what arises, is a treasury of practice. Our practice becomes reoriented around the fact that these things are all naturally arising anyway, so it's all just practice. Rather than developing an overly formal relationship to practice, this song asks us to develop a familiar relationship with everything that arises, a natural, effortless, friendly relationship to everything that arises.

This is also why this kind of instruction is closely related to the idea of the mother and son being reunited: symbolically, the son (the relative mind) is being reintroduced to the mother (the ultimate nature of mind). This is how everything comes together into the experience of awakening. This is also why this song is described as the insight of the victors of the three times; it is the insight of the Buddhas of the three times and ten directions. It is also characterized as the secret speech of Vajradhara; this is the secret instruction of the cosmic, primordial Buddha Vajradhara, who is the source of all of the tantras.

Padampa Sangye regards this song as the vital essence of the four classes of dakinis: the Vajra Dakini, the Ratna Dakini, the Padma Dakini, and the Karma Dakini. It is the essence, the very heart-essence and warm breath of their instruction, and it characterizes their spontaneous relationship to the play of phenomena contained within this practice. Hence this is referred to as the critical advice of the oral lineage—the key to the methods of that critical advice.

How amazing is it that through a song like this, we are able to step into everything that is hard, difficult, and painful? We can step into places of darkness and places of intense suffering, whether they are physical places or places within ourselves, and explore fearlessness practice, which is a rare treat. To look into, to step into, how our visceral reaction to intensity causes the experience of fear to arise and what happens when we continue to practice radical acceptance as that fear arises makes us better practitioners and better spiritual friends, more capable of serving others.

This is the song that can create an army of fearless spiritual warriors, here in North America, in South America, in Europe, on the African continent,

throughout Asia, everywhere. The beauty of this practice is that all of our experiences are constantly happening, at no extra charge. It's all free. It happens twenty-four hours a day. Even dream experience becomes something that we can focus on when we're engaging in an instruction like this.

Ground, Path, Fruit, and Mahamudra

At this point, it's worth talking a little bit about the ground, the path, the fruit, and shamatha and vipassana, or within the context of mahamudra practice, shinay and lhakthong. It is important in the sense that in the early part of the mind portion of the book, we looked at Gampopa's dialectic around responding to problems that arise within practice. He laid out three ways of working with such difficulties as they arise: the first is to avoid the difficulties if possible, the second is to transform them, and the third is to rest in them as they arise.

The practice of Tantric Buddhism, as we have seen, although ultimately effectively rooted in an understanding of the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, is focused and rooted more within transformation and or resting in the experience of difficulties as they arise. One of the problems of being too fixated on transformation is that we can become fixated on needing to transform everything. This pulls us out of relationship to the activity of just resting with what arises.

As a result, it's helpful to have a clear perspective when it comes to what nature of mind practices are all about and why constant reflection and returning to the structure of ground, path, and fruit is important. Luckily the structure of the relationship between these has a simple layout. That being said, as with much of this kind of spiritual practice, it is simple to lay out and explain, but it is hard to bring it into complete fruition.

The Ground

The ground is basically the nature of mind. Mind, when all is said and done, is described as unobstructed openness. It is described as clear light. In this sense, clear light is not a state that is outside of the self, but rather the recognition of mind through not cultivating or grafting anything onto our experience. The mind of clear light is the natural, spontaneous, perfected nature of mind. In one way, mind can be regarded as our own original face,

and the act of recognizing it removes all conceptions that define it. The mind's essential nature is not defined by the play of our thoughts. When thoughts begin to cease, what appears is the experience of emptiness, which arises in an unobstructed way and also causes an experience of blissfulness to arise. This blissfulness is rooted in the exhaustion of all effort. It is a sense of bliss when resting in the inherent beauty of simply experiencing everything as it arises without labeling and judgment. This process is like becoming aware of the canvas upon which a painting is painted. Mind is the luminescent nature of the sky upon which the clouds and other phenomenon arise.

Tsunma Zangmo taught that habitual tendency ensures that when we look at space, we see clouds, birds, stars, and moon. Yet, we tend to be distracted from the clear shining space itself upon which everything arises. Similarly, within the experience of our meditation practice, thoughts, ideas, conceptions, brilliant theories, artistic endeavors, all of these arise and distract us from being able to recognize the ground, the primordially pure, inherently enlightened, vast, expansive, natural, blissful nature of mind.

This is what is characterized as the ground. This is the thing that all beings share—this is our original face. This is also something that we struggle with being able to recognize.

The Path

The path is basically the process of applying effort and diligence, concentration, and patience toward learning how to familiarize our experience with the ground. We do not do this intellectually, although it is possible to do that. It is possible to read endless treatises to try to build a library of every single book on mahamudra or dzogchen or a range of Buddhist tantric practices. But this kind of intellectual knowledge will help only to a certain extent. At some point such knowledge will most likely become a much larger problem. It can easily lead our practice of meditation, which is the path, to become more theoretical than it needs to be. Too much intellectual practice allows us the unfortunate ability to become jaded about our meditation experience.

At one point, a few years ago, I was sitting with a meditation teacher. We were catching up and having tea when he told me that he could sit for hours

and hours, and that meditation practice wasn't a problem; he had, in his opinion, basically mastered sitting. He spoke with such confidence. Yet, it was clear that although his practice was stable, he was not cutting deeply enough into this recognition of the ground. Recognizing and resting fully in the nature of mind, he insisted, was so easy. He then began to ask about much more esoteric practices, clearly feeling that the esoteric was more valuable for him than plain sitting.

On one level, sitting and engaging in the work of recognizing the mind's essential nature *is* easy. Yet in another sense, learning to rest in the ability to cease conceptual thought in a way that is sustainable, that is authentic and isn't artificial, that isn't conjoined with a phenomenal amount of effort, takes time. Within the context of mahamudra, the practices of shinay and lhakthong, and their union, becomes the meat of the practice of the path. A number of wonderful classical texts on this can be useful for getting a sense of the depth of the mahamudra tradition.

We can learn more about such instructions from looking at Bokar Rinpoche's *Opening the Door to Certainty* and the translation of the ninth Karmapa's *Ocean of Certainty* by Elizabeth Callahan, which I have quoted from heavily throughout this book. In *Opening the Door to Certainty*, Bokar Rinpoche gives a very rich outline of *shinay* (calm abiding) and *lakthong* (superior insight). Included in this work are the technicalities around anchoring the mind; anchoring the mind with an impure object, with a pure object, and without an object; anchoring the mind on the breath; and stabilizing the anchored mind.

In an essentialized form, shinay is really the cultivation of settling the mind in tranquility, such that there is a sustained stillness of mind, so it is free from evaluating and clinging. In this way, we practice perceiving appearances with vividness using ordinary appearance as it arises as a way of anchoring the mind. When sitting with our eyes open, we gently place our gaze ahead of us, and we rest in that experience. The vividness and clarity of the appearance becomes the anchor of our mind.

While trying to allow the mind to remain settled and tranquil, we do not seek to engage in conceptuality. Then, after we have achieved some period of stabilization in this practice, we can introduce the practice of *lhakthong* (or superior insight), a form of vipassana. In the practice of lakthong, insight

refers to the awareness of, or an understanding based on, the direct experience of perceived appearance and its emptiness.

Developing certainty around the emptiness aspect of what's arising is rooted in gentle analysis. We can apply a soft, critical inquiry: From where does the appearance of this object arise? Is there any limit to what's arising? Where is mind? Where is the mind in relationship to time? Does this object last forever? Where is the mind that perceives this object? Where is the separation between this object and myself? In this way, we begin to experientially (and experimentally) parse out and develop certainty around the ground.

Slowly, we start off with shinay and move on to lakthong. Then we join the two. This is the art of the practice of mahamudra. The union of tranquility and insight consists of the practice of recognizing appearance as inseparable from its intrinsic emptiness or, in other words, recognizing that emptiness itself has an appearance, a form. In this regard, this practice touches on Prajnaparamita: form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.

Through a sustained repetition of returning to, and gaining certainty in, the way mind is experienced through practice, we may start with a somewhat intellectual understanding of the ground. However, when the nature of mind is pointed out by the lama through pointing-out instructions, we have a clear understanding, albeit fleeting, of what the ground is like. Then we're taught the techniques of path.

In the process of practicing mahamudra, we first develop familiarity with shinay, then with lakthong, and then blend the two together. This yields the experience of the fruit, the fundamental clear-light mind, the open, limitless, boundless mind.

The Fruit

The fruit is the experience of the ground, but it's the experience of ground rooted in authentic certainty. This certainty is born from engaged authentic practice: the path.

Whether we're practicing chöd or relying on the instructions laid out by the Padampa Sangye song that we studied earlier, or as we move on into more direct mahamudra-related instructions, like Tilopa's Six Nails and the

instructions of Maitripa, we come back, over and over and over again, to recognize and develop a realization of the fruit.

When engaged in practice, although it can be easy to think of traversing the path as a large endeavor and something on which we must spend a considerable amount of time, we might be well served to remember that such labels are a bit of artifice because part of the nature of mind is to express itself. It will emerge. Similarly, the nature of Buddha-mind or Buddha-nature is not to align with any particular expression or any particular form. The aim is not the cessation of expression. The aim is to recognize the luminous mind of clear light, indivisible from samsara, which in reality, is its own play.

The arising of samsara *is* the play of clear light. And yet, not recognizing it, we come back, take it as real, react to it, chase after it, try to contain it, try to change it, and thereby experience what's arising as a source of considerable pain, suffering, and anxiety. This is the root of the ground, the path, and the fruit. By engaging these three in a lighthearted way, by not overly conceptualizing our practice, and by not solidifying it, we allow ourselves to be simple yogins or yoginis of space. At this point, the experience of mahamudra begins to ripen.

In notes from a teaching that Thrangu Rinpoche gave on *Saraha's King Doha*, based on the instructions from Karma Trinley, the tutor of eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje, Thrangu Rinpoche points out that mind is lucid and empty. It is luminous and empty. Saraha points out in his *King Doha* that the ground mahamudra, the essence of mind, is *sujatagarbha*: an enlightened essence present in all of us. However, it is concealed. We do not see our innate wisdom because our eyes are blinded by ignorance. The work becomes recognizing this and recognizing that the mind's true nature as it is, when we are in direct experience of it, ends all kleshas, all karma, all suffering, and all bewilderment. This is mahamudra. Recognizing that the stains that prevent us from recognizing the mind's essence are removed when we watch the mind and let it be becomes our practice. This is the path; the fruit is confirmed by recognizing that the mind's nature does not change once it is realized.

It remains as it always has been. There's nothing to be removed, nothing to be added. When it is perfectly seen, we experience liberation just by seeing the mind's self-perfected nature. We purify endless streams of negative

karma. The cultivation of tranquility and special insight and the natural balance of letting the two arise in a coemergent way to be able to finally recognize this basic simplicity reveals our awakening. This is our original face. This is the power of this practice, and it positively reflects the power inherent in our basic goodness—our Buddha-nature.

Secret Mind

Tilopa's Six Nails

Tilopa's Six Nails is an incredibly powerful instruction in terms of coming back to this basic clarity, the luminescent aspect of mind, mahamudra. The instructions contained within Tilopa's Six Nails can be taught in a variety of ways. One way they can be taught is to approach calm abiding or shinay as a way to cut through distraction. At its core, Tilopa's Six Nails reinforces the natural ability of the mind to be able to cut through distraction, both relative and ultimate, to reveal the fundamental nature of mind.

Tilopa was a *mahasiddha*, or great adept, who likely lived in the region now known as West Bengal, India, and Bangladesh during late tenth to early eleventh centuries. Not much is known about the details of his life. The existing biographies tell us that he was a cowherd and perhaps someone with a natural talent for meditation and mystical experiences. What is clear is that he became a very experienced meditator who developed a profound understanding of the mind. Like many of the other famed eighty-four mahasiddhas from the Indian subcontinent, Tilopa was instrumental in creating and refining many core spiritual practices that later spread throughout the Himalayan region. He is remembered as human progenitor of the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, and as such, he is regarded as one of the most famous mahasiddhas from the Indian subcontinent. He was instrumental in teaching Naropa his special tantric practices, some of which, including mahamudra, became known as the six yogas of Naropa. Naropa was the teacher of Marpa, the first to bring these instructions from India to Tibet.

Tilopa's Six Nails, or his Six Words of Advice, is one of the best-known meditation instructions developed by Tilopa. There is something about this set of instructions that never dulls. For some reason, they feel as fresh and as sharp to me as when I first heard them. I first experienced this set of instructions in 1997 in Bodh Gaya from Bokar Rinpoche during a mahamudra seminar that he had given over a course of a number of years.

The translation of this set of instructions that I prefer, and the one I commonly teach from, is one by Ken McLeod; it reads:

Don't Recall; let go of what has passed
Don't Imagine; let go of what may come
Don't Think; Let go of what is happening now
Don't Examine; Don't try to figure anything out
Don't Control; Don't try to make anything happen
*Rest; Relax, right now, and rest.*¹

At its heart, this meditation instruction is about allowing what is happening in the present moment to happen with simple awareness. It's about resting the mind and allowing ourselves, by reorienting our experience of mind, to cut through the discursive, reactive patterning that our ordinary samsaric awareness or samsaric mind is focused on. It's almost as if Tilopa is trying to point a finger at what the experience of meditation or what the experience of mahamudra is all about.

These six short instructions point out how to settle the mind, not only within the context of shamatha, but within the context of mahamudra itself. In the mahamudra tradition, this instruction demonstrates how to place the mind. Tilopa is essentially showing us that we can nurture our practice while simultaneously deepening its meaning, that the two are not mutually exclusive, and that when we find ourselves craving complexity, when we find ourselves needing to come back to this storyline, this personal narrative, this sense of victimhood, or the sense of ourselves being the center of the world as we know it, Tilopa is saying that we're best served by the simplicity of just resting our mind. Let's take a closer look and see how this might be the case.

Don't Recall; Let Go of What Has Passed This instruction, especially in the beginning, is simple. Almost too simple. Let go of what has passed. Don't chase after past experiences. Easy, right? We might think so, yet when we sit down and begin a meditation session, what happens? What do we experience?

Often, we are faced with the natural cascading replay of the experiences that we had earlier in the day. If it's not earlier today, then it's yesterday, or earlier in the week, or before that. The mind can be a busy place, especially when we are in the beginning stage of developing a relationship with the way it manifests. Sometimes, when we are bored, or rebellious, or tired, we find ourselves replaying experiences that feel important because they bolster our sense of being important, well liked, or brilliant. In a similar way, we can play out habits of viewing ourselves as not good enough, of being broken, or without worth.

Key to this instruction is gaining a better understanding of our relationship to the past and how that might continue to affect us right now. So, in this case, when we sit down to do this practice, or if we're doing this in a more engaged way, or if we're caregivers or chaplains, social workers, and so on, in the midst of this practice, this particular instruction forces us to be face-to-face with the moment. If we are sitting in a meditation session right now, this instruction is all about cutting away any notion of past experience, allowing ourselves to be present in this very moment, nailed down to the now.

Don't Imagine; Let Go of What May Come This instruction is similar to that of letting go of the past in that we are invited to not think about what might come about in the future. At its most basic, thoughts of chores, meals to make, tasks to accomplish, goals to achieve, and every myriad thing that we are convinced we must remember might arise. Sometimes these arise as thoughts, sometimes they arise as mental images, sometime they arise as what I like to call thought-chains, or mental narratives, that, if we are not careful, will just run their course throughout the duration of the meditation session. Similar to the previous instruction, as well as the following ones, it's important to try to remain aware as these thoughts arise, to notice them in an alert, nonreactive way, and then to try to let them go. Just as we tend to habitually define ourselves in relation to the past, we also tend to want to be developing a particular outcome in the future. Here Tilopa is asking us to gently let this go.

Don't Think; Let Go of What Is Happening Now Sometimes our own brilliance can be an impediment, and this instruction touches on how this can be the case. It is very natural to want to know exactly what we are experiencing and to want to codify it on a scale that determines whether this is a good session or a bad session, or whether we are making progress or failing miserably. I am drawn to the Zen Buddhist instruction—In relation to this point, I am drawn to the Zen Buddhist instruction “when you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” Within the context of this meditation instruction, Tilopa is suggesting we cut away labeling and analytic recollection so that whatever is arising—thought, emotion, physical sensation—can be experienced and then let go of. Try not to worry about what is happening right now; let whatever arises happen naturally without judgment. Here we are trying to remain cautious around expectation and let everything happen as a fresh impression without a trace of reaction.

Sometimes we want to go so far as to codify our experience and practice as either good or bad or progressing or failing. At other times we want to distract ourselves, or we are distracted by an endless play of thought activity. And at other times, we might use our Buddhist education, our religious or spiritual education, to begin to kind of play in the sand of what is happening right now. “Oh, is this experience right now just like that experience that Milarepa had?” Or, “This sounds a lot to me like an instruction that the third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, brought up in a song.”

Don't Examine; Don't Try to Figure Anything Out Sometimes in Buddhist practice, we're warned to be careful about not engaging in overly intellectual practice. That is not to say that we shouldn't be rigorous around rooting ourselves deeply within our tradition, but rather such warnings are meant to point out how easy it can be to substitute descriptions from books for experiences gained in meditation. Practically speaking, this might mean that we try to assess where we are in our practice based upon what we have studied. Once we make an assessment or a diagnosis, we create the ground for subsequent reactions. With this instruction, Tilopa isn't worried about how much you have read or studied, or even if you

are illiterate; he is pointing out how important it is to let analysis evaporate so that direct experience can happen. When it does, what happens?

This reminds me of an instruction that Tsunma Zangmo gave me: “If you must read books about dharma, try to read them and forget them immediately.” This instruction is rooted in how to be authentic in our practice and not come back to this need to elaborate and try to really figure out what we’re doing. We don’t need to assess or develop intellectual inquiry around everything that’s arising in our meditation experience.

Sometimes the most powerful thing we can do is just let what is arising go, and when we’re able to do that, we’re creating the dynamic in which there’s a shift in what is being distinguished. In this case, thinking, and all of the mental activity associated with thinking, ceases. We’re not trying to analyze or figure out what’s going on. We don’t necessarily have to worry about whether or not we’re making progress or whether the experience fits into a larger idea of what our meditation practice is supposed to be all about, and so this instruction has a lot to do with a reference point, but it also has a lot to do with fear. I think, on some level, it’s natural for a sense of insecurity to arise in the midst of practice, where we are concerned about whether or not what is arising is actually authentic, and whether this meditation experience, as it arises, is valid. Here Tilopa isn’t really saying it is or it isn’t—he’s saying, let it go. Don’t worry. Everything that arises, arises. Everything that ceases, ceases.

Don’t Control; Don’t Try to Make Anything Happen In some meditation texts meditators are advised not to modulate or fabricate anything within their practice. That’s what this instruction is all about. Think about sitting on a beach and watching the waves come and go, the flatness of the horizon, and the way the clouds appear. Can you control them? Can you make the salt air different? What would happen if we approached the meditation experience the same way? Here, we are faced with discarding the desire to induce change within the context of meditation. This can be a challenge when we don’t feel like remaining present, when we want to be distracted, or

when we want to push back. Sometimes we're not so thrilled with what's actually happening, and we seek to change the experience.

I think that rooted within control is a sense of judgment, a need to try to affect whatever is happening; take, for example, the experience of lying in the grass in some beautiful park and watching the clouds come and go. You can't control them, can you? Can you make the temperature of the air any different? Can you make the smell of the grass or the feel of the grass any different? Breezes either come or don't come. You can't control those either. You can try. And what if a bird happens to fly across your point of orientation, your frame of reference, or an airplane, or a balloon? Or if children run by, kicking a ball? Wouldn't you hear the sounds of their voices and of their running? And perhaps emotions would arise in relation to wondering if you're going to get kicked by a ball. Are they coming close to you? Can you control all of the sound? Can you control all of the thoughts and emotions that are arising?

What happens if we approach meditation in a way in which we don't try to control everything? Deeply connected to this is a sense of well-being or acceptance. Within this instruction is the seed of how much we suffer in our lives, seeking to control, seeking to make things happen. Sometimes if we are trying to make ourselves different than the way we naturally are—to make our personalities different, to make our sizes and our shapes different, to make our qualities different—this is a challenging instruction. It's especially challenging when we don't feel like we want to remain present or when we want to distract ourselves on purpose and when we want to push back. Here Tilopa is gently reminding us that actively engaging what is arising is not the meditation experience we are seeking to develop.

Rest; Relax, Right Now, and Rest Relax. This isn't about being intense; it's about coming back to ease—letting the mind and the body settle into an experience that contains the seeds of expansiveness, which in this case, translates to developing the ability to get to know what the mind is like. In order to begin to have a clearer sense of what the mind is like, we need to develop comfort in letting ourselves, and our mind, rest with ease. It isn't usually until

we fall out of relationship with this experience that we feel the need to do something. Maybe we begin to chase after thoughts, or start to examine what is happening, or play with everything that mind seems to contain. Sometimes we feel awkward; we believe that if we don't keep thinking about anything, then our mind will just disappear—that's not going to happen.

Occasionally I like to use two other related instructions that help convey the sense of rest that Tilopa is getting at: Rest like a bee stuck in honey; rest like a worker sitting down at the end of a day of hard work. In other words, try to let your mind settle with an ease born of natural relaxation.

In the Tibetan tradition, we often talk about *familiarizing* ourselves with mind. This is a way of saying that with each meditation session, we get to know, with greater clarity, what is really going on. You want to maintain an adherence to each instruction simultaneously so that you can experience the mind resting, free from conceptual elaboration—fresh, aware, vibrant, and stable. This is hard at first, but with practice, it becomes easier, until you reach a point where you can sit in meditation and eventually experience glimpses of nonconceptual wakefulness.

Experiencing nonconceptual wakefulness doesn't destroy our ability to analyze. It doesn't destroy our ability to conceptualize, come up with new ideas, or compose new music. It can be hard to rest. Resting can also feel counterintuitive, especially in these times when we're moving at such incredibly fast rates, on social media all of the time, with these little computerlike phones in our hands or pockets. Given all of this, it can take a while to become comfortable with what relaxing our mind feels like, especially given this busyness that we experience all of the time.

The practice of Tilopa's Six Nails makes it possible for us to cut through everything so we can experience the vajra-like quality of mind—unbreakable, completely fearless, multivalent, expansive, naturally arising, luminescent, unending, not bound by time, not bound by space. After having developed a practical personal relationship to these instructions, it's easy to see how they reorient us. They help us create a sense of boundaryless boundaries through which we can experience the mind in a direct, fresh, and uncontrived way. This instruction is deeply rooted in developing certainty in

the experience of mind rather than knowledge of the path. Certainty becomes more valuable than intellectual knowledge around the nature of the path.

Let's return to Tsunma Zangmo's instructions: "If you must read, try to read and then instantly forget." Let's try to allow our practice not to be harder than it needs to be. Let's try to allow this to be a practice that can be carefree, one in which we develop confidence, not only in Tilopa's words, but in what the words point to. And of course, as with many meditation instructions, we must remember that it can take time for the instruction to feel natural and integrated into our experience. This is okay. We should be grateful when difficulties arise, because they arise as compassionate opportunities for us to practice. They provide us with the potential for realization, and this repeated practice of coming back in a gentle, self-loving, self-care-oriented way allows us to embrace the radical acceptance of mahamudra, and it allows us to embrace this change, this turning away from a limited, samsaric, neurotic, self-oriented view and into the effortlessness of the bodhisattva.

There's an instruction from Tilopa that says, "Look at that which cannot be seen. Within the unseen, the yogi, seeing the meaning, is self-liberated." All of the accidental illusions, all of the ways that we constantly fabricate, naturally dissolve when we allow ourselves to rest freely in the nature of mind. This is an experience that's free of elaboration, free from obstruction, and free from grasping—it is spontaneous, stainless, and naturally arising.

Maitripa's Six Verses on the Coemergent

The philosophy that informs what I'm going to be discussing now comes from the Indian mahasiddha and philosopher Maitripa, who is also known as Maitripada, Advayavajra, and Maitrigupta. He lived during the late tenth century. Klaus-Dieter Mathes, from the University of Vienna, who has written a great deal about Maitripa and his approach to mahamudra, puts his dates at 986–1063 CE. Maitripa was a great scholar, and according to the histories available, he taught at Vikramashila University, located in present day West Bengal. Like a number of other scholars of his caliber, he decided to leave the monastery in search of a guru to point out the nature of mind. After attaining renown as a scholar, Maitripa realized that although he understood the dharma intellectually and was considered a Buddhist master, he hadn't developed realization the way that he felt was meaningful.

The thing that helps me connect to Maitripa is that, according to the biographies, he experienced depression and anxiety and a sense of brokenness and worthlessness around not having had the opportunity to experience the nature of mind. He also felt a sense of desperation around the difficulty of finally connecting with a teacher. Somehow this makes Maitripa feel more real, more ordinary, and like someone who is as prone to suffering as I am. Feeling broken and sad, depressed, and maybe even like a failure are all emotions that I can connect with and have experienced in different phases of my life, and to be honest, these are alive for me at any given moment in any day of any given week.

My dharma teaching often overlaps with the work involved in creating a relationship to practicing radical acceptance when things feel hard or difficult. In times like these, when political instability seems to be a given here and abroad, and when the effects of the environmental crisis can feel terrifying, it becomes really hard to learn how to sit with acceptance when it feels like the world is on fire. These are hard times; they are also powerful times to explore training in radical acceptance.

On his quest, Maitripa wandered through forests and jungles and eventually met a very unusual yogi named Shavaripa. He was very strange looking. In some accounts, he wore a peacock-feather skirt and his hair long. His long dirty hair was home to lice, which he would fish out and eat, much to the disgust and anxiety of Maitripa, who must have thought, “I can’t get teachings from this guy, he’s a lunatic.” In fact, he interacted with Shavaripa a number of times, and each time, he saw something defective in the way Shavaripa presented himself. He also failed to realize that each time he silently judged Shavaripa, it was his own pride and egotism and his own sense of what it means to be a high-Buddhist that was getting in the way. He was failing to see that Shavaripa, while controversial in appearance, was really just being real.

In one story, Maitripa had a traveling companion, and his traveling companion decided to take empowerment, or initiation, with Shavaripa. In my mind, Maitripa must have thought, “No, no, no, I’m not going to do that, that guy’s crazy.” His traveling companion, who went ahead and did so, said afterward, “Oh, it was incredible, and then he gave me instruction, and I’m now learning how to rest in the nature of mind.”

From what we see, there is little doubt that Maitripa thought his traveling companion was crazy, and Maitripa continued to feel that Shavaripa was wrong. Eventually this all culminated in one great, very depressing situation in which he decided, “I’m going to just end my life right now.” At that moment, however, Shavaripa came up to him and said, “*You’re* the crazy one, why are you doing this? Why don’t you just try my dharma?”

And he did. He received an initiation that he was not sure was real, and he received meditation instructions that he also was not sure were accurate. But he took them, and he went off into the jungle and he practiced, and after a certain amount of time, he began to experience the mind of awakening. In the tradition I come from, this practice is known as mahamudra, which I like to call *radical acceptance*. A while later Maitripa came back to Shavaripa and told him, “Okay, not only have I experienced the teachings, I’ve really developed certainty.” According to the tradition, the word *certainty* has more to do with the blending of experience from a meditational state into our everyday experience—it’s a form of definitive experiential knowledge. Not only had Maitripa touched the essence of mind, he was able to rest in the essence of mind consistently throughout most of his everyday life experiences.

Maitripa asked, “Guru-ji, now that I have realization should I live in the jungle here with you?” To which Shavaripa responded, “No. Go back to the monastery. Go back to the monastic university and write about this.” And this is what Maitripa did; he returned to scholarship focusing on what’s called *Amanasikara*, which is nonconceptual realization. In fact, he developed twenty-six texts focusing on non-labeling and the practice of non-elaboration.

The Six Verses on the Coemergent

(Sahajaṣaṭka)

Homage to Vajradhara!

Buddhists take true reality

To be free from permanence and nihilism;

To engage in affirmation and exclusion

When it comes to naturally arisen phenomena—this is the talk of fools.

To those who claim [that there is] existence we say

That, upon analysis, nothing exists.

To those who claim that [there is] no existence we say

That, when no analysis is done, everything exists.

In whatever manner superimpositions

Present themselves to the yogin of true reality,

In like manner superimpositions

Are destroyed by the yogin of true reality.

As the co-emergent is not fabricated,

Attachment does not pertain to the co-emergent.

Bliss is not different from the co-emergent;

Bliss has the defining characteristic of freedom from attachment.

Once the genuine bliss associated with realization is known—
[Bliss] whose nature it is to be free from attachment—
Once the manifold [world] is turned into self-realization
It is dissolved into the ocean of the co-emergent.

The yogin of mantra reality
Is thoroughly established in a state without attachment.
Once this has transformed the factors of existence into gurus,
He should be one who has no attachment to objects.

This work, the *Sahajaṣaṭka*, by the learned renunciant, the
glorious Advayavajra, is ended. Translated by the Indian *paṇḍita*
and the Tibetan translator and monk from mTsur, Ye shes 'byung
gnas.²

Maitripa begins his song by playfully reminding Buddhists that a central aspect of the path, true reality, or dharmata, the very liberated essence of mind, is free from any ideas of being permanent. He is warning us of falling into an eternalist view in which the vast clarity of mind is accidentally assigned permanent characteristics, which misses the point. This is similarly the case if we find ourselves wandering into nihilism by reducing everything to nonexistence and even a sense of pointlessness.

He then goes on to mention that the *affirmation* or *exclusion* around the characteristics of naturally arisen phenomena is the talk of fools. Here he is making a point that has also been made by the mahasiddha Saraha and others—that wanting to classify distinctions between how naturally arisen phenomena arise and how we might label such an arising is foolish. The point has less to do with how it is labeled, although this is not entirely true because we *are* seeking out a middle-way approach to experiences, and more

to do with seeing whether we can rest in a meditation that, at its root, is non-mentation, or *amanasikara*. Non-mentation in this context is resting the mind in a state free of mental elaboration.

We can see that the crux of mahamudra is gaining familiarity with leaving the mind in an undistracted state for which creating any type of conceptual elaboration is absent. David Higgins's *Non-Mentation Doctrine in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* shows this with greater clarity:

... given that amanasikara is precisely that which eluded positive assertions, how then is it to be cultivated? Saraha's answer is, as we expect it, negative: The best cultivation is that which comes of its own accord in absence of any willful cultivation. As Saraha states in his Dohakoshanamamahamudradesa:

In mahamudra which is non-mentation,

Since there is not the slightest reason to meditate, there's no meditation.

Without meditating or being divorced from what it is about is the best meditation!

The theme is elaborated in another passage from the author's Dohakoshanamamahamudradesa:

Mind cut off at its root is like the open sky.

There being nothing to meditate on, there's no mental engagement because

Ordinary awareness, perfectly natural in its own way of being,

Is not deceived by artificial thought objects.

There is no need to fake this naturally pure mind.

So, without holding or dismissing it, leave it where it is most happy!³

Maitripa goes on to play with the various internal lines of inquiry as well as larger philosophical concepts about whether what is arising in the moment is existent or not. "To those who claim that there is existence, we say that there is not," and similarly, "to those who claim that there is no existence, we say everything exists." This is a rabbit hole that will never end, hence, it is

the talk of fools. Why would we want to waste our time expounding one way or the other with regard to whether that which is being experienced in this moment exists or doesn't?

The yogin of true reality, Maitripa suggests, naturally destroys any kind of superimposition upon our experience in the moment. This is the root of *amanasikara*. The yogin of true reality is able to rest their mind with natural nonmental engagement without contrivance—resting free and easy.

Thus, Maitripa declares that the *coemergent*, that which is appearing to arise and the experience of recognition of that which is arising, cannot be fabricated. It just is; it just happens. The cultivation of direct experience without falling into mentation, without straying into the pitfalls that Tilopa's Six Nails are directed toward, becomes the experience of bliss. Bliss free from attachment, bliss that is the same as the direct, nonmodulated experience of whatever arises. This is the path of mahamudra. We will now turn to another text by Maitripa that offers a more elaborate approach to this short song of instruction.

Maitripa's Mahamudra Sancamitha

I'm very happy to be able to include this text by Maitripa. Although it is not part of the *Amanasikara* texts like the previous example, this comes from a collection called the *Asta-Doha-Kosha*, a collection of eight texts on mahamudra by a variety of Indian masters. I learned of this collection in 2014 and first received the transmission from Ringu Tulku in 2015 when he was staying with my family and I back when the dharma center was still open and he was visiting. Later that year, I received the transmission from Gyaltsab Rinpoche as well as teachings on the songs from him.

The translation of the text that I am using is my own.⁴ My translation is interpretive in the sense that I was less interested in a direct word-for-word translation than one that stayed true to the meditation instruction contained within the text, yet I also wanted it to be fresh and relatable for the contemporary practitioner of mahamudra. I am neither an academic nor a skilled translator, and thus I ask for forgiveness for any egregious errors and pray that this translation, inspired by my love of Maitripa and his example, brings more benefit than it does confusion. With that said, let us look at this

short text called the *Mahamudra Sancamitha* by Maitripa, after which I will then provide some commentary.

Mahamudra Sancamitha

Having bowed to the experience of Great Bliss
mahamudra shall be expressed.

All phenomena are one's natural mind,
The perceived reality of the external world is rooted in mistaken
mind;
Like a dream, it is devoid of an entity;
It is merely the movement of grasping and wakeful conscious
awareness.
Lacking inherent existence it is like the manifestation of the wind;
Empty of essence just like space;
All that appears is equally space-like;
This is said to be *mahamudra*.

Its essence cannot be taught;
For this reason, the nature of mind,
Due to the very nature of *mahamudra*,
Is free from fabrication or transformation.

By what is realization of the essential nature made?
The entirety of appearance is *mahamudra*,
The great, all-pervading *dharmakāya*,

Relax into the uncontrived nature of being.

Dharmakāya is beyond thought,
Naturally remain in meditation without seeking,
Meditation rooted in seeking is mistaken mind.

Like magical illusions in space,
Meditation and non-meditation has vanished!
How could there be freedom or non-freedom?

In such a way the yogin with realization,
Through knowing this, becomes liberated
From all virtuous and non-virtuous karmas.

Kleshas are great wisdoms,
Like fire in a forest, they are the yogin's companion.
How can there be going or staying?
Remaining in solitude, what meditative stability can there be?

One who does not realize the nature of phenomena and mind,
Never becomes liberated from circumstances.

What could bind the realization of the essential nature?

While undistractedly abiding,

Do not modify body, speech, or meditation:

“Neither remaining nor not-remaining in equanimity”

It needs no contrived corrective measure, nor meditative cultivation,

Having nothing to establish,

Know that whatever you experience lacks any real existence,

Appearance is naturally liberated *dharmadhātu*.

Realization is self-liberated great original wakefulness,

Non-dual, equal to *dharmakāya*.

Like the continuous flow of a great river,

However it abides, it is endowed with pure meaning,

Likewise it is continual Buddhahood.

Samṣāra is non-referential great bliss.

All phenomena are devoid of an entity,

Being empty, the intellect is purified into its own essence;

Mind being beyond concept there is nothing more to be done,

This is the path of all Buddhas.

How fortunate!

I summarized the heart-essence of the teachings,
Through this, may all sentient beings without exception,
Reside in Mahamudra.

This concludes Maitripa's *Mahamudra Sañcamitha* (Compendium of Words).

This is from the mouth of the same paṇḍita, and was translated by the Tibetan translator Marpa Chökyi Lodrö.

Śuddhamāstu sarva-jagataṃ!

Translated into English by Repa Dorje Odzer, the heinous aberration himself, at the Mahasmasan known as Rikers Island.

This text points out the nature of mind. In a certain way, the practice of resting in the nature of mind is both somewhat complicated and also deceptively simple. Much of the literature on the subject of mind, especially within the context of mahamudra, emphasizes that it is as if it has a reflective quality in the sense that mind is often experienced not as it is, but rather as it is misapprehended to be for what it is reflecting. In a way, mind is the canvas, or the basis, upon which all that arises is experienced. It is not an object, because it has no particular location, nor does it have any qualities other than what is sometimes described as luminous clarity and bliss. These “qualities” are not qualities in the sense that mind is defined by them as we might be used to with regard to spatial qualities; instead, the words used to describe mind refer to the way it is—it is described as *luminous clarity* because everything arises within it, and it is *blissful* because it is complete and lacks for nothing—the completeness of mind is somewhat like a deep intimate understanding that there is no “outside” and that everything arises equally. There is nothing to fear.

In my work as a chaplain—whether it’s in correctional settings or in the past, when I worked in hospice and worked with people at the end of life and their loved ones, who were learning to cope with loss and grief—I have come to benefit from learning how to understand approaching difficult experiences with a sense of simplicity. Part of this involves cultivating the ability to sit with discomfort, fear, and anxiety and work on the ability to recognize how limited we are in trying to be there for others, even when we take this great vow to be able to be there for all beings for the three times in the ten directions. Part of my personal work in relating to fear and anxiety is rooted in the practice of repeatedly coming back to an engaged relationship with the nature of mind. There is nothing to fear because there is nothing to fear. Everything we experience can be boiled down into the experience of simplicity. Simple being appearances arising in unison. Everything that we experience, can be appreciated as spacious when we learn to rest our mind in the simplicity of being and let go of grasping and recollecting and chasing after what arises so that we can let mind arise in an unimpeded way.

Letting the mind *be* is a profound way through which we can practice generating a mind of simplicity. Thus, in places where Maitripa says things like, “Dharmakaya is beyond thought. Naturally remain in meditation without seeking. Meditation rooted in seeking is mistaken mind,” he’s asking us to return to *this moment*. In this particular context, wherever you are right now, rest in that experience. Maybe you are tired, or maybe you are experiencing a mind state that’s stimulated, or a mix of a number of experiences blended with a little bit of exhaustion—whatever is happening, sit with that experience right now. In other texts, we find declarative statements that ask us to leave our mind *unmodulated* or *unfabricated*, which is central to this practice, despite the fact that it takes some practice to become comfortable with and have confidence in our ability to let the mind settle.

Maitripa points out that *kleshas*—which, in the realm of Buddhist psychology, are the basic emotional habits rooted in ignorance, attachment, and aversion—keep us in a very self-oriented way of being with the world are, in reality, our friends. These annoying patterns are actually great wisdom. That which makes us feel jealous, or makes us feel angry, or completely enraged about something in our lives is not to be abandoned. Rather than avoiding these difficult reactions, let’s see if we can approach them as things that contain wisdom. It is as if Maitripa is saying, “Just as fire

in a forest brings warmth, our difficulties are the yogin's or yogini's companion: rather than turn away or avert our gaze from all of our difficult emotions, all of the places where we feel stuck, shut down, and impatient, let's sit and be, our eyes open to the simplicity of right now."

All of the highs in life, the power of love, the power of romance, the power of intense joy, these too hold great wisdom. These feelings and associated thoughts are our companions. The question with this type of meditation becomes whether we can learn to rest with simplicity in this experience. It takes time and practice to build a relationship to the way that the reactive parts of our relative mind—our emotional body, for instance—shows itself. After experiencing anger over and over again, and getting curious about it, anger changes. Or rather, the emotion doesn't change; the manner in which we experience it does. A variety of insights and various forms of awareness develop with sustained practice, which leads to us developing the ability to experience things that arise without the typical reactions around which we are so habituated.

When Maitripa says, "How can there be no going or staying?" he is essentially pointing out that there really is no difference in mind as it is experienced in secluded retreat and as it is experienced in great vast urban expanse. The mind as you experience it right now is no different than the mind at the beach, or in a monastery, or when you are driving, or when you get home, or when you get to work tomorrow. It's the same mind. There's no going anywhere, no staying anywhere. We shouldn't necessarily stay in retreat because this whole place, this whole experience, *is* retreat.

In that way, he points out, "Like a continuous flow of a great river, however it abides, it is endowed with pure meaning." All of which is unpleasant, all of the things that are ordinary, and all of the times we may say to ourselves, "Here I am, just me here, having my ordinary experience, kind of boring," this is Buddhahood, too. The way that we celebrate the good, that's Buddhahood as well. Likewise, when we feel overwhelmed that, too, is Buddhahood. This is the continuous flow of the great river of moment after moment after moment; no matter how hard our experiences are, *what* they are is really what we're looking at when we engage in meditation in this way.

The most vital part of a meditation instruction like this one involves not solidifying the present moment and learning to develop an open, friendly,

nonjudgmental relationship to mind. Can we put grasping at the comfortable narrative away and just rest in this experience of collective wisdom? Can we rest in both the problem and the solution or thought activity and the fundamental spaciousness of mind without necessarily getting triggered or whipped up by either side?

This process of learning to be open and resting in developing curiosity and a sense of insight around what is arising in this moment and how it arises is the practice of *radical acceptance*. It's the root of mahamudra; it's the root of Amanasikara philosophy. It's the root of Madhyamika philosophy as well. If you can, play with the essence-oriented instruction known as Maitripa's *Mahamudra Sancamitha* as a way of reorienting your mind. Try to be present with your body; try to be present with the way that mind is experienced. Be open, be gentle, and be kind with yourself as you play with this instruction. To get overly serious is to miss the point.

Conclusion: Resting Free

During my final year of College, Tsunma Zangmo apparently wrote a letter to my dharma brother Erik and me, which she told us had contained the only meditation instruction we would ever need in our lives. This vital instruction, she said, would have freed us from traveling back and forth to India and would have simplified our ideas about the path. Unfortunately, the letter got lost in the mail. At that point in time she was quite sick, and we were planning to go to India to continue to study under her. At that point I think we realized that we wanted to do ngondro practice.

By the time we were able to return to Sikkim to see her, she said to us that “the letter contained the only instruction anyone ever needed to hear, but because it got lost, now you need to go through the whole journey of figuring out what dharma practice really is and how liberation arises.” Needless to say, I can tell you that in the moment, I was upset and frustrated and irritated with the US Postal Service, the international mail delivery system, and even the dakinis who may very well have been responsible for redirecting that one piece of mail to Uddiyana. We were going to be given the final instruction, and it never made it to us.

And as I sit here and contemplate the end of this book, especially this last portion on resting free, I find myself looking back over all of the years of my returning to India for instruction, at the relationships that I cultivated with my teachers, and all the time I have spent in practice. What I keep coming back to is a deep love and deep gratitude for all of my teachers: for His Eminence Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche, my present teacher, for whom nobody compares; for the late Kyabje Bokar Rinpoche, retreat master for the Kamstang and Shangpa Kagyu lineages; for the late Pathing Rinpoche, a master of incalculable skill, power, compassion, and humility; and above all else, for Tsunma Zangmo, the teacher who cared when she didn’t have to, who took my friend Erik and me into her home when she didn’t have to. She gave instruction when she didn’t have to, helped us confront some of our stagnant ignorance when she didn’t have to, and took time and tremendous effort to teach us mahamudra and to plant the seeds of dharma that continue to produce

fruit even now. I am beyond convinced that Tsunma Zangmo is one of the most precious masters I will ever meet.

I'm also left with a confirmed feeling that dharma practice is about becoming more authentic; it's about becoming more able to love, more able to let go and be less rigid. It's also about being able to rest freely and naturally in what's happening. It's not complicated. It doesn't have to arise within the setting of great scholastic mastery of philosophical treatises. It doesn't necessarily have much to do with mastering ritual, the playing of instruments, or wearing any particular dharma clothes. It has even less to do with adopting or transferring one rigid identity for another. In fact, practice seems to require a sense of humility and humor, an ability to laugh at ourselves with kindness and patience and love for all the places where we get rigid, arrogant, and lazy.

Whether we're adapting an outlook rooted in the monastic tradition or working to revitalize the repa lineage, whether we're trying to appreciate the brilliance of a scholar-monk such as Tsongkhapa, or emulate the yogic mastery of Maitripa, Tilopa, or Saraha, I pray that we all continue learning what it means to rest freely and that we all are playing with what it means to develop confidence in the power of our practice. This is, after all, what carries us forward into awakening. As these awakenings occur, I think it's safe to say that one can only smile. We come to understand that the simplicity of realization belies excruciating effort, and that in some ways, at a certain point, no matter how comfortable the Buddhist path has gotten, if we are really to cross over to the other shore, we must let go of the reality of the Buddhist path.

For me, resting free is sitting outside with a cup of tea, allowing everything to happen. It's cooking dinner amid the busyness of raising three boys and trying to be a responsible and dependable husband. It's also the process of trying to teach dharma in a way that lives up to the stainless models that my teachers have demonstrated for me. Resting free is also holding down the second-largest municipal correctional system in the country to ensure that the ground of spirituality and wellness is present for everyone. It's what it means to connect to the experience of wisdom-mind and speak with my own voice. Resting free is also about moving authentically into the next moment, whatever that might be.

As the Tantric Buddhist path takes root here in the West and begins to take shape in a unique way, I also have some concerns. It is the right time to begin reevaluating how our sanghas are structured in relation to creating greater accountability and holding teachers, sangha leadership, and sangha members accountable when it comes to abuse of power, especially sexual abuse. I realize that the topic is not necessarily black and white, and that there is a considerable amount of nuance, yet these problems seem to continue. There is no place for abuse in Tantric Buddhist practice, and while it's easy to cite the prevalence of *crazy wisdom* within the tradition, we also need to take responsibility for ourselves if all we do is wander into extremes related to nondual behavior as a way to justify or, even worse, hide abuse.

Gyalsab Rinpoche's main advice to me regarding dharma activity has been "keep it small." I find immense wisdom and benefit in keeping things small and slow: *small dharma, slow-dharma*. It's worth remembering the unintended effects that our capitalistic conditioning brings to the way we approach our values and conceive of dharma. Big dharma centers can be impressive, flashy ways of attracting large numbers of students and may allow us to derive a good income from teaching dharma, but these dynamics lead to much larger, complicating problems that most people don't seem to have the skill to negotiate without causing harm. I would rather have two students who are properly trained to carry on my lineage rather than a dharma empire. Dharma is not a product to be sold, and tantric dharma in particular ought to be passed from person to person with love, awareness of the sanctity of lineage transmission, responsibility, and humility. As fundamental awakening is the goal, along with a commitment to empty the pit of samsara, one has to wonder, why the rush? Slow, methodical, sane, and small dharma communities will yield skilled practitioners in a way that benefits the transmission of this tradition with less harm and confusion than rushing people through trainings that are highly monetized.

For that matter, I wonder if Tantric Buddhist sanghas would be better off if they were not so public about the propagation of tantra? I know that secrecy makes people suspicious, and I remember full well my own feelings of discomfort when I was told that certain topics were off-limits when I first began practice—yet I think the implementation of intentional boundaries around what should be disseminated and to whom is a wise move. This was the tradition up until recently; however, things seem to have shifted in a way

that is not healthy. Just as tantric practice holds incredible power in confronting our fundamental ignorance for those well prepared, it can inadvertently become weaponized by our ignorance and ego-clinging in a way that causes an incredible amount of harm. Returning to a less prevalent, less advertised and product-driven, slow tantric model needs more exploring. I can say that I am making this part of my practice.

Lastly, I believe that the Tantric Buddhist experiment won't last if we cannot individuate and claim our authenticity in relation to the cultures from which the tradition was introduced. The intention for suggesting this is rooted in love. It is time to make this ours. It is time for indigenous Western Tantric Buddhist lineages. It is time to grow into who we are and stop trying to be anyone other than that. This includes a call for more Western commentarial debate, sadhanas written by Western lamas, and a claiming of this land and the sacred geography contained herein so that we can tend this mandala and continue the vital work of practice, building community, and the mutual liberation of one another.

My prayer is that this book offers some kind of benefit, if not to my direct students, then to somebody who says: "I want to take this further, this book was not good enough. Let me write something better." I pray that this leads more deeply to an authentic Western Tantric Buddhist corpus. I pray that this book brings meaning and joy. I alone am responsible for many mistakes where inadequacy is contained within these teachings. Sarva Mangalam.

Glossary

Amanasikara The practice of non-mentation during meditation in which the mind does not label the arising of phenomena.

Amitabha The Buddha of infinite light. He presides over the celestial western pureland of Dewachen.

Amrita A term often referring to nectar. In some instances, the nectar is associated with the power of providing long life, the realization of the nondual, blissful nature of mind.

Bardo Literally bardo refers to an interval of time. Typically it refers to the period marked by the beginning of the death process and including the post-death experience.

Bhikshu/Bhikshuni The Sanskrit term for ordained monk (bhikshu) and ordained nun (bhikshuni).

Bindu A drop or dot that represents the mind or life-essence in visualization practices.

Bodhisattva Vow A vow originating within the Mahayana tradition in which one vows to liberate all sentient beings. This vow represents the height of the ethical ideal of the Mahayana tradition.

Buddha-nature The inherent awakened qualities shared by all beings.

Chakrasamvara An important yidam or meditational deity central to the Kagyu lineage. See yidam.

Chenrezig/Avalokitesvara The Bodhisattva of Compassion known as Chenrezig in Tibetan or Avalokitesvara in Sanskrit represents the perfection of the essence of compassion.

Chenrezig Practice The ritual and meditation practice associated with the Bodhisattva of Compassion. This practice includes prayer, visualization, mantra recitation, and meditation.

Chokgyur Dechen Lingpa A renowned nineteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist teacher and treasure revealer (Tibetan: tertön) known for revealing a cycle of practices known as the Chokling Tersar. See tertön.

Chöd A spiritual practice founded by Machig Labdron, the eleventh-century Tibetan female Buddhist teacher. Chöd is a highly ritualized practice that involves visualized offering of one's body to ghosts and demons that typically represent obstacles to enlightenment. See Machig Labdron.

Chödpa A practitioner of Chöd. See Chöd.

Dakini/Daka The Sanskrit term for a female class of spiritual beings who are often regarded as semi-wrathful and represent the experience of direct realization of spiritual insights. A daka is the male equivalent.

Dharma The essence of the nature of reality, and the subject of the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni.

Dharma Empire A term I use to refer to the spiritual materialistic need for the gain of name, fame, and profit through dharma activity.

Dharmata A Sanskrit word for the intrinsic awakened nature of everything.

Five Precepts The vow to abstain from killing, theft, sexual misconduct, falsehood, and intoxication.

Four Classes of Tantra The Buddhist Tantric tradition did not develop in a singular manner, nor is it necessarily practiced in a singular manner. It is divided, depending upon the school of practice, in a variety of ways. Within the Kagyu tradition it is often divided this way:

Kriya Tantra The first “outer” tantric classification, often focusing on ritual purification, conduct, and the maintenance of purity and cleanliness (physical, diet, and clothing).

Charya Tantra The second “outer” tantric classification, occasionally called conduct tantra, as it focuses upon the conduct surrounding body, speech, and mind, especially as the way the three (body, speech, and mind) relate to the cultivation of meditative absorption (samadhi).

Yoga Tantra The third “outer” tantric classification focuses upon inner yogic meditation.

Anuttarayoga Tantra Also known as Highest Yoga Tantra, is the most advanced of all tantric classifications.

Four Foundations Known in Tibetan as ngondro, this refers to a set of “preliminary practices” that is typically done prior to entering more formal tantric practice. This involves the completion of a set of 100,000 prostrations, 100,000 recitations of the long Vajrasattva mantra, 100,000 mandala offerings, and 100,000 applications of guru yoga.

Four Special Preliminaries Within the context of mahamudra practice, this refers to four conditions that aide in the realization of the nature of mind: the Causal Condition, the Empowering Condition, the Objective Condition, and the Immediate Condition.

Gampopa The eleventh-century monastic student of Milarepa. Gampopa was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the larger Kagyu lineage, which through his students, flourished through the creation of a series of distinct, separate Kagyu sublineages.

Ganachakra The term for a ritual gathering. Such gatherings occurred for the purpose of collective spiritual practice, to make offerings, and for groups of like-minded spiritual practitioners to commune. The term can also refer to the practice of making offerings that in Tibetan are referred to as tsok.

Guhyasamaja Tantra One of the several cycles of Highest Yoga Tantra practices brought from India to Tibet by Milarepa’s teacher, Marpa Lotsawa, in the eleventh century.

Guru Rinpoche The eighth-century Tantric Buddhist master who visited Tibet to help teach and spread the early diffusion of Buddhist tantra. He is popularly regarded as the second Buddha.

Guru Yoga The practice of developing devotion to one’s guru. It is said that devotion to the teacher, or guru, aides in achieving realization of mind. Sometimes there are specific meditations through which you foster a sense of closeness with your guru.

Heruka The male counterpart of dakinis, generally regarded as spiritual heroes.

Illusory Body Practice One of the Six Yogas of Naropa, focusing on recognizing the illusory nature of all appearances as well as the subtle body created through generation-stage tantric practice.

Indra's Net A metaphor used to explain emptiness.

Kadampa A Tibetan Buddhist school founded in the eleventh century by Dromton, the main disciple of Atisha.

Kalu Rinpoche The second Kalu Rinpoche was the root teacher of both Bokar Rinpoche and Tsunma Dechen Zangmo.

Karmamudra The practice of advanced tantric meditations directly engaging desire and sexuality.

Karmapa The successive reincarnating lineage head of the Karma Kagyu lineage.

Khenpo Lodrö Donyo The heart-son of the previous Bokar Rinpoche and abbot of his monastery in Mirik, West Bengal, Bokar Ngedon Chokhor Ling. One of my teachers.

Klesha A Buddhist term for mental afflictions that cause our experience of suffering.

Kukkuripa One of the classical eighty-four mahasiddhas of the Indian tantric tradition known for his deep love and compassion for a dog who was also his spiritual companion. It is said that Pathing Rinpoche was the nineteenth incarnation of this mahasiddha.

Lama as Appearance One of the subgroups of the Four Special Preliminaries in which we reorient our experiences to explore using the arising of all phenomena as the teacher. Through this practice, we are able to expand our relationship to the teacher and accept everyday phenomena as being endowed with great spiritual meaning.

Lhakthong Literally known as Superior Insight meditation. A form of vipassana meditation aimed at dissolving conceptual barriers that prevent the realization of the nature of mind.

Lojong Slogans Logong, or Mind Training, is based upon a series of slogans, or aphorisms, developed by the twelfth-century Kadampa teacher Chewaka Yeshe Dorje in Tibet. These slogans represent a powerful training through which we can refine our motivation.

Machig Labdron The eleventh-century female founder of chöd practice.

Mahamudra The special nonconceptual meditation that is a specialty of the Kagyu lineage. Mahamudra was developed by the Indian mahasiddhas Saraha, Shavaripa, Maitripa, and Tilopa.

Mahasiddha A Sanskrit term denoting a practitioner who has achieved great realization. You find mahasiddhas in both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Mahayana Also known as the second turning of the wheel of dharma by the Buddha. The Mahayana tradition introduced the bodhisattva ideal as well as the emphasis on deeply engaged altruism as part of the Buddhist path.

Maitripa The great eleventh-century Indian Buddhist mahasiddha who is known for his development and dissemination of the practice of Mahamudra meditation.

Mandala A ritual symbol common to both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. In some cases, a mandala can refer to the entire universe; in others, it is the abode of a particular deity; and in some cases, it is a physical place.

Mara A being that represents ignorance, distraction, desire, and attachment.

Mikyö Dorje The eighth Karmapa, a great meditation master famed for compiling the Indian source texts for mahamudra meditation.

Milarepa The famous eleventh-century Tibetan yogin. He is well known for his perseverance of spiritual practice, humility, and for teaching through song. Milarepa was and still remains the model for the yogic traditions in later Tantric Buddhist traditions.

Namthar Tibetan word for spiritual biography. These texts are read to inspire meditators.

Naropa Direct student of Tilopa who had been a well-regarded scholar but gave up his position to study with the yogin Tilopa. He compiled many of Tilopa's most profound teachings into what has been called the Six Yogas of Naropa.

Ngondro The Tibetan name for a practice called the four foundations or the four preliminaries. These consist of prostrations/taking refuge, Vajrasattva meditation, mandala offerings, and guru yoga. Traditionally each of the four foundations are to be done 100,000 times.

Palmo The short name for Dorje Palmo, or Vajravarahi, one of the central Kagyu tantric Buddhas.

Paramitas Sanskrit term for perfection. In the Mahayana tradition, this typically refers to the Six Paramitas, or Six Perfections, which exist as six qualities we train to develop: generosity, virtue, patience, diligence, one-pointed concentration, and wisdom.

Parinirvana A term meaning final enlightenment, which also refers to enlightenment after the death experience.

Pathing Rinpoche One of my main teachers.

Pawo The Tibetan word for daka. See dakini/daka.

Pecha Tibetan term for meditation text or ritual text.

Phat A seed symbol syllable that is associated with wrathful practices that removes negativity and also cuts through the obscurations of mind-impeding realization.

Pitha A Sanskrit term that literally translates to "seat," referring to a place of spiritual power where we can interact with spiritual beings.

Preta A Sanskrit term for hungry ghost, a being typified by insatiable desire/greed. In the case of Buddhist art, hungry ghosts are depicted as having large bellies and necks too narrow to swallow a grain of rice.

Radical Acceptance A term I use to denote the fresh, direct openness of resting in the nature of mind. It is radical because it runs counter to our self-reinforcing habits.

Rechungpa One of the principle disciples of Milarepa. Rechungpa was a great yogin who was instrumental in the dissemination of the Nyengyud Chakrasamvara tradition in Tibet.

Repa The name for a lay tantric yogin or yogini.

Rime A nonsectarian movement in Tibetan Buddhism developed in the nineteenth century by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye and Jamyang Kheyntse Wongpo.

Sacred Geography The exploration of the relationship between physical place and its spiritual, and therefore internal, meaning.

Sadhana Ritual text.

Samantabhadra A primordial Buddha representing the inherent, perfect, naturally awakened mind.

Samaya A vow or pledge given in association with a tantric meditation practice. Samaya is closely related to the maintenance of a specific type of behavior or action associated with a given tantric practice.

Samsara The experience of suffering rooted in the experience of ignorance and ego-grasping.

Saraha An eighth-century Indian Buddhist mahasiddha credited with first formulating the mahamudra practice lineage.

Shamatha Calm-abiding meditation. This form of meditation is aimed at settling the mind.

Shinay Tibetan word for shamatha. See shamatha.

Six Realms of Existence A classical presentation of the experience of life as divided into six realms (God realm, Demigod realm, Human realm, Animal realm, Hungry Ghost realm, and Hell realm). In traditional presentations over the course of multiple lifetimes, we cycle through these realms depending upon our karma.

Skuksep Lochen Chönyi Zangmo A renowned female tantric master who lived from 1852 to 1953. She was a teacher of Pathing Rinpoche and was famed as being the abbess of the Shukseb nunnery, a lineage holder of the

Longchen Nyingthik cycle of teachings, as well as an incarnation of Machig Labdron.

Tantrika A term denoting the practitioner of tantra.

Terma That which is discovered or found by a tertön. This could be a mind treasure (a direct revelatory experience that translates into the development of a meditation practice that is then recorded) or physical objects, texts, images, sculpture, and so on.

Terton Also known as a treasure revealer. Refers to a highly realized practitioner who, prophesized by Padmasambhava, the tantric master who brought Tantric Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century, has the ability to reveal hidden teachings, texts, or sacred objects.

Theravada The first Buddhist tradition based upon the Pali Canon—the body of recorded texts (suttas) originating from the historical Buddha.

Three Authentic Perceptions Within the context of the song by Pathing Rinpoche, the three authentic perceptions refer to the “pure” perception of the community of assembled ganachakra goddesses as sacred beings, the teacher as none other than a Tantric Buddha, and the gathered sangha as female and male deities.

Three Doubts Doubt regarding the power of the tantric texts, doubt regarding the cleanliness of the ganachakra, and doubt concerning the secret tantric conduct.

Three Isolations The practice of isolation of body, isolation of speech, and isolation of mind. This meditation practice is rooted in settling the practitioner in a state of stable stillness of body and speech and unmovable awareness of mind. This practice is found within the Guhyasamaja cycle of tantric practice.

Three Jewels Buddha, dharma, and sangha.

Three Kayas Nirmanakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Dharmakaya. These represent the form-body, the enjoyment body, and the inconceivable body, respectively.

Three Unwholesome Activities Accumulating unwholesome actions in relationship to the tantric path revealed by the guru, the spiritual

instructions, and toward fellow practitioners.

Three Vehicles The three turnings of the wheel of dharma, or the three major forms of Buddhism: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.

Tilopa Tenth-century Indian yogin who was the founder of the Kagyu tradition of Tantric Buddhism.

Tonglen A meditation practice known as “sending and receiving” in which the meditator practices taking on the suffering of others and replacing it with love, compassion, and healing. This practice is powerful and transformational as it opens the door to greater empathy.

Torma A ritual cake offered at the beginning of some tantric rituals to pacify any obstructing spirits. Also refers to a more formal decorative offering cake for visualized beings.

Tsok The practice of making offerings sometimes in the form of ritual cakes called torma. Can also include offerings of food. These offerings are both acts of generosity and ways of maintaining intimate connections with the deities to which such substances are offered.

Tsongkhapa The fourteenth-century founder of the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

Tsunma Dechen Zangmo My root teacher, a Tibetan Buddhist nun from Sikkim, India.

Vamacara/Durtro Practice Embracing activity that is transgressive, rooted in the expression of the nondual point realization of mind and the “one taste” of all phenomena. This activity is highly advanced, easily misunderstood, and requires a solid dharma training.

Vajrasana Literally, vajra-seat. Refers to the vajra-throne at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, India. Also refers to the seated meditation posture commonly referred to as the lotus position.

Vajrayana The diamond or vajra-vehicle, the Tantric Buddhist tradition.

Vipassana Known as Insight meditation. This practice is rooted in exploring and creating a deeper awareness of experiences as they arise.

Yidam A meditational deity or meditational Buddha that you use as the focus of a specific meditation practice. In yidam practice, you typically visualize yourself as a particular Buddha while also reciting the mantra associated with that Buddha. Sometimes you make ritual offerings to yidam deities as well.

Notes

Introduction

[1.](#) Tiso, “Mi la ras pa on the Intermediate State.”

Section I: Body

Outer Body

[¹](#) K. T. Rinpoche, *Uttara Tantra*, 55–56.

[²](#) K. T. Rinpoche, *Uttara Tantra*, 56–57.

Inner Body

[¹](#) See Quintman, Yogin and the Madman and Roberts, *The Biographies of Rechungpa*.

[²](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 37.

[³](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 37.

[⁴](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 37.

[⁵](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 37.

[⁶](#) Dorje, *Profound Instructions*, 184.

[⁷](#) Dorje, *Profound Instructions*, 184.

[⁸](#) Dorje, *Profound Instructions*, lxii–lxiii.

[⁹](#) Jinpa, *Mind of Mahamudra*, 44.

[¹⁰](#) Jinpa, *Mind of Mahamudra*, 51.

Secret Body

[¹](#) I have used the Tibetan term *Tsunma*, which is the classical term for a Buddhist nun, rather than the term *Ani*, which means Aunt and is a derogatory and diminutive term. I owe a debt of gratitude to Karma Lekshe Tsomo for reiterating the importance of the use of *Tsunma* and the extent to which the term *Ani* remains used today “even by nuns showing the extent of internalized oppression in the Tibetan Tradition.” Personal communication.

² Tiso, “Mi la ras pa on the Intermediate State.”

³ Kongtrul, Vol V, *gDams ngag mdzod*.

Section II: Speech

Inner Speech

- [1.](#) B. Rinpoche, *Taking the Bodhisattva Vow*, 52.
- [2.](#) Kongtrul, *Buddhist Ethics*, 221.
- [3.](#) Kongtrul, *Buddhist Ethics*, 226.
- [4.](#) Kongtrul, *Buddhist Ethics*, 229.
- [5.](#) The Three Secrets in this text are the secret treasury of the *guru*, the *yidam*, and of the *dakas and dakinis*. This is a reference to the shift in the tantric tradition in which the teacher (guru), the deity (yidam), and the dakas and dakinis are seen as the root of realization.
- [6.](#) *The Chöd Instruction*, 21.

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- [1.](#) Dorje and Kongtrul, *Chöd Practice Manual*, 109.
- [2.](#) Dorje and Kongtrul, *Chöd Practice Manual*, 112.
- [3.](#) Thondup, *Masters of Meditation and Miracles*, 251.

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- [1.](#) Walshe, *Long Discourses of Buddha*, 263–64.
- [2.](#) Schaeffer, *Dreaming the Great Brahmin*, 151.
- [3.](#) Zangpo, *Sacred Ground*, 175.
- [4.](#) Zangpo, *Sacred Ground*, 176–177.
- [5.](#) Zangpo, *Sacred Ground*, 66.
- [6.](#) Ricard, *Life of Shabkar*, 442, note 1.
- [7.](#) See David Templeman, “Internal and External Geography in Spiritual Biography,” in Huber, *Sacred Spaces*, 190.
- [8.](#) See Huber, “Putting the Gnas Back into Gnas-skor: Rethinking Tibetan Pilgrimage Practice,” in Huber, *Sacred Spaces*, 82–99.
- [9.](#) Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 36.
- [10.](#) Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 37.
- [11.](#) Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 41.
- [12.](#) Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 41.
- [13.](#) Dorje, *Profound Instructions*, 83.
- [14.](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 23.
- [15.](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 23.
- [16.](#) Dorje, *Profound Instructions*, 85.
- [17.](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 23.
- [18.](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 25.

[19.](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 25.

[20.](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 25.

[21.](#) B. Rinpoche, *Opening the Door*, 25.

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[1.](#) Tilopa, “Six Words of Advice.”

[2.](#) Mathes, *Fine Blend of Mahamudra and Madhyamaka*, 259.

[3.](#) Higgins, “Non-Mentation Doctrine,” 283–284.

[4.](#) The only English translations I have been able to locate of this collection are one by an unidentified translator that is easily found online, one by Ani Karma Sonam Palmo, published by the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Choglamsar, Leh-Ladakh, in 2013; and one by Sanjib Kumar Das, published by AAYU Publications, New Delhi, in 2018.

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