

Illusion's Game
THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF NAROPA



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FIVE

Mahamudra

BEFORE WE DISCUSS Naropa's experiences with Tilopa further, we have to understand the meaning of mahamudra properly. So far, we have only a very rough sketch of that experience. In our earlier discussion of continuity, we discussed it as starting from the level of the hinayana realization of pain and then going on to the shunyata experience. Then from the shunyata experience of emptiness, we are led to mahamudra. The sense of continuity there is rediscovering one's basic ground; the mahamudra experience could be described that way. Having had all the illusions and hallucinations removed by the experience of shunyata, there is a sense of extraordinary clarity. That clarity is called mahamudra.

Mahamudra is a Sanskrit word. *Maha* means "big, great," and *mudra* means "symbol." But *maha* doesn't mean "big" in a comparative sense: something bigger compared to something smaller. It is not based on a dichotomy. It is simply that such clarity as this is beyond measure. There is no other clarity like this. It is fullness; it is without association in the sense that this experience is full in itself. And the sense in which *mudra* means symbol again has nothing to do with analysis or examples; rather the thing itself is its own symbol. Everybody represents themselves and everybody is a caricature of themselves. There is that sense of a humorous aspect, a caricature aspect, as well as everything having its own basic fullness. You represent yourself not by name but by being. So there is a sense of completion.

The mahamudra experience has been compared to the experience of a young child visiting a colorful temple. He sees all kinds of magnificent decorations, displays, rich colors, vividness of all kinds. But this child has no preconception or any concept whatsoever about where to begin to analyze. Everything is overwhelming, quite in its own right. So the child does not become frightened by this vivid scenery and at the same time does not know how to appreciate it. It is quite different from a child walking into a playroom full of toys, where his attention is caught by a particular toy and he runs right over and starts playing with it. A temple—a highly decorated, colorful temple—is so harmonious in its own right that the child has no way of introducing his fascination from one particular standpoint. The experience is all-pervasive. At the same time, it is perhaps somewhat overwhelmingly pleasurable.

So the mahamudra experience is vividness, vividness to such an extent that it does not require a watcher or commentator; or for that matter, it does not require meditative absorption. In the case of shunyata, there is still a sense of needing a nursing process for that experience; it is not only that the sitting practice of meditation is required, but there is a sense of needing a registrar to record your experience in a memory bank. The very idea of emptiness is an experience, even though you may not have an *experiencer* as such, since the whole thing is totally open and nondualistic. But even the very sense of nonduality is a faint stain, a very subtle, transparent stain. On the shunyata level, that stain is regarded as an adornment, like putting a varnish over well-finished wood. It is supposed to protect the wood from further stains of dirt or grease, to keep it looking fresh and new, to preserve the newness of this well-finished wood. But in the long run, that clear varnish becomes a factor that ages the new look of this fresh wood. It turns yellow and slowly begins to crumble, and scratches begin to

show much more in it than they would in the original wood. So the nonduality becomes a problem in the shunyata experience.

In the experience of mahamudra, even the notion of nonduality is not applied or is not necessary. Therefore, it has been said in the scriptures that the only definition of mahamudra you can use is “unborn” or “unoriginated.” Or again, often the mahamudra experience is described in terms of coemergent wisdom—that is, born simultaneously rather than born with the delays of process. This refers to confusion and realization existing simultaneously, as opposed to confusion coming first and then realization taking over and cleaning out the confusion. In the mahamudra, confusion and realization are simultaneous, coemergent.

The eternally youthful quality of the mahamudra experience is one of its outstanding qualities. It is eternally youthful because there is no sense of repetition, no sense of wearing out of interest because of familiarity. Every experience is a new, fresh experience. So it is childlike, innocent and childlike. The child has never even seen its body—such a brandnew world.

Another term for mahamudra, used by Rangjung Dorje and other great teachers, is “ordinary consciousness.” Experience ceases to be extraordinary. It is so ordinary—so clear and precise and obvious. The only thing that confuses us and prevents us from realizing this experience is its ordinariness. The ordinary quality becomes a kind of barrier, because when you look for something, you don’t look for the ordinary. Even in the case of losing a pair of glasses that you are completely used to. When you lose them, the glasses become a very interesting object. They immediately become an extraordinary thing, because you’ve lost them. You begin to imagine: “Could they be here? Could they be there?” You shake all the cushions, you move all the chairs and tables, and you look underneath the rugs. It becomes an extraordinary case. But the glasses are an ordinary thing.

In that way, mahamudra is self-secret because of its ordinariness. Ordinariness becomes its own camouflage, so to speak. It has also been said that mahamudra cannot be expressed, that even the Buddha’s tongue is numb when it comes to describing mahamudra. And it’s true. How much can you say about ordinary things? And the more you see that it is very ordinary, the more that becomes an extraordinary case, which creates a further veil.

The experience of mahamudra is also somewhat irritating, or even highly irritating, because of its sharpness and precision. The energies around you—textures, colors, different states of mind, relationships—are very vivid and precise. They are all so naked and so much right in front of you, without any padding, without any walls between you and “that.” That nakedness is overwhelming. Although it is your own experience, we often find that even when you have only a small glimpse of mahamudra experience, you want to run away from yourself. You look for privacy of some kind—privacy from yourself. The world is so true and naked and sharp and precise and colorful that it’s extraordinarily irritating—let alone when other *people* approach you. You think you can avoid them, run away from them physically, put a notice on your door, or take a trip to an unknown corner of the world. You might try to dissociate yourself from the familiar world, run away from your home ground, disconnect your telephone. You can do all kinds of things of that nature, but when the world begins to become *you* and all these preceptions are *yours* and are very precise and very obviously right in front of you, you can’t run away from it. The process of running away creates further sharpness, and if you really try to run away from these phenomena, they begin to mock you, laugh at you. The chairs and tables and rugs and paintings on the wall and your books, the sounds you hear in your head, begin to mock you. Even if you try to tear your body apart, still something follows you. You can’t get away

from it. That is why it is called the ultimate nakedness. You begin to feel you are just a live brain with no tissue around it, exposed on a winter morning to the cold air. It's *so* penetrating, so irritating, and so sharp.

It is a fundamental and very profound irritation. The irritations we discussed before are relatively simple and seem to be ordinary ones. The irritation of the mahamudra experience is very insulting in many ways, disconcerting. That is why the experience of mahamudra is also referred to as "crazy wisdom." It is a crazy experience, but not exactly ego madness. It's wisdom that has gone crazy. The element of wisdom here is its playfulness, humorousness, and sybaritic quality. Even though you are irritated and naked and completely exposed without your skin, there is a sense of joy or, more likely, bliss.

One of the definite characteristics of the Buddhist tantra, on the mahamudra level at least, is not running away from sense pleasures, but rather identifying with them, working with them as part of the working basis. That is an outstanding part of the tantric message. Pleasure in this case includes every kind of pleasure: psychosomatic, physical, psychological, and spiritual. Here, it is quite different from the way in which spiritual materialists might seek pleasure—by getting into the other. In this case, it is getting into "this." There is a self-existing pleasurable quality that is completely hollow if you look at it from the ordinary point of view of ego's pleasure orientation. Within that, you don't actually experience pleasure at all. All pleasure experiences are hollow. But if you look at it from the point of view of this nakedness, this situation of being completely exposed, any pleasure you experience is full because of its hollowness. On the mahamudra level, pleasure does not take place through the pores of your skin, but pleasure takes place on your very *flesh* without skin. You become the bliss rather than enjoying the bliss. You are the embodiment of bliss, and this contains a quality of your being very powerful. You have conquered pleasure, and pleasure is yours. One doesn't even have to go so far as to try to enjoy pleasure, but pleasure becomes self-existing bliss.

In this way, every experience that might occur in our life—communication, visual experience, auditory experience, consciousness, anything that we relate to—becomes completely workable, highly workable. In fact, even the notion of workability does not apply. It's yours. It is *you*, in fact. So things become very immediate.

This is what is often called vajra pride. Pride in this case is not arrogance, but is nondualistically self-contained. You are not threatened by your projections or projectors, but you are there, and at the same time, everything around you is you and yours.

It took a long time for Naropa to realize that. Having visited the freak show, he failed again. Finally, at the last moment, when he thought of killing himself and was just about to relate with the totality of himself, *finally* then he experienced that penetrating pain in himself. He thought that maybe if he eliminated his body, he might be able to relieve that pain. At that point, Tilopa finally appeared. Through the twelve tortures that Naropa went through (with the help of Tilopa), sometimes he understood this nakedness, experiencing it fully, totally, completely, and sometimes he didn't understand it and instead tripped out into the highest spiritual mishmash. The perfect example is when Tilopa put sharpened pieces of bamboo between his nails and his fingers, put little flags on the ends of the pieces of bamboo, and asked Naropa to hold them up into the wind. That exemplifies (through the medium of pain, of course) how real the nakedness could be if it were blissful.

That seems to be a very powerful message for us. Mind you, we are not going to practice that very exercise with every student, but that is an example of what the process is like. How many times can