



His Eminence Khentin Tai Situ Rinpoche

The Four Seals of Mahamudra - *Chös-rtags-kyi-phyag-rgya-bzhi*

Mahamudra, *phyag-rgya-chen-po* – literally translated as ‘Great Seal, Great Symbol’ - means that all appearances and experiences are sealed by the primordially perfect, true nature. Mahamudra is the view and meditation practice that is emphasized in the Kagyü Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. It enables sincere disciples to directly experience the empty, luminous, and pure nature of mind, which is Buddha nature. Mahamudra is also called *phyag-rgya-chen-mo*, the supreme and all-embracing gesture that is the consort of empty form.

The four great seals of Mahamudra are the four main principles of Buddhism. They are four summaries (*chös-rtags-kyi-phyag-rgya-bzhi*) and are also referred to as *rtags-ma*, ‘emblems.’ These four main principles that mark a doctrine as Buddhist are:

Du-byäs-thams-cäd-mi-rtag-pa-red,
 ‘Everything that is conditioned is impermanent.’
Zag-bcäs-thams-cäd-sdug-bsngal-red,
 ‘Everything that is stained brings suffering.’
Chös-thams-cäd-stong-zhin-bdag-med-pa-red,
 ‘All phenomena are empty and devoid of a self.’
Myan- ‘däs-ni-zhi-ba-red,
 ‘Nirvana is peace.’

The four great seals of Mahamudra are closely linked to the Four Noble Truths that Lord Buddha taught the first time he turned the Wheel of Dharma. The Four Noble Truths are the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to freedom from suffering and pain. Let us look at each verse of the four seals more closely.

1) Everything that is conditioned is impermanent – ‘*Du-byäs-thams-cäd-mi-rtag-pa-red*

All things arise due to causes and conditions and are therefore impermanent. Everything changes from moment to moment and ceases very quickly. Birth leads to death, good becomes bad, what seemed bad turns good, the present becomes the past, individuals closely connected part, and what arises ceases. This is why Jetsun Milarepa sang, “*Mi-rtag-pa, mi-rtag-pa*. Impermanence, impermanence. Nothing has a lasting essence.”

Nothing that arises has an inherently existing essence and everything can be compared to a banana tree. When the first layer of bark is peeled away, there is another layer; when that is peeled away, there is another layer, and so on. When one reaches the middle of a banana tree’s trunk, it is hollow, so there was nothing there except the layers to begin with. Samsara is like that too. Everything is like a banana tree’s layers and layers – illusory and impermanent. Yet, one sees and apprehends things and calls the person who sees “I” and what is seen “mine,” believing both are independent existents. Illusory apprehensions thought to be real can be understood by looking at a flowing river or candle flame. When one looks down at a river while standing on a bridge, one sees ripples of a current of flowing water. If one returns to the same spot the next day or a year later, one thinks one sees the same river. Since a river consists of flowing water, it is never the river one once saw, yet one insists that it is the same, even years later. The flame of a candle that has the shape of an arrowhead is dark at its centre, then it is reddish, then yellow, and red again. The flame seems to be the same but isn’t, not even for a second. And yet, one points to it and calls it “the flame,” while, in fact, it is no longer the flame one is referring to when one speaks about it. In the same way, everything one sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches is impermanent and doesn’t last a split second. Impermanence is the nature of all things. Even tiniest objects and smallest instants of time change incessantly.

How does a practitioner deal with impermanence? It is not a hopeless case. On the contrary, it gives one a reason to be optimistic. In the *Bodhicharyavatara*, Shantideva wrote, “We can cross the river of samsara by using the vessel of this precious human existence.” One needs a boat in order to cross a river, and the boat we all have that will carry us across the river of samsara is our precious human existence. It is impermanent and it is precious but, as Jetsün Milarepa said, “There is no time to waste because life is subject to destruction.” Life can be destroyed in billions of ways and so it is said to be like a water-bubble or a burning butter-lamp placed in the wind – fragile and extremely vulnerable.

The moment we are born, we are subject to death, and it will be very difficult to attain a precious existence like the one we have now after we have died. A precious human birth is attained as a result of former causes and conditions that were quite virtuous and good. This life is precious because we have the ability to leave suffering behind and attain great happiness. Life is invaluable but it is impermanent and can be destroyed very easily. So we should not waste it but make the best use of the opportunity and invaluable resources at our disposal.

2) Everything that is stained brings suffering – *Zag-bcäs-thams-cäd-sdug-bsngül-red*

There are many ways to explain the second seal of Mahamudra. It is easy to understand that any negative action is polluted and stained.¹ A positive action that is carried out with selfish intentions is also stained. And even positive actions that are carried out to benefit others are stained as long as they are done with divided thoughts. Suffering that ensues from these types of actions is manifold. I want to speak about the three kinds of suffering (*sdug-bsngül-gsum*).

¹ Further usages to describe the word ‘stained,’ *zag-bcäs* in Tibetan, are ‘with outflows, contaminated, defiled, conditioned, mundane.’

They are (1) suffering of change (*'gyur-ba'i-sdug-bsngäl*), (2) inherent suffering (*'du-byäs-kyi-sdug-bsngäl*),² and (3) suffering of suffering (*sdug-bsngäl-gi-sdug-bsngäl*).

When negative karma ripens, it is experienced as suffering of suffering, such as birth into states of hell, where beings go through torturous pain that is inflicted by being exposed to unbearable heat and freezing cold. When positive karma of actions that were carried out with selfish intentions ripens, it is experienced as the suffering of change. Even if happiness were to last millions of years, eventually the situation changes and ends. When positive actions are carried out to benefit others with dualistic fixations, they do not become the source of liberation from suffering, rather they give rise to inherent suffering that is due to the erroneous belief in the unconditioned existence of a subject and objects.

How can the erroneous belief in a self be the cause of suffering? Taking generosity or good conduct as examples, they are beneficial when they are paramitas, i.e., good actions carried out with wisdom-awareness. Generosity and ethical conduct, for example, are good, but they are usually based on dualistic concepts, for example, the notions “good” versus “bad” or “right” versus “wrong.” Such virtuous karma is stained as long as there are still dualistic fixations, which arise from ignorance.³

Many people ask me, “How could samsara (that is characterized by suffering) have ever begun in the first place?” The illusion of a self sets samsara in motion and is the first of the twelve links of interdependent origination. The first link is called “ignorance,” i.e., not knowing how things are, not knowing the “as-it-is-ness” of all things. That is the beginning of samsara. It takes place in every second and arises due to the belief in an “I,” a “me,” and a “mine.” We accept what we think pleases and reject what we think displeases. We act accordingly and experience the results, either here or in future incarnations. The continuum of incarnations occurs every minute, every day, all year long, and as long as life lasts, until we are reborn as an animal, then from being an animal to taking birth as a ghost, then on to hell, then on to the god realm. We go up and down and back and forth, restlessly turning around in what can be called “never-ending dreams.” Buddhist teachings do not say that reincarnation truly exists. I understand when people say, “There are no good results from virtue and no bad results from vice.” I do not leave it at that, though, but ask them, “Are you happy when things work out for you? Aren’t you upset when things go wrong? Don’t you ever make mistakes?” We need to remember that there is a difference between the way things appear and the way things really are.

We do not have enough awareness to actually see “as-it-is-ness,” *dharmata*.⁴ We do not have wisdom-awareness that sees that there is no happiness, no suffering, no reincarnation, no vice, no virtue, but that these aspects of life are simply present. The inevitable facets of life that are simply present are experienced negatively or positively because of an obscured mind, which is ignorance. Ignorance is the first of the twelve links of interdependent origination, which I will speak about briefly.

² *'Du-byäs* means ‘compounded, conditioned,’ the way in which everything appears and exists.

³ *Zag-bcäs-kyi-dge-ba* means ‘conditioned virtue,’ practices in which a dualistic point of reference is used. Unconditioned virtue is recognition of Buddha nature.

⁴ See Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, *Distinguishing Dharma and Dharmata by Maitreya*, Zhyisil Chokyi Ghatsal Charitable Trust Publications, Auckland, New Zealand, and Nammo Buddha Publications, Crestone, Colorado, 2004. The Sanskrit term *dharmata* is *chös-nyid* in Tibetan. It is the intrinsic nature of phenomena and mind, which is emptiness, the absolute nature. Awareness of dharmata (*chäs-nyid-kyi-drän-pa*) is the unchanging presence of mind.

Ignorance causes a deluded and stained apprehension of all that appears and gives rise to the second link of interdependent origination, which is karmic creation. The second link leads to the third link. Positive and negative karma is accumulated due to the third link, which is consciousness. Birth into one of the specific realms of existence occurs due to the universal law of karma, which is the unremitting interaction that takes place between causes and conditions. And so, specific experiences in a realm of existence cause one to generate further conditionings, the fourth link, which is name and form. Since mind is not separate from body and speech, name and form take place. When karma ripens, the sensory faculties develop accordingly, link five, which are the six perceptual entrances. Someone who is born blind, for instance, doesn't have the karma to develop an eye-consciousness. When the sensory faculties have fully developed in accordance with a person's own biography, contact with various sense-objects happens, the sixth link. Contact is felt to be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, the seventh link, which is feelings. Being attracted to what seems pleasant leads to the eighth link, which is grasping or involvement. A mind that is attracted to one object or another is the ninth link, grasping and rejecting. Grasping for what seems pleasant and rejecting what seems unpleasant lead to the tenth link, which is becoming, i.e., birth, the eleventh link of interdependent origination. Birth inevitably entails ageing, sickness, and death, the twelfth link in the process of causality that rounds up the never-ending cycle of being and becoming. Understanding the twelve links makes it easier to understand reincarnation.⁵

The second seal or emblem of Mahamudra means to say that any actions carried out with dualistic fixations are based on ignorance, which automatically brings on suffering. Now, suffering is not necessarily evident just because someone is crying – some people cry when they are happy. Suffering mentioned in the second seal deals with the cause of suffering. Lord Buddha taught that ordinary beings can't feel a thin hair that is on the palm of their hand, whereas extraordinary beings feel everything as though a strand of hair or a tiniest dust kernel were in their eye. This means to say that discursiveness, the cause of suffering, doesn't disturb ordinary beings, who simply remain insensitive about it. But they can feel the results of negative karma - they certainly would feel being cooked alive in boiling water or feel pain if steaming hot water were poured over the palms of their hands. Duality is the cause of suffering, which is purified through meditation practice. Through meditation, duality is recognized more and more clearly and eventually a practitioner becomes sensitive and feels it, as though dualistic concepts that divide were a strand of hair in his or her eyes.

3) All phenomena are empty and devoid of a self – *Chös-thams-cüd-stong-zhin-bdag-med-pa-red*

There are two aspects of phenomena (*chös* in Tibetan), subjects and objects, animate and inanimate. Animate refers to every being that is capable of apprehending and therefore can perceive and conceive itself as “a self,” as an “I.” The self that is felt to be unique and distinct is compounded, though, and therefore doesn't exist as an independent entity the way it happens to appear to a deluded mind. Belief in a truly existing self is illusory, only because the self does not exist the way it appears to be but isn't. The self, the “I,” depends upon causes and conditions and therefore it is impermanent. We call this aspect “relative truth.” The absence of an independent entity can be deduced logically and is easy to understand. Seeing that the “I” (that one thinks exists of its own accord) is not really an independent existent, it is reasonable that what is experienced as “mine” does not truly exist either, i.e., objects that are apprehended are not independent entities either. We call this aspect “ultimate truth.” The

⁵ See Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, *The Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination – Instructions Presented at the Namu Buddha Seminar in Glasgow, Scotland, 1993*, Namu Buddha Publications, Crestone, Colorado, 1993 and 2003.

absence of truly existing, self-sufficient subjects and objects is examined carefully in the Madhyamaka School.

Madhyamikas investigate smallest particles and shortest instants of time thoroughly. If an indivisible instant of time that has no duration (and therefore would not consist of smaller instants) could ever be found, then how can there be an independently existing longer period of time that does not consist of shortest instants? With this in mind, the question arises, “What does time mean and how did everything start?” Similarly, if a smallest particle that is not composed of smaller particles exists, i.e., is not conditioned, it would necessarily be partless and therefore could not have sides, i.e., no inner side, no outer side, no back, or front, no left side, or right side, and so forth. Seeing that all particles have sides, smallest particles cannot be unconditioned since they consist of and depend upon parts. It would go beyond the scope of a short seminar to explain Madhyamaka Philosophy fully. There are four great tenets of investigation that are the core of this school. The four great tenets are investigations carried out in order to find whether appearances and experiences can be characterized by concepts such as “existent,” “non-existent,” “both existent and non-existent,” or “neither.” They are studied in great detail in order to understand and appreciate that all phenomena lack independent existence.⁶

So, seen ultimately, there is no independent entity that can be called “a truly existing self,” but, seen relatively, there is. Lord Buddha spoke about the interconnectedness of subjects and objects. The self is a dependent entity that functions in a relative, conventional way. When I do something good, the karmic result is mine and not that of others. When I study, I become educated and learned. In Buddhism, it is understood that relatively there is nothing that is not dependent but that there is a self that functions and experiences the inner and outer world of appearances. It is furthermore understood that ultimately there is nothing that is independent. Everything depends upon other things in order to exist and nothing is a self-existing, independent entity that lasts. All phenomena are dependent entities and are impermanent. That is how things are.

What is the purpose of understanding Madhyamaka? It seems so confusing but isn't confusing at all. Madhyamaka philosophy helps us understand both relative and ultimate truths. We find ourselves living in relative reality and follow a path that leads to realization of the ultimate truth. Our essence is ultimate, which can become our view if we study, contemplate, and meditate the instructions correctly. So, learning the view leads to realizing the view. A student who understands and acknowledges the ultimate view does so from a relative position, the reason a mystical song of realization exclaims, “In this universe, the world is an illusion. The illusory practitioner travels an illusory path and attains an illusory result.” This means to say that ultimately everything that is relative is illusory; nevertheless illusory practitioners try to develop and progress by ridding themselves of illusory obstacles. Wholesome illusions are practiced so that a student overcomes and eradicates unwholesome illusions.

As long as one is governed by the main disturbing emotions of ignorance, desire, and aversion, it is impossible to achieve ultimate realization. Anything that might be a cause for emotions to evolve and increase needs to be overcome, and anything that could be a cause to develop and increase positive karma needs to be cultivated. Instead of killing, it is necessary to preserve life, which brings a longer life. Instead of lying, it is necessary to tell the truth, which engenders trustworthy speech and a good environment. Such behaviour is positive but illusory. In order to eliminate illusiveness, one needs to use good speech and the good life one

⁶ Madhyamaka (*dU-ma-chen-po*) means “Middle Way” and is the school that was founded by the Indian scholar Nagarjuna, who lived in the late 2nd century A.D.

has so that one becomes free from duality and realizes one's true nature. Let me give an example to illustrate elimination of illusiveness: Even when it is cloudy outside, the sun is always present. Wind dispels the clouds that conceal the sun but also curbs the sun's vital rays, in which case the wind impedes the beneficial qualities of the sun. Similarly, by creating a better illusion, painful illusions are removed, but the better illusions also need to be dispelled. Better illusions need to be removed so that wisdom of non-duality shines freely.

4) Nirvana is peace – *Myän-'däs-ni-zhi-ba-red*

Realization is not beyond daily life. It is not outside the realm of reality, rather realization reveals itself when a practitioner has purified stains and when qualities of worth have unfolded through the practice of accumulation.⁷ When nothing is left that needs to be purified or accumulated, a disciple has realized the ultimate truth. It is an inconceivable experience that surpasses intellectual understanding.

How does realization come about? Like one's very own face, every sentient being always and already has realization but does not see it due to ignorance, the first link of conditionality. Since perfect and pure realization already exists within every sentient being, one may wonder, "If the ultimate truth abides within as-it-is already, how can it possibly not be realized?" Nobody has seen his or her own face other than in a picture or mirror and will not see it directly in life. Seeing mind's essence, which is realization, is obscured because of one's ignorance that causes one to cling to the self (one calls "I") and to perceptions (one calls "other"). When the essence of the own mind is seen the first time, one thinks that it is completely other than the self that one normally clings to and cherishes so much. This realization still entails a subject-object dichotomy, which is not ultimate perfection that a buddha has realized and that buddhas continue realizing. A fully enlightened buddha has transcended a subject-object dichotomy. I cannot describe this. No one can describe it. The only thing we can say now is that realization means realizing "just-as-it-is" for oneself. All we can do is diligently work to achieve realization. How does one start?

Even though the Buddha nature already abides within oneself, in order to realize it one needs to start at a down-to-earth level, i.e., on a relative level, by removing stains and obstacles that conceal it. The strongest stains are desire, anger, and ignorance. Contentment purifies desire, loving kindness purifies aversion and anger, and wisdom-awareness purifies ignorance. There are many levels of contentment, loving kindness, and wisdom-awareness that are gradually accomplished through training.

The world presents many excuses to be discontent. Homeless people think, "If only I had somewhere to sleep, I would be happy." The poor think, "If only I had something to eat and warm clothes, then I would be happy." When they get what they wanted, it doesn't take long and they think, "Well, this food tastes bad. I would rather have something tastier. These clothes are ugly. I want better clothes to wear. There is only an oven in this place. I would rather sleep in a room that has central heating." People are hardly ever content – everything must be bigger and better. Once one has the same things that others living in the same village have, one wants to be the best in the whole village. Once one possesses the most and is the best in the place where one lives, one wants to be the best in the whole country, and so on. That's how one becomes rich – always wanting and grabbing for more, hoping to become the richest person in the entire galaxy. When one accomplishes one's aims, the mind is discontent again. It is more or less the same for most people.

⁷ His Eminence is referring to the path of accumulation, the first path of practice that a follower of Lord Buddha's teachings practices, which is to arouse the mind of awakening, *Bodhicitta*.

In order to become content and kind and to realize wisdom-awareness, it is necessary to overcome all obstacles on a down-to-earth level by practicing step-by-step. It is possible to rid oneself of dualistic, mental fixations and thereby become free of the three kinds of suffering. It is possible to develop realization, which is peace. Contentment is peace; when one is content, then one is free to enjoy what one has. Loving kindness is peace; when one is kind, then one is open for others. Wisdom-awareness is peace; when one realizes wisdom-awareness, then one knows how to reliably help and be there for others. When a practitioner has finally transcended the notions of peace and suffering, then complete and perfect realization has dawned.

It is necessary to understand that the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya manifest through having realized freedom from dualistic fixations. It is already beneficial to know that realization means peace and can be attained by practicing Mahamudra, which is the all-encompassing practice that leads from conditioned and therefore transitory peace to unconditioned peace that is timeless, pristine awareness.

The Purpose

The purpose of this brief presentation of the four seals of Mahamudra is to encourage students to integrate the relative and ultimate views in their lives. If a student cannot accept the four great seals as their basic view, then it will be very difficult for them to acknowledge and appreciate the Buddhadharma that is the indivisibility of the relative and ultimate truths. What is the purpose of understanding the two truths on a down-to-earth level and how are they practiced? Let me explain this through an example.

Sometimes we are happy. Sometimes we are sad. Having heard the teachings does not mean one simply reiterates, “My happiness is nothing. It is just emptiness,” nor does it mean simply repeating to oneself, “My suffering is nothing. It is just emptiness.” Having won an idea of the relative and ultimate truths doesn’t mean that happiness and suffering cease, rather it means that one holds a key in one’s hand with which one can unlock the door and slowly take the steps to realize that joy and pain have no solid reality and are merely illusions, like passing dreams.

One benefit of learning to appreciate the teachings is to have a key in one’s hands to remember not to be angry when one suffers nor to be set upon being happy while doing one’s best for oneself and for one’s family and friends. Another benefit of having the right view is not to solidify the thoughts that generosity, ethical behaviour, discipline, and other virtuous activities are special and exceptional, rather to see them just as they are, i.e., to practice them without a selfish motivation and without dividing them into “good,” “bad,” and the like. Of course, it is not possible to always have the correct view in mind while living one’s life, but it is possible to become accustomed to the meaning of the four seals and to practice the general approach as well as one can.

The view I outlined a little here is Mahamudra, the ‘Great Symbol and Seal.’ It is the fundamental view of the precious Dharma that Lord Buddha revealed for us. Thank you.

Dedication

Through this goodness may omniscience be attained
And thereby may every enemy (mental defilement) be overcome.
May beings be liberated from the ocean of samsara
That is troubled by waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death.

By this virtue may I quickly attain the state of Guru Buddha and then
Lead every being without exception to that very state!
May precious and supreme Bodhicitta that has not been generated now be so,
And may precious Bodhicitta that has already been never decline, but continuously increase!

A Long Life Prayer for His Eminence Khentin Tai Situ Rinpoche

The Regent of the Future Buddha, the Undefeatable,
The Regent of the Lotus, the protector of all beings and the teachings,
Tai Situ Pema Dönyo,
May your life be long and your activities be extensive.



Photo of His Eminence Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche the Fourth listening to His Eminence bestowing the Rinchen Terzöd at Palpung Monastery in 2006 courtesy of Palpung Monastery, India.
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