

## Three Classifications of Mahamudra

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According to the teachings and tradition of Lord Gampopa's lineage, the three classifications of Mahamudra are Sutra Mahamudra, Mantra Mahamudra and Essence Mahamudra. Sutra Mahamudra is primarily based on the sutra teachings, and mantra Mahamudra is primarily based on the mantra teachings. Essence Mahamudra draws from both sutra and mantra, but is traditionally distinguished as the devotional path based on blessings.

### **Sutra Mahamudra: The Secret Road in the City**

The general teachings of Mahamudra were presented by Lord Buddha and his followers in such sutras as the Prajnaparamita Sutras or The Discourses on Transcendental Knowledge. These sutras teach primarily "the great emptiness." The shortest of the Prajnaparamita sutras is the Heart Sutra, which teaches the inseparability of form and emptiness. That sutra, along with the whole collection of Prajnaparamita teachings, comprises one of the bases for Sutra Mahamudra.

The teachings on buddha nature are the other basis for Sutra Mahamudra. The buddha nature teachings point out that the nature of our mind, emotions and thoughts is complete wakefulness. That wakefulness is what we call buddhahood or enlightenment. Furthermore, that enlightenment is the nature of all sentient beings. This essence of enlightenment is what we call "buddha nature" or tathagatagarbha.

These two streams of teachings form the basis for the sutra aspect of Mahamudra. The practice of Sutra Mahamudra essentially involves the study and contemplation of these sutras, followed by meditation. We contemplate the teachings on emptiness or shunyata, as well as the teachings on buddha nature, which is our fundamental wakefulness. Through this process, we discover our own heart of enlightenment. We discover that enlightenment is nothing external to us but is found within this very mind—within our emotions, thoughts and perceptions. It is within these experiences that we see the basic state of enlightenment.

The meditation of Sutra Mahamudra essentially consists of resting one's mind, free of mental activity, in the state of nonconceptual wisdom. This is the fundamental definition of Sutra Mahamudra: mind resting in the state in which it experiences the dharmadhatu, which is the expanse or nature of all things. This resting is essentially "a nonconceptual wisdom beyond all elaboration" or "the unity of clarity and emptiness."

In this context, one meditates in the following way: The object of one’s meditation is luminosity free of any projections; the perceiving subject is the lack of mental engagement; and one meditates without mental engagement. There are many extensive explanations on meditating without mental engagement, found primarily in the teachings of Maitripa and Sahajavajra.

The Sutrayana approach to Mahamudra is seen as a very profound method because it does not require any of the sophisticated and complex tantric rituals, deity yoga practices, or samayas. It is a very simple sutra approach, yet it conveys the direct transmission of the tantric essence of awakening. This particular approach is also known as “a secret passage.” It can be compared to a secret street within a city—a route that has not been widely discovered. Although it is right in the heart of the city, very few people know about this secret street. What is the difference between this street and the other streets in the city? This street is a shortcut, without traffic or traffic lights, and it is a direct route. It does not go around the city; it is not outside the city limits. This street is right within this very city, and it will take you straight to your destination without any delays.

Thus, in order to find this path, you do not have to go far. The direct and profound methods of Sutrayana Mahamudra are found right within the sutra approach, right within the ordinary and simple path of spiritual practice. Through this path, we can attain complete buddhahood by traversing the five paths and ten bhumis.

Sutrayana Mahamudra is viewed as being very profound, straight to the point, yet simple. The difference between Sutrayana Mahamudra and other sutra approaches, such as the general Hinayana and Mahayana paths, is that Sutrayana Mahamudra has a tradition of skillful means that contains profound methods of directly pointing out the selfless and luminous nature of mind. There is a direct method of pointing out, which usually does not exist in other sutra approaches. The skillful methods of pointing out the nature of mind used in Sutra Mahamudra are imported, in a sense, from the Vajrayana tradition. Therefore, the essence of Sutrayana Mahamudra is usually described as being prajnaparamita or the transcendental wisdom of emptiness with a touch of the Vajrayana. Finally, it is called Mahamudra, the great seal, because by using the very words and teachings of the sutras, it brings the realization of Mahamudra.

The Sutra Mahamudra approach is seen as a specialty of the Kagyu tradition and was the central emphasis of Gampopa’s teachings. Therefore, although it originated in India and was also taught by Marpa and Milarepa, Gampopa is regarded as the main figure responsible for bringing this teaching to its full development and manifestation.

### **Mantra Mahamudra: The Path of Great Upaya**

The second aspect of the Mahamudra tradition is the approach of the Mantrayana or the Vajrayana. This approach involves quite profound and sophisticated methods, which include working with creation and completion stage deity practices, as well as very detailed instructions on working with nadi, prana and bindu. The main presentation of Vajrayana Mahamudra is found in the anuttarayoga tantras and in the instructions of

those tantras. These tantras are transmitted through the four principal abhishekas or empowerments. When Mahamudra is introduced as the naked, natural state through the use of Vajrayana methods, this is called Mantra Mahamudra.

A special feature of the Vajrayana path is the variety and richness of its methods, through which one can realize the nature of mind. This diversity of methods is not emphasized in the Sutra Mahamudra approach, in which there is just one, simple pointing out method for experiencing Mahamudra. In Mantra Mahamudra, there are many means of pointing out mind’s nature, such as the process of the four abhishekas. When we go through the initiation process of an abhisheka, we are empowered to practice the mandala of a particular deity, which symbolizes the nature of mind. This is the traditional way of introducing us to the nature of mind. The images of the deities that we see represented in paintings and sculptures are actually reflections, mirror images, of the nature of our own minds. By working with such a reflection through the process of visualization, we are working towards the recognition of our own minds. For example, in order to see your own face, you have to rely upon a mirror. When you see your reflection, you can say, “Oh yes, my face has such and such features,” and you can recognize whether your face is clean or dirty. Similarly, the pure and impure aspects of mind are reflected in these symbolic images of a deity. Thus, through deity yoga practice, Vajrayana Mahamudra reflects to us the nature of mind.

The Vajrayana Mahamudra deity practice is very profound; at the same time, it is quite easy for us to misunderstand the images that we see and to misinterpret the deity as an entity external to ourselves. The practice of the Vajrayana path requires a very strong understanding, and the source of that understanding is the instructions of the lineage and the Vajrayana tantras. When we study the instructions and receive the transmission, our understanding becomes clear. Through this clear understanding, we are able to genuinely relate to Vajrayana deity practice.

### **Essence Mahamudra: Simultaneous Realization and Liberation**

Essence Mahamudra is transmitted through a path more profound and more wondrous than the previous two because it leads to the sudden realization of the true nature of mind, which is called *thamal gyi shepa* (*tha mal gyi shes pa*) or ordinary mind.

Essence mahamudra is practiced when an extremely realized guru bestows a transmission—a particular type of blessing or *adhishthana* that is called “the empowerment of vajra wisdom”—upon an extremely receptive, open, devoted and qualified student. This empowerment is regarded as the descent of the actual realization of the root and lineage gurus upon or into a student. Through the descent of the blessings of this vajra wisdom, *thamal gyi shepa* suddenly awakens in that student’s heart and is fully recognized on the spot. As a result, the student experiences what is called “simultaneous realization and liberation.” The origin of Essence Mahamudra is mainly found in the *anuttarayoga* tantras, as well as in the other sutras and tantras mentioned earlier.

On this path, there is no need for either the elaborate methods of Mantra Mahamudra or the gradual training of Sutra Mahamudra. In Sutra Mahamudra, there are still some forms; for example, the practices of shamatha and vipashyana meditation, as well as the practices of bodhichitta are retained. There is also a great deal of formal study. In Mantrayana Mahamudra, there is also a certain formality of method that can be seen in its reliance upon ceremony and ritual; for example, there are extensive liturgies, visualizations and mantra recitations. Thus, in this sense, Vajrayana Mahamudra is also a very formal way of introducing the nature of mind. In contrast, the Essence Mahamudra path is totally formless. The transmission happens instantaneously. Essence Mahamudra is nothing more than one's naked, ordinary mind resting in the unfabricated state.

In the Essence Mahamudra tradition, all conceptual clinging, such as clinging to ideas of "sacred and profane" or "virtuous and non-virtuous," is cut through and we work directly with the experience of mind and its nature. The lineage guru points out the nature of mind to us, directly and nakedly. This kind of pointing out instruction is very genuine. It is not something that we can mimic or repeat. We cannot "try it out" one time and say, "That was just a rehearsal. It did not work out, so okay, let's do the same thing again." That is not how it works. In the tradition of this lineage, we get one direct and naked pointing out, which has an effect. Throughout the history of Essence Mahamudra, pointing out has always happened in a very simple and ordinary way. This type of pointing out typifies the Essence Mahamudra approach, where we are working directly with our experiences of ordinary, worldly life, as well as our experience of the nature of mind.