

Introduction to Mahāmudrā (The Great Seal) in the Perspective of Drikung Kagyu and Gelug School of Tibetan Buddhism

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.120800356>

Received: 08 September 2025; Accepted 11 September 2025; Published: 14 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Mahāmudrā meditation teaching practices is very spiritual and powerful meditation method. It is profound philosophy to understating the true nature of the mind. It has been exist in Tibetan Buddhism in different terms. As in the case of Nyingma School it is called Dzogchen meditation. It is developed right from the early spread of Buddhism in Tibet in 8th century. On the other side, Mahāmudrā meditation in different Kagyu Schools had started from 12th century. The goal of the Mahāmudrā teaching practices is equal with the results in all Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Moreover, the term is particularly associated with the Kagyu Schools. The research paper will try to present the concept and other characteristics of Mahāmudrā meditation. It is based on both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Mahāmudrā, Drikung Kagyu, Tibetan Buddhism, Gelug School

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Mahāmudrā is kind of meditation methods as studied and practiced in Vajrayāna Buddhism for the realization of the pure or true nature of mind. The Sanskrit term Mahāmudrā is rendered as chagya chenpo (Wyl.: phyag rgya chen po) into Tibetan. It is translated as the Great Seal into English. Mahāmudrā is an important set of teachings as found in many Tibetan Buddhist traditions, with various methods for realizing the true nature of our own mind and ultimately attaining the Buddhahood, the complete enlightenment. Different traditions may explain slightly different approaches in attaining the goal of Mahāmudrā. However, regardless of which approach we follow, striving to realize the true nature of our minds is a way to make our lives very meaningful.

Mahāmudrā is a very high and profound system of meditation in understanding the nature of the mind. It is the understanding of the inner knowledge as gained by pure practice of it. For example, the Great Seal is like a seal of approval on legal documents to show that they are authentic and genuinely authentic. For the benefit of all sentient beings, it is the practice of the standard sources to realize the Buddhahood, the enlightenment.

There are three types of Mahāmudrā. They are ground Mahāmudrā, path Mahāmudrā, and fruition Mahāmudrā. The significance of Mahāmudrā has been described by many Indian and Tibetan adepts alike. For instance, Ācārya Śāntideva (7th century) says in his great work, A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life that although we might do many hundreds of thousands of other practices like recitation of mantras, all of them are simply methods for realizing Mahāmudrā.

Mahāmudrā is also known by other names in Indian and Tibetan philosophical schools. Some of them are: Parmārtha (ultimate), Tathatā (suchness), Tathāgatagarbha (Buddha essence) etc., by Madhyamika and Kuntu Zangpo (Samtabhadra), Dzogchen (Mahāsampanna) etc., by Nyingma School¹. In Buddhism, the terms Dharmatā, Tathatā and Śūnyatā are used as synonyms in many contexts and that is referring to the quality, nature, existence, entity and so on of all phenomena or the things in the external world and the internal mind.

Drikung Kagyu founder and the scholar master Kyobpa Jigten Sumgon (1142-1217 C.E.) said, the essence of

¹ Thrangu Rinpoche, 2002, pp. 80-81.

Mahāmudrā and Śīla (discipline) is uniquely one. The meaning of the word Śīla is Tshultrim (Wyl.: tshulkhims) in Tibetan. Here, it refers to fully aware about the nature or state of all phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, the state of being and non-being, white, black, pure, etc., and the dependent arising of phenomena are called Tshul; the way or the manner. No one can change that nature, and it never passes away, therefore it is called Thrims; law or doctrine. What is the difference between that and Mahāmudrā? As for the explanation of the term Mahāmudrā, Kagyu School's one of the most elite masters Gampopa (1079-1153 C.E.) said:

Understanding that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa² do not go beyond the unborn state of dharmatā is the (Chagya) hand gesture. Because whatever appears and exists does not go beyond the original meaning or nature, hence, it is the seal. Because it is realized as the self-liberation of dharmatā, so it is (chenpo) the great.

Mahāmudrā is discussed in both sūtra and tantra literatures in Buddhism³. According to sūtra, it is described that the special meaning of Mahāmudrā is Anuttara, the supreme and absolute doctrine; it is described as the knowledge of Dharma-Karma and the vows or the commitments⁴. Similarly, according to tantra; chag signifies the knowledge of Śūnyatā (emptiness), while gya conveys the meaning of liberation from Saṃsāra (wordiness); and chenpo signifies both these important functions being brought together⁵.

Teachings and Lineage Masters

The secret Mahāmudrā teaching practices of Buddhism was developed and taught in India by infinite masters. Among them some of the widely popular siddhācāryas and scholars who had preserved and transmitted this special knowledge to the appropriate disciples from time to time in India. They are as Saraha, Nāgārjuna, Tilopa, Maitripa, Nāropā and so on. Afterward, the teaching knowledge was transferred to Tibet. There Tibetan sages like as Marpa (1012-1097 C.E.), Milarepa (1040-1123 C.E.), Gampopa (1079-1153 C.E.), Phagmo Drupa (1110-1170 C.E.), Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa (1110-1193 C.E.), Kyobpa Jigten Sumgon (1143-1217 C.E.) etc., great practitioners had strengthened the teachings. They were the lineage of Mahāmudrā teaching and meditation practices of Kagyu School. Apart from those other renowned scholars such as Sakya Panchen (1182-1251 C.E.), Je Lama Tsongkhapa (1357-1419 C.E.) etc., also expanded the power of this thought in their respective traditions in Tibet.

Gampopa unified the stages of path to enlightenment related to the Kadam school and lineage and the Mahāmudrā teachings of yogi Milarepa into distinctive Kagyu approach. Furthermore, he composed several texts Margottama-Ratnavali (The Precious Garland of Supreme Path) and so forth for the better understanding of the unified stream of Kadampa and Mahāmudrā traditions in Tibet (Kagyu School And Lineage Masters, 2016. P. 76).

Gampopa instructed directly to the Phagmo Drupa, who fully executed the direct realization of Mahāmudrā. He then emphasized the Fivefold Path of Mahāmudrā⁶ which encompasses the complete teachings of the Buddha, both sūtra and tantra (Kagyu School And Lineage Masters, 2016. pp. 96-97).

In the lineage of Mahāmudrā teaching, Dusum Khyenpa received the full transmission of master Gampopa such as Mahāmudrā, Cakrasaṃvara, Hevajra, and the Six Yogas of Nāropā⁷ and so on. Later, Phagmo Drupa and his supreme disciple Jigten Sumgon also practiced the sādhanā of luminosity and Mahāmudrā. Thereafter, he spread this teaching and meditation practices among his infinite disciples throughout the Tibet.

The Characteristics of Mahāmudrā Meditation

It is a common understanding that the meditation is the only technique by means of which the anxieties and

² Tibetan (Tib.) 'khor 'das

³ A Tibetan and English Dictionary, Sarat Chandra Das, 2005, p. 831.

⁴ Tib.: phyag rgya'i dbye ba bla na med. chos dang las dang dam tshig dang phyag rgya chen po zhes brjod do.

⁵Phyag ni stongpa'i yeshete. Rgyani 'khor ba'ichos las grol. Chen po zung du 'jug pa ste.

⁶ 1. Bodhicitta, 2. Yidam deity, 3. The four bodies of guru yoga, 4. Mahāmudrā and 5. Dedication.

⁷ They are: 1. Caṇḍālī yoga (yoga of psychic heat), 2. Prabhāsvara yoga (yoga of clear light), 3. Māyākāya yoga (yoga of illusory body), 4. Antarābhava yoga (yoga of intermediate rebirth), 5. Saṃkrānti yoga (yoga of consciousness transference), and 6. Swapana yoga (yoga of dream).

stresses of the existence are removed. The mediation is an effective technique of training the mind. For the reason, one must practice meditation when he/she is completely sound in body and sound in mind with earnest interest as well. Thus, the unique characteristic of Mahāmudrā meditation focuses on the mind itself, and the mind in turn focuses on whatever close relationship there is between the appearance of the conventional world and the true nature of emptiness. Because of delusion and ignorance of this relationship, disturbing emotions are allowed to arise and compulsive behavior is allowed to develop. As a result, unbearable sufferings and hardships occurred in a life. This Mahāmudrā meditation is the most effective way to escape all sufferings and successfully attain the Buddhahood, the ultimate goal of all Buddhist practitioners. However, it can only become effective if it is practiced with a solid foundation. This means that one must train thoroughly in the entire graduated path to enlightenment and thereby be able to progress.

Tibetan form of Schools such as Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug believed in this concept of Mahāmudrā. In Kagyu and Gelug, Mahāmudrā includes both sūtra and highest tantra practices. These usually involve focusing, one at a time, on the ordinary mind and the mind's clear light. The Sakya tradition transmits it only through highest yoga tantra. Here, we are trying to explain the sūtra approach based on the Gelug School and Drikung Kagyu traditions. The Gelug School emphasizes meditating on emptiness, while the Drikung School emphasizes realizing emptiness through a non-conceptual mind. Nevertheless, the aims and objectives of both the schools are same to visualize the emptiness in its totality from the point of its conceptual and vocal state.

It is important to clearly understand, the meaning of both the mind and the method. The mind is the specific activity of the object-oriented mind that experiences an object. The activity of the mind, without beginning or end, continues uninterrupted throughout all our lifetimes. Because the mind itself is very difficult to recognize, achieving realization depends entirely on accumulating extensive merit or virtue and purifying non-virtue or sin through repeatedly doing preliminary practices⁸.

The Mahāmudrā teaching is a significant tradition in the Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism. In its meditation system, it first starts with the cultivation of calming (*Śamatha* in Pāli), eventually developing insight (*Vipassanā* in Pāli), lastly coming to the direct experience of emptiness and luminosity, embodied in the figure of Samantabhadra (the state of Dharma-kāya). That means they are both semantically consistent and not formed within a box-like category that can be found. No matter what method we use, we come to the same result: we can only realize the nature of appearance through its connection with the mind. When we realize the mind and all the illusory appearances of the world, and when the stages of the path are practiced as a foundation, and when there is extensive preliminary practice, then through continuous Mahāmudrā meditation, we can attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.

Gelug School's Perspective

The Gelug School as emerged in 15th century in Tibet by Lama Tsongkhapa is known for its scholarship in Buddhism. This school or tradition asserts two aspects of the mind, i.e. the conventional aspect and the ultimate aspect. The conventional aspect is explained as simply clarity and awareness. Let's discuss them all in very brief here.

Clarity: It is the function of the mind to cause appearances to arise, and it is called the image of the third dimension of the mind, including form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and dharma, (phenomena) and is accompanied by happiness and various emotions. These are also basic mental events such as focus and one-pointedness.

Rigpa (understanding or awareness): It is a type of attention, neither separate from appearance nor consistent with appearance. It's not like having a thought at first and then thinking about it. Knowledge is only a way of describing the same mental activity as appearance. It is denied that there is a findable "self", an agent or observer of whatever mental activity is, or that there is a findable "mind", an immaterial machine that does things, separate from the body. Mental activity is based on the physical brain and nervous system.

⁸ The Four Extra-ordinary Preliminary Practices are: 1. Prostration inclusion with taking refuge and Bodhicitta, 2. Mandala Offering, 3. Vajrasattava meditation and mantra recitation, and 4. Guru Yoga.

However, this does not mean that the mind is identical to a physical object or reducible to one. The ultimate nature of the mind's activity is that it is "empty of inherent existence."

Emptiness is the absence of even an atom that can be found from the side of mere clarity and awareness, and the characteristic of even things called functions of the mind is that they are not established independently. The only truth we can state is that, conventionally, we agree that we experience phenomena from the side of objects and as individuals, and that is the way the mind imputes.

In reality, as a society, we have the meaning and word of mind. For that, we have coined the term imputation for the sake of momentary continuity and the attention we all experience. However, the way of imputation is not a practice that is diligent in creating anything; it is just a way of reasoning for the sake of establishing all conventional dharmas as valid. In terms of the function of the mind, it does not reason that it is inherently established or that anything else is established. That is impossible. Emptiness is the structure in which it is impossible for any conventional dharma to be anything. In the Gelug tradition, when meditating on Mahāmudrā, one relies on mindfulness to not lose the object (of meditation) and relies on introspection to keep watch over mindfulness and distraction, and at first one focuses on the activity of conventional nature of mind. When thinking of something like a candle, we don't pay attention to the light radiating from it (the appearance or perception of the object of the senses, and on top of that, the topic of the emotion that helps it). Instead, we manifest the appearance by focusing on the activity that is happening in each moment of the candle. Instead of focusing on the activity of the mind as if it were an object, we must instead focus with great attention on the activity of the mind as it arises. We need to make sure that we don't identify the self with the candle. Also, it is not like the person is holding the candle or analyzing what appears. When thoughts arise, we only need to recognize them and not be drawn into their narrative.

These automatically disappear, and our initial motivation to meditate on the mind itself brings attention to the activity of the mind. Thus, in turn, we also make it free of concepts and keep the attention as it is, with mindfulness. When we have attained a peaceful and stable state of mind focused on the conventional nature of the mind's activity, or calm abiding, then we focus on the ultimate nature, which is emptiness of inherent existence. Eventually, we attain special insight, and combining calm and insight, we focus on the emptiness of the mind. We must continue to practice until the union of calm and insight becomes non-conceptual, and thus, step by step, through effort, we attain liberation and omniscience.

Drikung Kagyu's Perspective

According to the interpretation of the Rigzen Chodrak, the function of the conventional nature of mind is the inseparability of the appearing (clarity) and the appearance. The function of the ultimate nature of mind is the inseparability of awareness and emptiness, and the inseparability of the appearing or appearance and awareness or emptiness.

Emptiness: It is rendered as Śūnyatā in Sanskrit. In Buddhist philosophy it means lack of inherent existence of phenomena or illusory nature of all things both in outer space and inner mind level, i.e. the fact that these being impermanent, miserable, empty, and lack self-identity are non-inherent in nature. In other words, it is the highest view of reality. The understanding the view of emptiness is not so easy to all in general. Moreover, it is one of the vital point of Buddhist teaching and practice in particular. There are eighteen type of Śūnyatā or emptiness⁹ in Buddhism. Likewise, dharmatā means intrinsic, nature, suchness or empty nature. Similarly, tathatā means suchness or thatness, identity or essence. These terms are as important as the two aspects of a coin for understanding of emptiness, the reality of the existence.

⁹ They are 1. Emptiness of internal, 2. Emptiness of external, 3. Emptiness of internal and external, 4. Emptiness of emptiness, 5. Emptiness of the great, 6. Emptiness of the ultimate, 7. Emptiness of compounded phenomena, 8. Emptiness of uncompounded phenomena, 9. Emptiness of what has passed beyond the extremes, 10. Emptiness of what is beginningless and endless, 11. Emptiness of that which is not to be forsaken, 12. Emptiness of nature, 13. Emptiness of all phenomena, 14. Emptiness of self-characteristics, 15. Emptiness of non-visualization, 16. Emptiness of the lack of truly existent identity, 17. Emptiness of things and 18. emptiness of non-things.

In the view of Other-Emptiness¹⁰ (Uma-Zhentong), emptiness is a state of mind that transcends words and meanings. Transcends means both awareness is void (empty) of all the grosser levels of mind from which words and meanings arise, and it is established as transcending whatever is consistent with words and meanings.

Inseparability¹¹: A synonym for non-duality. That is, a part of inseparability is not established, or it is not established on its own without depending on others. According to the interpretation of the Ninth Karmapa, the function of the conventional essence of mind is clarity, awareness, and nakedness. Clarity, or to put it simply, clarity (appearing) is explained as shining brightly.

Rigpa is synonymous with knowing. It is also widely awake. Jenpa¹² (uncovered or nakedness) means without concepts. It is the state of mind free from concepts. Conceptual thought is the creation of whatever is conceived to appear as truly established, and the differentiation of phenomena as this and that. The ultimate nature of mind is the inseparability or non-duality of appearance and emptiness, the inseparability of clarity and emptiness, and the inseparability of awareness and emptiness. According to the Self-Empty¹³ view, emptiness is a state beyond both word and meaning, and it is merely a construct that transcends whatever is necessarily consistent with word and meaning (e.g., truly established, not truly established, both, neither). In the Karma Kagyu tradition of Mahāmudrā meditation, Śamatha¹⁴ is attained through mindfulness and awareness, clarity, understanding, and nakedness, free from conceptualization, and through a calm, stable mind. This means meditating without hope or worry, and without conceptually identifying concrete objects as (this) and (that).

Gelug tradition of Mahāmudrā meditation focuses on the relationship between mind and conventional appearances, in terms of how the mind makes all conventionally established phenomena appear and knows them. The reason for doing so is that it is not established by virtue of its own findable nature. Both mind and conventional appearances can only be regarded in terms of what their words and meanings based on momentary appearances and awareness alone. Karma Kagyu Mahāmudrā meditation focuses on the relationship between mind and conventional appearances in terms of non-duality. It is not established from its own side, nor is it established separately from the other. Both are established as beyond words and meanings.

CONCLUSION

Mahāmudrā is a unique knowledge of meditation practice mostly prevailed in Vajrayāna Buddhism. Its philosophical dimension is tough to understand by an ordinary people without help of a great realized Mahāmudrā practitioner. Though there are various methods of its meditation practice according to different Buddhist Schools. Nevertheless, it has spiritual lineage and a long history of teaching-learning practice among the Indian and Tibetan sages and adepts. Due to its benefits the practitioners are psychologically and spiritually strong enough to encounter the problems of individual and mass of population in all circumstances of life. As a consequence, all the enlightenment or the Buddhahood aspirants should know it well and practice it well for the better results in life here and hereafter.

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¹⁰Tib.: dbu ma gzhanstong

¹¹Tib.: dbyer med

¹²Tib.: rjen pa

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¹⁴Tib.: gzhi gnas

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