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# The Karma Kagyu Path

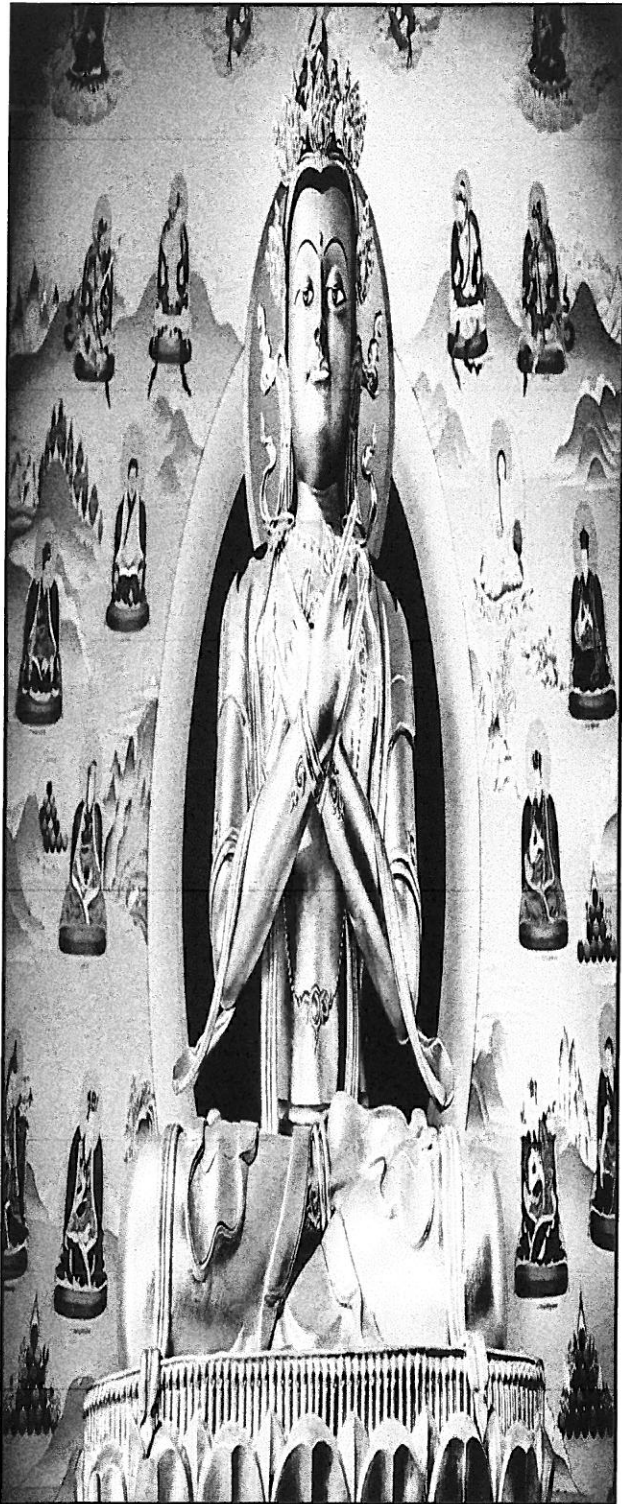
by H.H. the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa | Issue 29

**D**harma is a word which might stand for any sort of human activity, but it follows that what the students of Buddhism mean by dharma is the transformation of their own inner negativities into something more real. Our inner negativities are the five negative emotions,<sup>1</sup> and what we have to do in order to transmute these negative emotions is to follow the Mahayana path. The five negative emotions derive from ignorance and so it is ignorance that we must transmute in the path to freedom.

Many years ago, in the vajra-asana<sup>2</sup> at Bodhgaya, India, the Buddha attained full realization and it is from his realization that the tradition of enlightenment derives in our time. And from his teaching we derive the great teachings of tantras, which had an effect like fire burning down a mountainside. From the great fire of the tantras countless numbers of realized siddhas,<sup>3</sup> who were renowned for their powers, arose in India. The teachings of these tantras were a very special part of the Mahayana, enabling one to distinguish each moment in its momentariness, and attain complete buddhahood in that moment.

Then the tradition of the dharma was brought to Tibet by the siddhas and scholars of ancient India, and by the scholars and the translators of Tibet, working together in a rigorous fashion. The transmission is maintained so that from ancient times to the present day the lineage has been passed on in an unbroken succession of realized individuals.

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Among these, Milarepa<sup>4</sup> was especially noteworthy. This great siddha first had to undergo many difficulties and then practice levels of yoga to gain the confidence of true meditation. But in the end, he attained the confidence of Mahamudra,<sup>5</sup> and in one body and in one life attained full realization. The effects of his realization still reach us today, such that people even on merely hearing his name gain freedom; and not only do they gain freedom but they spontaneously feel inspired to follow his way and develop because of it. This is equally true in the East and the West. This is a sign that the energy of the Buddha's enlightenment can and does still affect us today. If this were not the case, the mere hearing of someone's name would not change a person's mind, would not influence them as strongly as it does on many occasions. The impulse, the feeling of people to follow the way of the dharma merely on hearing or thinking of the name of Milarepa, is a sign that the energy of the Buddha still affects us today. However, even so, we still have the karma that we have built up in our past lives and so we go on

experiencing happy events from good karma, and unhappy events from bad karma that we have accumulated. If your karma is weak, then merely gaining some confident understanding of the nature of the Mahayana teaching can lead to freedom and recognition of the wisdom of your own innate awareness.

In the Kagyu tradition, one needs to get and keep the view, meditation and conduct proceeding simultaneously, and it would not be correct to say that one can dispense with, for example, either view or meditation. However, it is a special quality

of the Kagyu tradition to bring people to realization suddenly and spontaneously without reference to view, meditation or conduct.

All of you connected with the traditions of Milarepa have great hopes of recognizing your own true nature and attaining the fruition of the realization of Mahamudra. I pray that in the end, all of you will dispel the darkness of your ignorance, recognize the wisdom of your own awareness, and attain the final peace of the ultimate realization of Vajradara;<sup>6</sup> and I pray that in the meantime you will all be happy and will act selflessly for the benefit of others and that through constantly thinking of this each of you will be of great benefit to your fellows and be able to consider their needs most highly.

In fact, the true Kagyu tradition is not one which a pupil can approach immediately, nor is it one which a teacher can teach immediately. It is one where the approach is extremely profound and were a teacher to attempt to teach it to a person who did not have the appropriate precepts, then not only would it benefit neither of them, but it would actually be destructive. But when it is taught to a person who has a deep sense of trust and is stable in it to the depths of his heart and marrow of his bones, then it has a supreme transforming effect.

And so it is because of this that in the Kagyu tradition we begin with studying Chariot of Deliverance—The Supreme Path which will thus purify our character with the four reflections. These bring us to a stable condition of trust which all the great teachers of the Kagyu tradition in the past have verified.

More important than the actual levels of meditation are the preliminaries through which we approach them. If we do not purify our character, purify the obscurations of our body, speech and mind, then though we go on seeking our own happiness, we will continually fall into suffering, because we will always be trapped by our own ignorance. It is because of this that we purify the obscurations of our body, speech and mind. So first we practice prostrations. Then, in order to purify the negative karma we have accumulated, we do the Vajrasattva<sup>7</sup> practice. Next, in order to create the conceptual accumulation of merit and the non-conceptual accumulation of wisdom, we practice the Mandala Offerings. Finally, because our true connection with the dharma is through our lama, and also because it is through the lama that we receive our tradition of the dharma, we practice Guru Yoga in order to receive the energy of the lineage. Thus the practice with the 400,000 recitations of the preliminaries Diamond Holder (Tib. Dorje Chang) is very important, and it is based on this that we begin to develop, stage by stage, through the levels of meditation.



Dorje Chang

In matters of view the Kagyudpa have always followed the tradition of Madyamaka<sup>8</sup> which is also known as Yen tong in Tibetan. This view, beyond any object of examination or any possibility of examining anything, is the integral view, the view of the integral basic space of emptiness and great bliss. This integral view of emptiness is in accordance with the great Indian teacher Asanga.

In matters of meditation, we practice the Six Yogas of Naropa<sup>9</sup> and the profound understanding of Mahamudra which gives rise spontaneously to true wisdom, and by these means, attain in actuality, the four aspects of buddhahood. Tantra is divided into father tantra, mother tantra and non-dual tantra. In the non-dual tantra called Kalachakra integral great bliss is described, and this integral great bliss is

the realization of the path. It is to this end that we practice the development stage of the spontaneous dakini,<sup>10</sup> and the completion stage of the inseparability of prana<sup>11</sup> and mind. In the development stage, we practice the attainment of the purity of body, speech and mind of the deity.

When one receives an initiation, one passes through the four stages: the vase initiation, the secret initiation, the initiation of knowledge and wisdom, and the initiation of the word; and in some initiations one passes through a fifth initiation of awareness. All of these concepts signify one basic reality: the four aspects of buddhahood. Then, based on the purity attained in the development stage, we practice the completion stage of the inseparability of prana and mind. The significance of this is the same as was explained before in regard to the integrality of view. Specifically, the integrality of the basic space of emptiness and wisdom means that those two are not capable of being separated into a duality. This is the understanding



of the aspect of the totality of buddhahood called the Sambhogakaya, and is in accordance with integral great bliss as described in the non-dual tantras.

This is what the language of the Kagyu tradition sounds like, and this is what we must practice; and in order to practice it, one must begin at the beginning of the path by purifying one's obscurations. So it is that we begin practicing Chariot of Deliverance—The Supreme Path, and then we progress stage by stage. For instance, if we were going to go up to the top of the house, we would go up the stairs. Otherwise, how would we get to the top? My prayers are that all of you will be able to attain these realizations, and that in attaining them, you will be of boundless benefit to sentient beings. When a bodhisattva<sup>12</sup> makes a prayer of aspiration, it is never meaningless; it has a great effect on those for whom he prays. This effect comes from the great strength of his aspiration affecting others. It does not come from his trying to do anything, but rather it comes from effortlessness. No amount of effort could ever have such strength. Effortlessness is an ultimate approach. Trying to do something is a mundane approach. I will pray that you will all develop greatly in love and compassion and that the dharma will go on increasing until you all attain realization.

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<sup>1</sup> Five negative emotions: anger, pride, jealousy, desire and ignorance.

<sup>2</sup> *Vajra-asana*: the posture in which the Buddha was sitting when he reached enlightenment, with his hand touching the earth.

<sup>3</sup> *Siddha*: one who has attained spiritual power such as Mahamudra realization.

<sup>4</sup> *Milarepa (1052–1135)*: famous Tibetan yogi and poet who dwelt in caves and achieved realization in one lifetime.

<sup>5</sup> *Mahamudra*: refers to the experience of the practitioner where one attains the union of emptiness and luminosity and also perceives the non-duality of the phenomenal world and emptiness.

<sup>6</sup> *Vajradara (Skt.) or Dorje Chang (Tib.)*: one's own intrinsic enlightenment; personification of the Dhamakaya.

<sup>7</sup> *Vajrasattva (Skt.) or Dorje Sempa (Tib.)*: practice which purifies harmful deeds and removes obscurations.

<sup>8</sup> *Madyamaka*: the philosophy developed by the Indian master Nagarjuna in the first half of the second century.

<sup>9</sup> *Six Yogas of Naropa*: key meditation practices of the Kagyu school.

<sup>10</sup> *Dakini*: a female dharma protector

<sup>11</sup> *Prana*: energy or breath which moves through the channels of the body.

<sup>12</sup> *Bodhisattva*: a being committed to the Mahayana path of developing wisdom and compassion in order to help all living beings to attain enlightenment.

### **About H.H. the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa**

*The 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje (1924–1981) was spiritual leader of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. He spearheaded the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism to the West, establishing dharma centers and monasteries in various places around the world in order to protect, preserve, and spread the Buddha's teachings. He was considered by many to be a living Buddha.*



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