

The Great Perfection and the Great Seal

Part 1 - establishing the basis

The summit of the Buddha's teaching is known as the Great Perfection in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism and as the Great Seal in the Kagyu school. These are one and the same goal, under different names, and each tradition follows a similar path to attain it. Their paths represent the practical application of the zenith of Buddhist philosophy — a third 'great' — the Great Middle Way. The latter makes it clear that voidness and the apparent world are one and the same thing. Voidness is neither a spiritual state of blankness nor a mere rejection of reality but wisdom: the clarity of the awakened mind which is aware that no thing exists in its own right but only as an illusion created by the coming together of many temporary, inter-dependent factors.

But how to make this wisdom-voidness a reality in practice? Both traditions point to two ways, the first progressive and the second more or less instantaneous. Despite the obvious attraction of the second, it is the fortunate lot of one disciple among hundreds of thousands, as the great Tibetan yogin Milarepa found to his chagrin. Having met a master of the Great Perfection tradition, who boasted of the ease with which its teachings could carry Milarepa to enlightenment, in just a matter of days, he was left by the master to meditate. Delighted to encounter such an easy practice, he took the master's statement at face value and meditated — but a little too relaxedly — for some days with little result. The master returned, to realise that Milarepa would need to take a slightly longer road to enlightenment and so sent him away to the Great Seal guru Marpa. But there are other stories of the fortunate few who, upon hearing a few profound, carefully-chosen words from their teacher or simply by being in their presence, awaken in great simplicity to buddhahood. This either happens early on in life, upon a first encounter with a guru, due to all the purification work done in former lives, or else it is the crowning moment of whatever time is needed to finish off the purification accomplished in this life. In the case of Naropa, the final awakening came with the blow of his guru's shoe, after twelve years of intense training at his feet.

The situation is summed up in an apocryphal story from Atisa's life. Most days he would see a woman, crying some days, laughing on others. He asked her why and if she was mentally distressed.

No, I am not, but you all are and so I cry.

Why?

One's own mind has been Buddha since time immemorial. Beings do not recognise it. Such a small mistake ! — but through it hundreds of thousands of beings enter into incredible muddle and complications. Although their own mind is buddha, they suffer needlessly. I cry not being able to bear this. But then sometimes I laugh because, by simply recognising this small, basic error, and recognising the Buddha within, any one could be easily freed.

Both traditions try to help people reach the state of faith and openness required for this 'simple' recognition to take place. In the meantime, they stress the absolute need, for most people, of properly completing a thorough preparation before entering into the very powerful teachings which reveal the truth about reality and the human mind. There are two main stages to this preparation. The first involves reflecting about life until a newer and franker vision of existence is in place. This training in *the four ways of transforming the mind* focusses on the rare potential of a human mind, on our fragile transience through mortality, on the power of one's actions to condition the way one experiences reality and, finally, upon the presence of suffering throughout worldliness.

The disciple then proceeds to the *four extraordinary foundation practices*.

The first involves cementing Buddhist faith and altruistic motivation. Using precise visualisations, one takes the sixfold Refuge of vajrayana as one makes prostrations. This is usually repeated at least 100,000 times. At the beginning and end of each practice session, the disciple takes the bodhisattva vows.

The second foundation consists of a profound method for freeing the mind of the most part of its unhealthy conditioning, due to the imprints of past negative karma. This is achieved through the Vajrasattva meditation, and 100,000 repetitions of the corresponding mantra, the deep meaning of which is one of always remaining within the sphere of ultimate purity.

Purification is followed by a discovery of the joy of freeing the mind of its clinging and entering totally into a state of dedication to enlightenment and working for the welfare of others. This is achieved through 100,000 practices of mandala practice: making both real and highly-symbolic offerings.

The fourth foundation practice is that of *guru yoga*. This is, in many ways, much more internalised,

drawing the mind into a state of openness and receptivity towards its own true, enlightened nature. The revelation of this true nature must, of necessity, come at first through an external source which can point out and confirm that the recognition of the Buddha within has been accurate and not just one of many other beautiful meditation experiences. The presence of a guru of an authentic Great Seal or Great Perfection lineage ensures this and this stage of preparation involves making a pure and sacred bond between the disciple, guru and lineage.

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Part 2 - establishing enlightenment

Having thoroughly prepared the ground of their minds, through the various preliminary practices, the only way to discover the vast wisdom, voidness, compassion and power to help others which is within the mind is through skilful meditation. Whatever form this meditation takes, it is always done with the total conviction that all is already pure and perfect within. All that remains is to remove the psychological blockages preventing one from access to the innate perfection.

The path of practice has two main areas of activity. One, called the ultimate stage, is a journey into the depths of mind itself. Having established total stillness and control, one illuminates the spotlight of inner wisdom, as mind exams mind in great subtlety. This eternal voyage of discovery needs expert guidance from a guru. From it will emerge a recognition of *dharmakaya*, the fusion of voidness and wisdom which lies at the very core of mind.

The other area of activity — the creative stage — works not with the noumenon of mind but with its phenomenal manifestations. One needs to discover, in the everyday world of events, people, feelings, thoughts and reactions the same purity that has been discovered when alone on the meditation cushion. This process is usually aided by learning, through visualisation, to identify with one or another of the many yidams or buddhas. These yidam and guru-yoga practices each unblock specific areas of the relative mind. Each contains its own section of ultimate stage meditation. This creative stage of practice will, at enlightenment, give rise to all the relative buddha-activity expressed through *sambhogakaya* and *nirmanakaya*, during which one manifests beneficially in the lives of all those with whom there has been a past connection.

Having worked sufficiently on both creative and ultimate areas of meditation, the time will come when the meditator is stable and clear enough to be aided into a recognition of the buddha within. But even then, having recognised primordial purity, he or she will need to continue with both stages of practice for many years. Unlike an intellectual realisation, which can lead to wide and sweeping changes immediately (such as Newton's sudden understanding of gravity as the apple fell), realising one's buddha nature is a direct experience which, after the first glimpse, is soon lost and needs to be constantly rediscovered as it is stifled again and again by the habitual activities of mind. The glimpses

become more frequent, longer lasting and generally more stable. The journey to their total stabilisation has four main stages, known as the *four yogas*.

The first yoga is called *one-pointedness*. One realises that to remain calm, relaxed and aware of mind's true, void nature is the one medicine which cures all mental ills. While cultivating experiences of bliss, non-thought and crystal clarity, one continuously lengthens the time that can be spent in deep meditation. The effects of the latter become more and more widespread, changing the quality of waking life and dreams.

The second yoga, called *lack of complication*, involves establishing the rootless, baseless nature of all things the mind experiences. This resolves clinging to any thing or to any intellectual reference point and reveals the true value of the Buddha's teaching. The third yoga, called *one taste*, destroys the habit of feeling one's mind as something other than the external universe it experiences. The subjective and objective feelings both dissolve into the one ocean in which everything manifests through interdependence and hence no thing has own nature. The fourth stage is called *non-meditation*. This is the final stage of the journey to total enlightenment, in which all effort to meditate and become a buddha has to cease, in the total acceptance of a buddhahood which already exists, spontaneously. It is the final transcendence of the conceptual mind, with its mania for interpreting events and defining the person and the person's world.

The Great Seal and Great Perfection traditions are like two magnificent chariots travelling the same path and heading for the same direction. Yet, made in different workshops, their trappings are not quite identical and their wheels make a different noise as they roll over the same ground. Each has its own 'in-house' terms. More confusingly, the Great Perfection tradition uses the term 'great seal' (Skt: mahamudra, Tib: phyag chen) to denote the penultimate stage of spiritual development whereas in the Great Seal tradition it is used for the ultimate stage, which is called Maha Ati in the Great Perfection tradition. Despite these superficial differences, these two traditions are extremely close and interwoven. They are often caricatured as the two main contemplative traditions of Tibet, whereas the Gelugpa and Sakyapa are seen as the studious ones.