

The Eight Flashing Lances

In this commentary on a famed yogi's spontaneous song of realization, **Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso** explains why Mahamudra practice makes our view, meditation, and action free and unhindered, like a lance flashing free in the open sky.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD MISRACH

The *Eight Flashing Lances* is a song of realization sung by Gyalwa Gotsangpa (1189–1258), who was renowned as an emanation of the lord of yogis, Milarepa. Born in southern Tibet, Gotsangpa went to central Tibet where he met his two teachers, Drogon Tsangpa Gyare and Sangye On. He wandered then from one mountain retreat to the next, practicing meditation and bringing his realization to perfection.

Gotsangpa made a commitment never to meditate in the same place twice. If he went somewhere and stayed for a few years, he never returned. He wandered continually to help himself abandon attachment to any particular place.

THE HOMAGES

Namo Ratna Guru

Gotsangpa begins the song with the Sanskrit homage *Namo Ratna Guru*, meaning “I prostrate” (*Namo*) to “the precious” (*Ratna*) “lama” (*Guru*). With body, speech, and mind filled with great devotion, Gotsangpa prostrates before the precious guru.

Next he offers an homage in Tibetan, which when translated into English reads:

*To that paragon, the dharmakaya, treasure isle
And the treasure too, sambhogakaya's range
of forms
Who as nirmanakaya fills the needs of beings
To the precious lord I bow respectfully*

In this opening verse, Gotsangpa pays homage to his guru, who is a paragon, a supreme being, an unsurpassable guide. In particular, he pays homage to the guru's three kayas, his three dimensions of enlightenment. Gotsangpa compares the dharmakaya to a treasure isle, because the dharmakaya, the enlightened mind itself, is the source of all that one needs and desires. The sambhogakaya, the subtle light-form of a buddha that appears to pure disciples who are noble bodhisattvas, is like the gold, silver, diamonds, and all the other jewels one finds on this treasure island. The nirmanakaya, the buddha's form that appears to ordinary disciples as well as to noble bodhisattvas, is what fulfills the needs of all wandering sentient beings. To the precious lord who embodies these three kayas, he says, I bow with body, speech, and mind filled with great respect.

The dharmakaya is the ultimate dimension of enlightenment, the ultimate kaya. The sambhogakaya and the nirmanakaya are the relative dimensions, the form kayas. Thus, you can also divide the kayas into two, the dharmakaya and the form kaya.

The dharmakaya, the true nature of reality, is inexpressible and inconceivable. The sambhogakaya and the nirmanakaya, therefore, are necessary because they appear in relative forms to be of benefit to all disciples who have not yet realized the dharmakaya. In this verse, Gyalwa Gotsangpa pays homage to his own root guru, Drogon Tsangpa Gyare, for embodying the three kayas.

KHENPO TSULTRIM GYAMTSO
RINPOCHE IS A WELL-KNOWN
SCHOLAR AND YOGI IN
THE KAGYU TRADITION OF
TIBETAN BUDDHISM WHO
HAS TAUGHT EXTENSIVELY IN
THE WEST FOR MANY YEARS.
THIS TEACHING IS FROM A
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THE SONG *THE EIGHT FLASHING
LANCES* WAS TRANSLATED
BY JIM SCOTT.



THE FLASHING LANCE of VIEW

*Decisive understanding of your basic being
No bias toward samsara or nirvana
Conviction reached, you change your mind
no more*

*These are three which render view unhindered
Like a lance that flashes free in the open sky*

The view that is like a lance flashing free in the open sky has three characteristics. The first is that you have a decisive understanding of genuine reality. Genuine reality is the actual, ultimate way things are; it is your basic, ultimate being. You know this essence as it is, free from negating or affirming, free from contrivance. You achieve this by applying unobscured intelligence to listening to and reflecting on teachings about the view. Reflection means that you analyze until you have doubt-free certainty about what the true nature of reality is. Here we are not talking about the true nature of outer things. It is not enough merely to determine the true nature of what is outside. You must ascertain the true nature of mind.

What is the true nature of mind? According to the final turning of the wheel of dharma, the sutras that teach about buddhanature, this true nature of mind is explained to be luminous clarity, the essence of enlightenment itself—buddhanature. According to the Mahamudra tradition, the true nature of mind is clarity-emptiness mahamudra, or bliss-emptiness mahamudra. At the outset, it is important for you to ascertain mind's true nature.

The next characteristic of this view that is like a lance flashing free in the open sky is that you are not biased toward either samsara or nirvana. From the perspective of thoughts, samsara and nirvana are different: samsara is of the nature of confusion and nirvana is liberation from that confusion. So from concept's point of view, samsara and nirvana appear to be opposites. But from the perspective of the true nature of reality, samsara is not something bad that needs to be abandoned, and nirvana is not something that needs to be attained. There is actually nothing to choose from between samsara and nirvana, because in their true nature, samsara and nirvana are undifferentiable.

As the protector Nagarjuna writes in *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*,

*Samsara is not the slightest bit different
from nirvana
Nirvana is not the slightest bit different
from samsara*

It is important to be decisive in being unbiased toward samsara and nirvana. You can do this when you have gained certainty that samsara and nirvana are equality.

The third quality of this view is unchanging certainty about the first two points. You have perfectly determined what the true nature of reality is and you are free from bias toward samsara or nirvana. You are doubt-free and have unchanging certainty about this.

When you have these three qualities, your view is profound. It is like a lance flashing in the open sky, because when you twirl a lance in open space you never hit any impediment. You do not hit any obstacles and nothing stops you. This is what your view is like; it is free from any hindrance.

THE FLASHING LANCE OF MEDITATION

*Cutting through the root,
it holds its own ground
Sixfold consciousness unspoiled by artifice
Free of effort aimed at recollection
These are three which make meditation
fully free
Like a lance that flashes free in the open sky*

“Cutting through the root” means that in meditation that is like a flashing lance, you cut through mental confusion at its root. The way you do that is to realize that confusion is groundless. When you analyze the true nature of your own mind, you find not the tiniest basis for confusion. You do not find the tiniest source where confusion could possibly originate from.

So you cut through confusion when you realize that you cannot actually find any confusion in the first place. You might have thought, “This or that is the source of my confusion,” but when you analyze it, you cannot find the tiniest bit of confusion or any source of it.

“It holds its own ground” refers to mind’s true nature, clarity-emptiness undifferentiable, holding its own ground. This means you are able to self-settle¹ within clarity-emptiness and sustain that. Whatever mind’s nature may be, however you find it to be, without negating or affirming it, you are able to settle naturally within it.

The next quality of this meditation is that the six consciousnesses—the five sense consciousnesses and the mental consciousness—are “unspoiled by artifice.” You leave the six consciousnesses just as

they are, without trying to alter or improve how they are functioning or what they are perceiving. There is no flaw in the essential nature of the six consciousnesses’ experiences, so you can leave them just as they are. Leave your six consciousnesses to perceive just as they will and rest in the essential nature of that, free from trying to fix or change anything about it.

The third point is “free of effort aimed at recollection.” Be free of mindfulness that is conceptual, that clings to the idea of needing to be mindful. Be free from mental contrivance and effort. Let your mindfulness be effortless and natural.

Thus, when you realize confusion is groundless and you can rest in clarity-emptiness, when your sixfold consciousness is unspoiled by artifice and your mindfulness is free of effort, then you have meditation that is unhindered, like a lance flashing free in the open sky.

THE FLASHING LANCE OF CONDUCT

*Experiences just naturally unhindered
Free of fear, depression, and anxiety
The triumph over all perceived/perceiver split
These are three which render conduct fully free
Like a lance that flashes free in the open sky*

The first quality of this conduct is that the experiences you have are natural and effortless. You do not need to put effort into your conduct; it happens naturally and easily.

At the same time, you are not afraid of anything. Nor do you get depressed or fall into despair. You never lose your courage and you do not get anxious over anything. You are triumphant over the duality of perceived object and perceiving subject.

To triumph over duality means to transcend it by ceasing to cling to dualistic appearances as being truly existent. This does not mean that dualistic appearances disappear; it just means you do not cling to what appears as real. Then, dualistic appearances of perceived and perceiver are self-arisen and self-liberated, as in a dream when you know you are dreaming.

Thus the point of practice is not to try to eliminate the appearances of perceived objects and perceiving subjects, but rather to realize that these dualistic appearances are the energy and play of the true nature of mind, which is luminous clarity, mahamudra, and therefore, they are self-arisen and self-liberated, like appearances in a dream when you know you are dreaming. That is how you should consider dualistic appearances to be: like appearances in a lucid dream. When you dream and you know you are dreaming, perceived and perceiver appear, but you are free from clinging to them as being truly existent; they are self-arisen and self-liberated.

¹ “Self-settle” (Tibetan: *rang bab*) means to settle within the true nature of mind in a non-dual way, free from there being anywhere to settle or anyone who is settling.

When your conduct has these three qualities, it is like a lance flashing free in the open sky—nothing hinders or impedes it. It is conduct that enhances your view and meditation, and which is enhanced by your view and meditation.

THE FLASHING LANCE of FRUITION

*The kayas, five, pristinely
self-occurring
Directly manifest in your experience
Ambition for achieving
buddhahood consumed
These are three which make fruition
fully free
Like a lance that flashes free
in the open sky*

The five kayas—the five dimensions of enlightenment—are the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya, plus, fourth, the undifferentiability of these three kayas from the perspective of their true nature, called the vajrakaya, and, fifth, the three kayas' distinct appearances in relative reality, called the kaya of manifest enlightenment.

These kayas are “pristinely self-occurring,” meaning that they are spontaneously present in your mind's true nature and have been since the beginning. This is the most subtle explanation of the kaya: dharmakaya is mind's emptiness; sambhogakaya is its natural luminous clarity; and nirmanakaya is mind's ability to unimpededly manifest as and cognize an infinite variety of images. Furthermore, it is not that mind's nature starts out as an ordinary composite thing and then transforms into the kayas. The kayas are mind's nature itself.

When you realize the fruition, these five kayas “directly manifest in your own experience.” Then the fact that the true nature of mind is the five kayas is not just something you believe; it is your actual experience. When you have this realization of the natural presence of the five kayas as the true nature of your mind, you no longer have any ambition or longing to achieve an enlightenment that has not been present all along. You do not desire to become or turn into a buddha because you realize directly the enlightenment that is the true nature of your own mind.

You should free yourself from the wish to achieve enlightenment as if it were something newly created, because if it were like that, then, like all newly created things, it would be impermanent and decay. It would be unreliable. So train in recognizing this genuine buddha that is originally the true nature of your mind. When you do perfectly recognize that, when you have these three profound aspects to your fruition, it is like a lance flashing free in the open sky.

THE FLASHING LANCE of SAMAYA

*Transgressions, downfalls pure from the
beginning
Experience: stainless clarity and emptiness
When you have made your peace with
self-importance
These are three which make samaya fully free
Like a lance that flashes free in the open sky*

The three profound aspects of samaya [tantric vow] are: to realize that transgressions of samaya vows and downfalls from them are originally and perfectly pure; to recognize that the true nature of all your experiences is flawless, unstained, clarity-emptiness; and to abandon self-importance, so that you stop thinking, “I am more important than everyone else” and “I want things to come out well for me.” When you have these three qualities, your samaya is like a lance flashing free in the open sky.

THE FLASHING LANCE of COMPASSION

*Self-concern's ambitions are exhausted
Uplifting waves of love without contention
Tireless, relentless, not self-seeking
These are three which make compassion
fully free
Like a lance that flashes free in the open sky*

The first quality of this compassion is that it is free of self-concern. You are compassionate toward others without hope of getting something back for yourself.

Second, this compassion is filled with “uplifting waves of love without contention.” The image here is of powerful waves of great love and compassion that are free of anger. The opposite of this would be if you felt love toward victims but anger toward aggressors. That is not authentic compassion. Authentic compassion is not angry at anyone; it sends out love equally toward both victims and aggressors.

Third, if you are going to benefit others with your compassionate mind, you must be tireless, free from despair or burnout, and unselfish. However, it is not required that tiredness, despair, and selfishness totally disappear. When they do appear, simply recognize that they are mind's true nature, Mahamudra's energy and play, and let them be self-arisen and self-liberated. In general, the Mahamudra instruction is that you do not need to make thoughts go away or prevent thoughts from arising. Whatever thoughts arise, look straight at their essence and self-settle, let go, and relax. Then thoughts will be self-arisen and self-liberated.

When your compassion has these three qualities, it is like a lance flashing free in the open sky—nothing can hinder or stop it.

THE FLASHING LANCE of DEPENDENT ARISING

*The murkiness of clinging clarified
Causes and conditions, like reflections
Knowing what to do and not, that subtle art
These are three which make relations fully free
Like a lance that flashes free in the open sky*

This verse is about the dependent relationships between causes, conditions, and results. When you cling to these things as being truly existent, that clinging is like mud in water, preventing you from seeing what is actually happening. But when water is free of even the tiniest bit of mud, you can see through it perfectly clearly. Similarly, when you are free from clinging to true existence, you are able to see things clearly. In the clarity of your freedom from clinging, causes and conditions become vividly apparent, like reflections shining in the water. Like reflections, the causes and conditions of things appear vividly as appearance-emptiness, and you do not cling to them as being truly existent.

When these first two qualities are present, the third one arises—a subtle knowledge of what to do and what not to do in relating to these causes and conditions, which you see vividly as appearance-emptiness. In a subtle and precise way, you can abandon faults and adopt good qualities.

When these three essential points of dependent arising are complete, dependently arisen relationships between causes and results are fully free, like a lance flashing free in the open sky.

THE FLASHING LANCE
of ENLIGHTENED ACTIVITY

*Prayers of aspiration long sent, wakening
Whatever's done contributing to benefit
Effortless spontaneous performance
These three make activity unhindered
Like a lance that flashes free in the open sky*

In the Mahayana it is important to make many different prayers. We pray that more and more benefit will come to sentient beings and to the dharma, and we aspire that our ability to be of benefit to sentient beings and the dharma will increase and increase.² These aspiration prayers for the benefit of others that we make over the course of many lifetimes accumulate a lot of altruistic positive energy, and when that energy wakes up, when it actually turns from potential into manifest ability, then you can really be of benefit.

Before the power of your aspiration prayers manifests, you cannot benefit beings in a vast way. But when it does, then you can do a lot. For example, when, due to your past aspiration prayers, you reach the first noble bodhisattva ground, called Excellent Joy, you are able to simultaneously send

out a hundred emanations, which can benefit sentient beings in a great variety of ways. As you progress through the ten grounds, your ability to benefit others increases and increases until, when you attain the level of buddhahood, you benefit others effortlessly and spontaneously.

All of the benefit you bring when you are a noble being is the result of the aspiration prayers you have made while on the path. Even when you are feeling physically or mentally weak due to sickness, mental agitation, or despair, you can always make aspiration prayers that your ability to benefit others will increase. This is one of the skillful methods of Mahayana practice, because even when you are not feeling capable of benefiting others in the present, your prayers will give you increasing ability to benefit others in the future.

The next aspect of enlightened activity is that whatever you do with your body, speech, and mind is excellent and benefits others. Everything you do is altruistic. Finally, your activity is effortless and spontaneous; it comes naturally. When these three qualities are complete, the result is profound, unhindered, enlightened activity, like a lance flashing free in the open sky.

A good example of effortless spontaneous activity for the benefit of others is Milarepa. Once, Milarepa was meditating in a forest and a frightened deer came running across his path. Milarepa sang the deer a song and the deer lost his fear. He sat down at Milarepa's feet like a student would sit at the feet of a teacher. Then came an angry hunting dog who was chasing the deer, and Milarepa sang her a song. She calmed down and sat down with the deer like they were mother and child. Finally there came the hunter, Gonpo Dorje, who was an angry person to begin with but became even angrier when he saw his dog sitting next to the deer. He accused Milarepa of putting a spell on his dog and he raised his bow and arrow to shoot him. Milarepa raised his hand and said, "There is plenty of time for you to shoot your arrow, so first please allow for some time to listen to my song." Hearing Milarepa's song made Gonpo Dorje lose his anger, and shortly thereafter he became Milarepa's student. That is what effortless spontaneous activity for the benefit of others is like.

CONCLUDING VERSE

*This tune upon this well-known site
in Chungkar
That tells of eight whole lances flashing freely
Borne on the blessing waves of able gurus
Appeared in mind and now has been
put to song.*

This is not a long song, so Gotsangpa calls it a "tune." He sang it in the well-known mountain retreat of Chungkar, due to the power of the

² Khenpo Tsultrim Rinpoche often teaches that out of all the aspiration prayers one could make, the best is The King of Aspiration Prayers, the Aspiration for Excellent Conduct, available at www.nalandabodhi.org/bhadra.html.



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blessing he received from his gurus. The power of his gurus' blessing allowed for this vajra song of realization to shine in Gotsangpa's mind, and he sang it.

QUESTIONS *and* ANSWERS

Student: How should we apply Mahamudra practice to a strong habitual tendency of feeling tired?

Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche: When you feel tired, recognize that it is like being tired in a dream when you know you are dreaming. Recognize tiredness to be an expression of mind's energy and play. Let it be self-arisen and self-liberated as luminous clarity, Mahamudra.

The Mahayana teaches that when a practitioner reaches the first noble bodhisattva ground, Excellent Joy, then birth, aging, sickness, and death cause no suffering or hardship. From the Mahamudra perspective, it is understood that this can happen because the bodhisattva realizes that the appearances of suffering are self-arisen and self-liberated.

In a dream, all forms are appearance-emptiness undifferentiable, all sounds are sound-emptiness undifferentiable, and all states of mind are clarity-emptiness undifferentiable. Therefore, there is actually nothing to get tired from or that can cause any difficulty. When you do not know you are dreaming, however, things appear to be truly existent, you think they truly exist, and your experiences seem to confirm that. All of this produces tiredness and other forms of suffering. But when you recognize that you are dreaming, tiredness, despair, and all other forms of suffering are self-arisen and self-liberated.

It is helpful to consider this example of a dream. When we do not know we are dreaming, we cling to dream appearances as being truly existent and experience a variety of hardships as a result. When we recognize we are dreaming, nothing is difficult—appearances of difficulty are self-arisen and self-liberated. From the dream's perspective, their quality of being appearance-emptiness does not change, but your experience is quite different depending on whether you recognize you are

dreaming or do not. Thinking about that difference will help us understand these points.

Recognizing or not recognizing the dream state makes a difference in whether or not you assert that outer objects are truly existent. When you dream and do not know you are dreaming, you believe that the outer objects in the dream truly exist, that matter truly exists. When you dream and know you are dreaming, you do not believe that outer objects truly exist. This shows that outer objects' existence comes from conceptual clinging.

When you directly realize the true nature of mind, or Mahamudra, dualistic appearances of perceived and perceiver are like in a dream when you know you are dreaming; they are self-arisen and self-liberated. As Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye (1813–1899) teaches in his *Song of Mahamudra*,³

*From mind itself, so difficult to describe,
Samsara and nirvana's magical variety shines.
Knowing it is self-liberated is view supreme.*

From mind's true nature, which is inexpressible, shine all the appearances of samsara and nirvana. Like a magical display, samsara and nirvana appear but are not truly existent, and knowing they are self-liberated is the supreme view. One does not need to try to stop samsara and nirvana's magical variety of appearances but only to know that these appearances are self-arisen and self-liberated. When you know appearances are self-arisen and self-liberated, you have the supreme view. This view of self-liberation sees that the difficult experiences in life are like difficult experiences in a dream—they arise due to clinging to appearances as being truly existent, and at the same time, they themselves do not truly exist.

As *The Song of Mahamudra* continues,

*Samsara's great waterwheel is turning,
While it turns, its essence is unstained.*

The confused state of samsara is like a giant waterwheel that is continuously turning, but from the perspective of its true nature, even while it turns, its essence is unstained. In essence samsara does not inherently exist, so it is unstained. It is like walking through mud in a dream; however dirty you may appear, in essence you are unstained.

In a dream, at the very moment you experience suffering, the experience does not truly exist. When you analyze wisely you can know that this is how it is; you can gain certainty in it. In terms of actually experiencing it, that will come gradually as a result of cultivating your certainty in meditation. And when you reach the first noble bodhisattva ground, you realize it directly.

Similarly, at the very time in your lives that disturbing emotions and suffering arise, in their true nature they do not arise. As in a dream, at the very time disturbing emotions and suffering appear to

arise, they do not truly arise at all. *The Song of Mahamudra* teaches:

*What arises in its true nature is unarisen,
The unarisen is unceasing,
And between these two that do not exist,
there is no abiding.*

The true nature of reality is free from arising, abiding, and ceasing. If you think about what dream experience is like, you will gain certainty in this. And like the appearances in a dream, this life's appearances do not exist while they appear, and while appearing, they are empty of true existence—they are appearance-emptiness undifferentiable. As Milarepa sang,

*E ma, the phenomena of the three realms
of samsara,
While not existing, they appear—
how incredibly amazing!*

Student: You have explained how this song teaches that ultimately samsara and nirvana are equality; they are undifferentiable. But Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche also said that while acknowledging that equality, we still have a bias toward nirvana. It seems true that while recognizing the ultimate equality, in relative terms we should favor the uplifted over the degraded and well-being over suffering. So how do we hold the ultimate view of equality and the relative need to differentiate at the same time?

Khenpo Tsultrim: From thoughts' perspective, one makes a choice; nonconceptual original wisdom does not make a choice. That's enough. [Laughter] Is that okay? [Laughter]

Student: Could you say more about how the subtle art of knowing what to do and what not to do arises from knowing causes and conditions?

Khenpo Tsultrim: It is like when the reflection of your face shines in a clear pool of water. You can use the reflection to remove even the subtlest blemishes from your skin, to trim every follicle of facial hair, and to make yourself look beautiful. In this way, from the perspective of appearances, there are things to be adopted and to be rejected. From the perspective of the true nature of reality, there is no adopting or rejecting.

Student: From the perspective of appearances, how should we subtly adopt and reject?

Khenpo Tsultrim: Adopt the actions that benefit others and abandon those that harm others. When the reflections of causes and conditions manifest, you can adopt those that are of subtle benefit to others and abandon those that subtly harm.

From the perspective of the causes and conditions in your mind, use a variety of meditation

³ Lodro Thaye's *Song of Mahamudra* appears in *The Rain of Wisdom* (Shambhala Publications, 1980), pp. 81–90. Khenpo Tsultrim recommends highly that students memorize and meditate on the verses in this song, particularly the explanations of the four yogas of Mahamudra on pp. 87–88, which he says is the clearest exposition of this subject matter.



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methods to cultivate love and compassion, which benefit others, and abandon anger and maliciousness. Relatively speaking, anger and maliciousness should be abandoned.

However, even though one adopts and rejects in relative, apparent reality, in the true nature of reality there is no adopting or rejecting. While conceptual consciousness adopts and rejects, there is no adopting or rejecting for nonconceptual original wisdom. Even though in relative reality one cultivates compassion for sentient beings and practices generosity and other virtuous actions toward them, in genuine reality, the three spheres of generosity⁴ do not truly exist. These points are important to know. You must know how to bring relative reality and genuine reality together.

If you think about it from the perspective of what you meditate on, in relative reality, in dependence upon thoughts, you contemplate birth, aging, sickness, and death. At the same time, reflect well on how it is that from original wisdom's perspective, the true nature of reality transcends birth, aging, sickness, and death. Milarepa sang a song in which in successive sets

of verses he described the respective suffering of aging, sickness, and death in great detail, and then at the end of each set of verses, he sang, "If you do not realize that aging does not truly exist, the suffering of aging is inconceivable," "If you do not realize that sickness does not truly exist, the suffering of sickness is inconceivable," and "If you do not realize that death does not truly exist, the suffering of death is inconceivable." Thus, use thoughts to consider the suffering of aging, sickness, and death and use wisdom to understand how genuine reality transcends the suffering of aging, sickness, and death.

When you put the two truths together in this way, you get Milarepa's two lines:

*E ma, the phenomena of the three realms
of samsara,
While not existing, they appear—
how incredibly amazing!*

The three realms of samsara are dream-like—while not existing they appear, while appearing they are empty of inherent nature, and so they are miraculous. **BD**

⁴ The one who is generous, the one toward whom the generosity is directed, and the act of generosity itself.