

The Story of the Sadhana of Mahamudra

By Carolyn Gimian

An excerpt from the introduction to
The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa, Volume Five.



Next in Volume Five are the excerpts from The Sadhana of Mahamudra and an article about the meaning of the text. The sadhana, which Trungpa Rinpoche "discovered" in Bhutan in 1968, is a particular kind of text or teaching called terma. In Tibet, Chogyam Trungpa had already been recognized as a tertön, a teacher who "finds" or reveals terma, which are the teachings that Padmasambhava concealed in physical locations throughout Tibet and in the realm of mind and space. As Trungpa Rinpoche describes in *Crazy Wisdom*, "He [Padmasambhava] had various writings of his put in gold and silver containers like capsules and buried in certain appropriate places in the different parts of Tibet so that people of the future would rediscover them. . . . This process of rediscovering the treasures has been happening all along, and a lot of sacred

teachings have been revealed. One example is the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Another approach to preserving treasures of wisdom is the style of the thought lineage. Teachings have been rediscovered by certain appropriate teachers who have had memories of them and written them down from memory. This is another kind of hidden treasure'. The Sadhana of Mahamudra is such a mind terma.

This text is particularly important to our discussion here because of how it joins together the teachings of both the Nyingma and Kagyu" lineages. As Chogyam Trungpa says in the accompanying article, "Joining Energy and Space," "The lineage of The Sadhana of Mahamudra is the two traditions of immense crazy wisdom and immense dedication and devotion put together. The Kagyu, or mahamudra tradition, is the devotion lineage. The Nyingma, or ati tradition, is the lineage of crazy wisdom. The sadhana brings these two traditions together as a prototype of how emotion and wisdom, energy and space, can work together" (p. 312). Additionally, the sadhana contains a vivid description of the obstacles presented by physical, psychological, and spiritual materialism in the modern age and prescribes unwavering devotion to wakefulness as the antidote to the materialistic outlook.

While in England, Chogyam Trungpa had been tutoring the crown prince (now the king) of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, while the prince was studying at Ascot. At the invitation of the queen of Bhutan, Trungpa Rinpoche journeyed to Bhutan in 1968. Rinpoche was accompanied to Asia by one of his young English students, Richard Arthure (who worked with Rinpoche on the translation of the sadhana and was also the editor of Meditation in Action). In preparation for the publication of The Collected Works, Richard kindly contributed information about their journey and the circumstances under which the sadhana was received:

It would be a sad thing if The Collected Works were published without including at least an excerpt from The Sadhana of Mahamudra. Along with the Shambhala teachings, it seems to be the quintessential expression of his [Trungpa Rinpoche's] enlightened mind and was openly recognized as such by both Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche and H. H. Dilgo Khyentse. The Vidyadhara [Chogyam Trungpa] himself wanted it to be propagated and practiced widely and without restriction, and he gladly shared it even with acquaintances, such as Thomas Merton, who were not Buddhist.

Before going into retreat at Taktsang, Trungpa Rinpoche and I traveled with Khyentse Rinpoche by jeep from Bhutan to Sikkim in order to spend some time with H. H. the sixteenth Karmapa. At [Trungpa] Rinpoche's request, the Karmapa performed the Karma Pakshi empowerment for us. Immediately, the Vidyadhara, with my assistance, set to work to prepare an English language translation of the Karma Pakshi sadhana. (There exists a photograph—tactfully suppressed for general purposes—of the two of us sitting side by side in the guest house at Rumtek smoking cigarettes and working on this translation.) It was to be my daily practice at Taktsang. It is unlikely that this translation has survived.

On our return to Bhutan, we received the Dorje Trolo [the wrathful aspect of Guru Rinpoche, in which he manifested at Taktsang before entering Tibet] empowerment from Dilgo Khyentse in a very informal setting, with just a handful of people present in Khyentse Rinpoche's tiny bedroom. Then we went up to Taktsang, traveling on horseback and then on foot up the steep trail, to begin our retreat. Once there, my morning practice was the Karma Pakshi sadhana. At noon I would go to Trungpa Rinpoche's room and we would have lunch together. In the afternoon I would sit with Rinpoche in the main shrine room while he performed a Dorje Trolo" feast practice, tormas and butter lamps having been prepared by a Bhutanese monk and a Tibetan yogi who were students of Dilgo Khyentse. We would share a light meal in the early evening and generally stay up late talking. A principal topic of our wide-ranging discussions was how to create an enlightened society, what form it would take, etc., Rinpoche favoring a combination of democracy and enlightened monarchy. The idea of the delek system was first proposed during these discussions. A young Australian woman traveler, Lorraine, showed up with a copy of Erich Fromm's *The Sane Society* in her backpack. We devoured it. Rinpoche had me write a synopsis of the main ideas in it to add fuel to our discussions.

Towards the end of our retreat, *The Sadhana of Mahamudra* arose in Rinpoche's mind, and the main part of it was written down very quickly, in one or two days. Several more days were spent in refining and polishing. We began translating it into English almost immediately, although most of the work was done after we had come down the mountain from Taktsang and were staying in a guest house belonging to the Queen's mother on the outskirts of Thimphu.

Here's how the process worked, more or less (and you should understand that I don't speak or read Tibetan): Word by word and phrase by phrase Rinpoche would explain the meaning to me, as far as his vocabulary allowed. From those basic building blocks of meaning, it became possible to construct the English language version of the sadhana. I tried to create something that would transmit the dharma in a powerful and poetic way, utilizing the natural cadences and rhythms of spoken English. For example, Rinpoche would say something like: ". . . namthok is thoughts . . . disappear. . . . Shunyata . . . like a bird in the sky, doesn't make, how would you say, footprints?— not like a horse or man walking in snow, but same idea." And this, after a few tries, would give rise to: "All thoughts vanish into emptiness, like the imprint of a bird in the sky."¹³ Later, I saw that same simile translated as "like the traceless path of a bird in the sky," which I think is pretty good. I chose the word imprint because it gives the echo or faint suggestion of footprint, so carries the resonance of that image into the dimension of space.

Perhaps the Dakinis inspired our work together. Rinpoche seemed to think they were taking an active interest, at least. While we were staying in that guest

house, tremendous rainstorms and floods caused landslides and destroyed roads and bridges so that we were unable to travel. Rinpoche commented: "This is the action of the Dakinis, making sure we don't leave until the translation is finished."

Richard's commentary provides quite a lot of new information about the circumstances surrounding the "discovery" of The Sadhana of Mahamudra. It has previously not been widely known that Chogyam Trungpa received both the Karma Pakshi and Dorje Trolo empowerments prior to entering retreat at Taktsang. He undoubtedly would have received these abhishekas earlier, while studying in Tibet, but having them "refreshed" in his mind may have had some influence on what occurred at Taktsang. These two gurus, visualized as yidams or vajrayana nontheistic deities, are combined as one central figure in The Sadhana of Mahamudra, thus unifying the energies of their respective lineages, the Kagyu and the Nyingma. We also see in Richard's reminiscences that Trungpa Rinpoche's facility with the English language was still limited in 1968. It is, therefore, remarkable both how accurately the translation of the sadhana captured the spirit and meaning of the original Tibetan (the translation used today is virtually the same as the original) and also how fast Rinpoche's grasp of the language developed after 1968. We have recordings of him teaching in America as early as 1970, and his sentence structure and vocabulary are nothing like the fragmentary approach that Richard reports less than two years earlier. His remarks complement Trungpa Rinpoche's own description of the retreat, which appears in "Joining Energy and Space." Richard sets the outer scene for us; Rinpoche describes more of the inner experiences he had, empty at the beginning, charged with energy and power at the end.

Although this article and the attendant excerpt are brief, they deserve significant commentary, because The Sadhana of Mahamudra had such a huge impact on Trungpa Rinpoche's development as a teacher and on the whole thrust of his teaching in the West. In a sense, the most articulate presentation of spiritual materialism and the most profound understanding of how to vanquish it are presented in this sadhana. In this, as well as other areas of his teaching, Trungpa Rinpoche first had the main realization, full and complete within itself, received almost in an instant. He then spent years sharing that understanding with others. This was also true with his propagation of the Shambhala teachings, which were heralded by his receiving another terma text, The Golden Sun of the Great East, well before he began to lecture publicly on the Shambhala path of warriorship. This approach is, in fact, quite orthodox. The Buddha first became enlightened; only some weeks later did he begin to teach. Similarly, Chogyam Trungpa discovered the heart teachings of his lineage—the ecumenical tradition of Ri-me—in Taktsang in 1968. He spent the next two decades sharing that realization with sentient beings.

As Richard also points out in his letter, after discovering and translating The Sadhana of Mahamudra, Trungpa Rinpoche was delighted to share this practice with anyone who might be interested. When he returned to England, his students there took up the practice of the sadhana immediately. In an unpublished memoir, Rinpoche's wife, Diana Mukpo, describes the practice of the sadhana at Samye Ling, Rinpoche's meditation center in Scotland: "When I was visiting Samye Ling with my mother in 1969, Rinpoche had only recently returned from this trip

to Bhutan. Now, in addition to traditional Tibetan practices, students at Samye Ling chanted an English translation of *The Sadhana of Mahamudra*, crudely printed on coloured paper."

Once he arrived in America in 1970, in spite of his insistence on the sitting practice of meditation as the main discipline, Trungpa Rinpoche encouraged students to gather together and read the sadhana on the new and full moon. This practice continues to the present day. During Trungpa Rinpoche's lifetime, he conferred the formal empowerment, or abhisheka, for this sadhana twice that we know of: in India in 1968 and slightly later in England. In 1982, His Holiness Khyentse Rinpoche requested that Trungpa Rinpoche write down the abhisheka text, which he had spontaneously composed when he gave the transmissions years before. He did not accomplish this before he died, but Khyentse Rinpoche, who had a very close connection to Trungpa Rinpoche and to his students, completed both the abhisheka and the feast liturgy in 1990. Rinpoche's eldest son, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, who inherited the leadership of the Shambhala Buddhist community in 1990, has conferred this abhisheka in a number of ceremonies, beginning in 1993. Several thousand students, both senior students and recent meditators, have taken part in these events. Carried out of a lonely retreat in a cave in Bhutan, the lineage of transmission has traveled far and grown quite large in less than three decades.

In *The Sadhana of Mahamudra*, the seed syllable HUM plays a major role in invoking the power of sanity to overcome the forces of materialism in the world. The next offering in Volume Five is "HUM: An Approach to Mantra," a short article on the mantra HUM, which was originally published in 1972 in *Garuda II: Working with Negativity*. As he so often does, Chogyam Trungpa begins his discussion by dispelling preconceptions. That is, he first tells the reader what mantra practice is not. It is not, he informs us, "a magical spell used in order to gain psychic powers for selfish purposes, such as accumulation of wealth, power over others, and destruction of enemies." He explains that the genuine usage of mantra arises from an understanding of the teachings of the Buddha on the four marks of existence: impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and egolessness. Mantra is the invocation of egoless or nontheistic energies of wisdom and insight. He also distinguishes the Buddhist understanding of mantra from its usage in Hindu tantra, explaining that the divinities invoked in Buddhist tantra are not external but rather represent "aspects of the awakened state of mind."

Trungpa Rinpoche then describes a number of ways in which the mantra HUM has been used. It was employed by Guru Padmasambhava "to subdue the force of the negative environment created by minds poisoned with passion, aggression, and ignorance." For beginning meditators, he suggests that chanting the sacred music of HUM can quiet the mind and ease the force of irritating thoughts. For advanced meditators, he states that the syllable HUM is a means of developing the wisdom of the five buddha families, innate wisdoms arising from emptiness, which one finds within oneself, not somewhere in the external world. He also describes HUM as the "sonorous sound of silence" and as "that state of meditation when awareness breaks out of the limits of ego." Finally, he describes the relationship of the mantra HUM to the Vajrakilaya Mandala, in which the power of egolessness is visualized as a dagger that pierces through the seductions of ego.



Taktsang