
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As we do normally it is good to start with generating a positive motivation, such as, 'in order to benefit all sentient beings as a way to liberate them from all suffering, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So, for that purpose I will listen to the profound teachings of the Mahayana and will put them into practice well'.

2.2. Actual

As the text explains there is the mahamudra from the sutra tradition and the mahamudra from the tantra tradition. The mahamudra from the tantra tradition is explained first as the auto-commentary says that it will take fewer words.

2.2.1 MAHAMUDRA ACCORDING TO THE TANTRA TRADITION

As explained in our previous session, according to the tantra tradition mahamudra is identified as being the *clear light* mind. Mahamudra itself is sub-divided into *object mahamudra* and *subject mahamudra*, and according to the tantric explanation the clear light mind is the subject mahamudra. Whereas according to the sutra explanation the subject mahamudra is the wisdom directly realising emptiness, and emptiness itself is the object mahamudra.

As also explained previously, the difference between sutra and tantra mahamudra primarily lies in the subject mahamudra—the mind that realises emptiness. There are many different terms for subject mahamudra, which the auto-commentary lists, however the main thing to keep in mind is that as according to the tantric explanations, object mahamudra is realised by the clear light mind, and in the sutra tradition object mahamudra is realised by the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness. It is essential to keep these main two points in mind.

In our previous session we explained that according to tantra the subject mahamudra is divided into *example clear light* and *meaning or actual clear light*. As we briefly covered earlier, it is explained that the clear light mind, as well as the illusory body, is the main essence of the completion stage tantra practice. Thus they are realisations and states to be obtained. These details are within the category of the highest yoga tantric teachings, so as mentioned previously, because quite a few attending these teachings would have not received the appropriate initiations, it is best we don't go into too much detail. However, gaining an understanding of what example clear light and meaning clear light mean, and how they serve to obtain the ultimate results, will leave a very positive imprint on the mind. So giving a general overview of tantra is permissible and appropriate.

The illusory body

That which is to be obtained is the pure illusory body, the ultimate body of unification. Within illusory body, there is the impure illusory body and the pure illusory body.

The means to obtain the **impure illusory body** is, when the wind serves as a substantial cause and the mind serves as a co-operative condition; combining those two and actualising it serves as the cause to obtain the impure illusory body. As

explained earlier, it is called impure because it is not yet free from the deluded obscurations.

When the wind that serves as a substantial cause and the mind of meaning or actual clear light serves as a co-operative condition, then through that combination the final result to be obtained is the **pure illusory body**, which is the ultimate enlightened body of unification. A pure illusory body free from all stains. Thus when the tantric teachings say, 'the ultimate purified body is the illusory body' it is referring to the body of the ultimate unification, or the pure illusory body. And when it says, 'the ultimate purified mind is the meaning clear light', it is referring to the fact that by utilising the meaning or actual clear light mind, one obtains the mind of enlightenment.

For those who are not very familiar with the tantric teachings, one of the main characteristics of the tantric practices is in the explanation of how the wind and the mind work in conjunction to achieve temporary and ultimate goals. An analogy to illustrate how the wind and mind work in conjunction is for example, the wind being like the legs of a person that takes them to places, whereas the mind is like the eyes that see where they want to go. Taking this analogy further, if someone were to have legs but no sight, it would be very difficult for them to travel by themselves. Likewise if someone had sight but no legs, then it would also be difficult for them to travel alone. So if there were two such people together who wished to cross a river, for example, the best way would be for the person with legs, but no sight, to carry the person with sight, but no legs, on top of his shoulders to cross over. Then they would not only be able to cross the river safely, but could also travel together to reach their destination.

Likewise the wind is said to have the ability to move towards an object, whereas the mind has the ability to know or cognise it. Thus, as explained in the tantric teachings, whenever the wind moves, the mind travels together with it. The relationship between the wind and the mind is such that one can't function properly without the other. They have to work in conjunction together to be able to achieve the destination that is to be reached. Thus in conjunction with the subtle wind the mind travels towards the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

Again, for reasons of inappropriateness we cannot go into too much detail on these subjects. However for those who are inclined to study and practice tantra further, it is good to understand that the tantric practices such as taking the intermediate state into the practice, and particularly when transforming the intermediate state body into the illusory body of the deity, are done in conjunction with the wind body. The description of the intermediate state body is closely related to the description of the illusory body. Thus if one has an understanding of what the intermediate state body is like, then one can have a better understanding of what the illusory body is. Thus one will be able to understand the significance of the practice of taking the intermediate state into one's practice, and it becomes much clearer. As some of you would have heard from explanations given in the tantric teachings, the intermediate state being's body is made up of the subtle wind rather than gross physical matter.

Brief explanation of how the intermediate state body is obtained

I will briefly explain how the intermediate state being's body is obtained, and then how, in conjunction with that, one

engages in the tantric practice of taking the intermediate state into the path.

At the time of death, when the actual dissolution takes place, the five aggregates along with the four elements dissolve. Within the four elements when the gross wind element dissolves, it dissolves into the aggregate of consciousness, and at that point the external breath ceases.

The next stage of death is where the white, red and clear light visions take place. This occurs after the breath stops. At the point when the gross wind element completely dissolves into the consciousness, the eighty conceptual minds, which are gross levels of mind, all dissolve and cease as well. So the dissolution is a process whereby the mind goes into subtler and subtler levels.

The first stage (after the breath has ceased) is called the **white appearance**. To explain briefly, the essential substance received from the father, called the white seed or drop (semen), descends from the crown down to the heart, which is where the indestructible seed is located. The descent of the white seed serves as the cause for the white vision to occur.

The next stage is the **red appearance** when the red vision occurs. The cause of the red vision is when the essential red seed/blood received from the mother ascends from the navel up towards the indestructible seed at the heart. As a result of the red substance ascending, the red vision occurs.

When the white seed and red seed actually enter and meet within the indestructible seed at the heart, then temporarily everything becomes dark; that is the **dark appearance** and the dark vision occurs.

In the earlier part of the dark vision the person becomes completely unconscious with no awareness at all. The later part of the dark vision transforms into to what is called the **clear light**, which is the most subtle state of mind of a person in the last stages of the death.

Within the clear light, the first stage is called the **basis clear light**. According to the sutra teachings, the last stage of death is simply referred to as the subtlest mind of death. Whereas according to the tantric teachings, the last stage of death is specifically described as the state of basic clear light mind.

For an ordinary person, when the wind serves as the substantial cause and the mind serves as the co-operative condition, the person then goes into the intermediate state and assumes the body of an **intermediate state being**. The body of the intermediate state being is a subtle wind body. A practitioner, or yogi, who is trained in the practices, will then transform that basis clear light into the clear light of the path. That is when the yogi actually utilises that stage of the death process to into the path by transforming it into the illusory body.

In brief, that is how, in relation to the death process of an ordinary person and how they obtain the intermediate state body, a yogi engages in the practice of utilising that stage into the path by transforming the subtle wind body into the illusory body of the deity.

So, as mentioned previously, according to the tantra mahamudra is the clear light.

Masters attesting to this explanation

The next verse of the root text reads:

8. *The explanation of mahamudra as the blissful realisation of voidness attained by channelling your body's energy winds into the central energy channel is attested to by Saraha, Nagarjuna,*

Naropa and Maitripa. These mahamudra teachings, thus, are the quintessence of the highest classification of tantra, anuttarayoga. This then, in brief is the explanation of mahamudra according to the tantra system.

The auto-commentary further explains:

The mind that is in the nature of that clear light is called the ultimate *atung*, *indestructible drop*, *the uncontrived mind*, *ordinary mind*, *fundamental mind* and so forth. According to the explanations of the great Indian and Tibetan masters such as the lord Dewa Chenpo or otherwise known as Tsokyi Dorje, as well as the great mahasiddha Saraha, Nagarjuna, Lord of Hermits, Tilopa and Naropa, Maitripa and so forth, as well as the Kagyu lineage masters from Pak-tru [district in Lhokha, Tibet] such as Marpa, Milarepa and Gampopa; they have also presented their final intentions of mahamudra as the great bliss of clear light that comes from the wind entering, abiding and dissolving into the central channel.

Here the author is referring to the authentic sources for presenting clear light as the mahamudra of tantra. To show their authenticity the auto-commentary explains that we first rely upon authentic Tibetan great masters who have gained great realisations. The treatises that these great Tibetan masters composed also relied upon the authentic sources of the great Indian masters. In this way an authentic source is shown to be one that relies upon its earlier authentic sources. That is how we know that what is being presented here is authentic and reliable.

As the auto-commentary further explains verse 8:

This is the inner most essence of the main subject of *The Seven Texts of the Mahasiddhas* and *The Three Core Volumes of Saraha* which are treatises on the ocean-like teachings on highest-yoga tantra.

Here 'this' refers to the clear light mind which *is the inner most essence of the main subject of 'The Seven Texts of the Mahasiddhas' and 'The Three Core Volumes of Saraha'* as also presented in the root verse.

What is being explained is that the tantra mahamudra is really the innermost essence of all these treatises. In other words tantric mahamudra is the core of all of the teachings of the great mahasiddhas. So, as explained in the auto-commentary, the subject mahamudra from the tantric tradition is the innermost essence of all tantric teachings.

The Seven Texts of the Mahasiddhas and *The Three Core Volumes of Saraha* are mentioned because these particular treatises have unique ways of explaining the clear light, and also include a lot of experiential presentations, which are a unique way of explaining the mahamudra. For that reason the author of the auto-commentary particularly cites these texts from among the many other tantric teachings.

The Seven Texts of the Mahasiddhas are then presented in the auto-commentary:

1. *Sangwa Dupa - Guhyasamaja (Accomplishment of Secrets)* composed by the Lord Dewa Chenpo. This text primarily elucidates the intentions of the treatise called *The Collections of Root Tantra* for it says, 'There is nothing greater than the glorious collections, for it is the one and only jewel in the entire universe'. Thus by mentioning the qualities of the collections, it also briefly presents the generation stage, and in particular presents the implicit meanings of the root tantra, which is the path of non-dual bliss and emptiness, the realisations attained on the highest levels of the completion stage. This text is also

considered as the main reference point for the rest of the seven texts.

The *Sangwa Dupa* is the main treatise as it serves as the essential text on which all other texts rely. As mentioned here, it presents the realisations attained at the highest level of the completion stage, *the path of non-dual bliss and emptiness*. Because this text presents that very clearly and uniquely, it serves as the main reference text.

Within the two classes of tantra—the father tantra and the mother tantra—this text mainly relates to the father tantra. The remaining six treatises are primarily presentations of the mother class of tantra¹.

Three Core Volumes of Saraha are known as the *Three Dohas*, which translates as ‘the spontaneous spiritual songs of the mahasiddhas’. These volumes are very poetic and give song-like explanations on mahamudra.

There are slightly different interpretations of *The Three Core Volumes* or *Three Dohas* of Saraha. These include the *Common Doha* and the *King’s Doha* and so forth. Apparently these are the poetic expressions of realisations and so forth of Saraha himself. Sometimes when he was awake and sometimes when he was lying down he would recall his own experiences of the teachings of emptiness.

The auto-commentary continues:

Some scholars such as the omniscient Bu-dön, assert that the *Common Do-ha* is authentic while the other two are pretense.

Of the three core volumes of Saraha, some are considered to be authentic and some are considered to be forgeries, but not all scholars assert that.

We will conclude the explanation of mahamudra according to the tantra tradition here, because as mentioned previously, going into too much detail would be inappropriate.

2.2.2. MAHAMUDRA ACCORDING TO THE SUTRAS

Again, the author makes a pledge to compose the next part of the treatise, which is the explanation of the mahamudra according to the sutra tradition.

This refers to verses 9 and 10 in the root text:

9. *As for the previous one, the mahamudra teachings of the sutras, this refers to the ways of meditating on voidness as taught in the three Prajnaparamita sutras and in all three traditions of the shravakas, pratyeka buddhas and bodhisattvas. Nagarjuna has said that except for these methods there is no other path to liberation.*

10. *Therefore, following the wishes and teachings of Nagarjuna, I shall now explain in this discussion of mahamudra the methods and ways of*

introducing yourself to the true nature of the mind in accordance with the teachings of the gurus of unbroken lineage.

By saying, *introducing yourself to the true nature of the mind in accordance with the teachings of the gurus of unbroken lineage*, the author is pledging to compose the text in accordance with instructions from his own guru whose lineage comes from the masters of the past.

As the auto-commentary reads:

There are two different techniques for meditating on mahamudra. To present the previous which is the sutra tradition; it is the technique of meditating on the wisdom realizing emptiness as explicitly presented in *The Mother*—the extensive, middling and abbreviated Prajnaparamita or perfection of wisdom sutras. In *The Mother* teachings of the Buddha, this [wisdom realising emptiness] is praised as the very life of the paths of the three vehicles, and the supreme Arya Nagarjuna also attested, ‘besides this there is no other path that leads to liberation’.

Those who have already studied the Madhyamaka text will remember that the short, medium and extensive prajnaparamita sutras explicitly present the subject of emptiness, while implicitly presenting the extensive deeds of the practices. Here the author states that he is presenting sutra mahamudra to be the wisdom realising emptiness, which is in accordance with the prajnaparamita sutras. These sutras of the Buddha explain how the wisdom realising emptiness is an unmistakable method, and it is this wisdom that needs to be actualised in one’s meditation. The author explains that the auto-commentary relies upon the explicit meaning of the prajnaparamita sutras is a way of authenticating his work.

More specifically, introducing the subject mahamudra as being the wisdom realising emptiness. in accordance with the explicit presentation of the prajnaparamita sutras, has the connotation that the mind realising mahamudra has to be a reliable and unmistakable mind. There are other presentations of realising emptiness from the lower schools, such as the mind that realises subject and object to be distinct, or the mind realising that objects are void of substantial existence and so forth. However the wisdom realising these levels of emptiness is not the wisdom realising emptiness according to the mahamudra explanation.

To be more specific, of the different tenets, this explanation is according to the Prasangika point of view. Students who have studied the tenets will recall that there is an emptiness that is presented in accordance to the Svatantrika point of view as well as the emptiness that is presented in accordance with the Chittamatra or Mind-only school. There are also the lower Buddhist schools’ presentations of selflessness according to the Sautrantika and Vaibashika. What is being specifically explained is that the wisdom realising emptiness as presented here is in accordance with the highest school of the Prasangika. Those who have studied the tenets previously can now actually relate to all of this, which gives a deeper understanding of the points being made here.

The auto commentary specifically describes the wisdom realising emptiness as being the *very life*, or essence, of *all three vehicles*. This should be understood to mean that the wisdom realising emptiness serves as the main method for obtaining the ultimate results of each of the three vehicles, the hearer vehicle, the solitary realiser vehicle and the bodhisattva vehicle. So in order to achieve one’s own

¹ The other six are:

2. *Dorje-tap-she Dupa*, (accomplishment of Indestructible method and wisdom) composed by Kamadeva who was a disciple of the former mahasiddha.

3. *Yeshe Dupa* (accomplishment of Wisdom) composed by Indra Bodhi who is the disciple of the former.

4. *Nyi-me Dupa* (accomplishment of non-duality) by Cham-la Kimkara who is the disciple of the former.

5. *Lhen-chik-kye Dupa* (accomplishment of spontaneously arising) by Do-me-ba Heruka.

6. *Sangwa-chenpo-de-kona-nyi Dupa* (accomplishment of suchness, the great secret) by Darikapa.

7. *Dro-wai-de-konna-nyi Dupa* (accomplishment of suchness, after having clarified phenomena) by Naljorma Tsita.

ultimate goal, one must rely upon the wisdom realising emptiness.

The auto-commentary then quotes a verse from Nagarjuna's works:

In order for buddhas, solitary-realiser as well as the
hearers,
To gain the state of liberation,
You proclaimed this alone is the path and none other,
Thus, this is definitely to be relied upon.

According to the Vajrayana Vehicle as well, there is no superior realisation to the wisdom realising emptiness. To understand this point, you must understand that as far as actual presentation of the object emptiness is concerned, there is no difference between the presentations of the Prajnaparamita Vehicle and Tantra Vehicle. However the Vajrayana or Tantra Vehicle presents the meaning clear light mind as the wisdom realising emptiness directly. Therefore the difference between the prajnaparamita and the tantra lies in subject mahamudra.

There is no difference between the Prajnaparamita Vehicle and the Tantra Vehicle as far as how emptiness itself is presented. Therefore, you do not find different tenets for Prajnaparamita and Tantrayana. There are no texts that make a distinction between the tenets of the Prajnaparamita and Tantrayana. This proves that as far as the tenets are concerned, there is no difference between the Tantrayana and Prajnaparamita views of the presentation of emptiness.

As the author further explains in the auto-commentary:

Also there is no distinction made for the Vajrayana in having another or more supreme view, for as the Lord Sakya Pandita has said:

Between perfection of wisdom and secret mantra,
No distinction has been proclaimed,
If there were a more supreme view,
Than the non-fabricated view of the perfections,
That view would have to be a fabricated view;
If claimed to be non-fabricated, then there no
distinction.

The auto-commentary then continues:

The one who elucidates this definitive meaning is Chandrakirti the disciple of Nagarjuna who is the trailblazer as predicted by Lord Buddha. For as Atisha said:

If one were to ask, by what means emptiness is realised?
That is to be relied upon the instructions from Chandrakirti,
The disciple of Nagarjuna who was predicted by the Tathagata,
And who has seen the truth of suchness;
For anyone who follows the instructions from this lineage,
Buddhahood is possible, otherwise it is not.

What is being presented here is the wisdom realising emptiness, including the presentation of emptiness itself. This was presented by Nagarjuna using many analogies to show how even an atom lacks inherent existence, with reasoning such as because it being inter-dependent origination, and so forth. This presentation of emptiness is the explicit meaning of the prajnaparamita sutras that Nagarjuna clearly elucidated. Another reason why we can rely upon Nagarjuna's work is because the Buddha himself predicted that Nagarjuna would be a trailblazer for the teachings.

So what the author is attesting is, Nagarjuna's intent is elucidated by Chandrakirti, who in turn passed the precious instructions of mahamudra, the means of recognising the nature of mind, to many great scholars and practitioners. This unbroken lineage of instructions and blessings have come down to my own glorious lama, and it is the guru's personal instructions that I rely upon for my explanations here.

In quoting from Atisha the auto-commentary is specifically presenting the lineage of the view on emptiness that we receive. Those who are familiar with the lam rim teachings will recall that in the lineage presentation found in those teachings there is a distant lineage and a close lineage.

The **distant lineage** shows how the teachings came from the Buddha to Manjushri, and then from Manjushri to Nagarjuna and down to Chandrakirti. It then passed through the Indian masters to the Tibetan masters, and down to Lama Tsong Khapa. From Lama Tsong Khapa the teachings passed to our lineage teachers and then to ourselves.

The **close lineage** comes from Vajradhara, who is the holder of the secret tantra lineage. From Vajradhara the lineage goes directly to Manjushri and from Manjushri directly to Lama Tsong Khapa. Then it is passed down to his main disciples, including Togden Jampa Gyatso all the way down through the lineage masters up to one's own guru. The authentic source of the ultimate view of the wisdom realising emptiness is shown by the presentation of this unbroken lineage.

The author says in the auto-commentary that just as Atisha's presentation of Nagarjuna's and Chandrakirti's presentations of the view is the unmistakable presentation, *in accordance with that, I will explain the mahamudra*. Thus he mentions that the presentation of the awareness of the mind is in accordance to the great masters of the lineage of Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti.

There are actually some commentaries that give specific instructions on the meditation on emptiness in relation to realising the nature of the mind. These were given to a Tibetan master called Gorim Gyatso Zangpo, who was a direct disciple of Lama Tsong Khapa. As one commentary explains, this is also one of the specific lineages. Lama Tsong Khapa gave specific instructions on how to realise the ultimate nature of the mind by first referring to the conventional nature of the mind, and then the ultimate nature of the mind, and gave specific instructions on how to meditate upon that. However the treatises by Gorim Gyatso Zangpo have somehow been lost in recent years—basically we cannot find them.

The main point to be taken here is that insofar as the actual presentation of emptiness itself is concerned, that view of emptiness definitely relies upon the authentic sources that have come through the lineages of the masters such as Nagarjuna. For the specific instructions on how to meditate upon the nature of the mind, which are explained in this commentary, the author relies upon his own master. As he explains, those specific instructions that are presented here explain how to develop calm abiding by using the mind itself as the object. Then based on that, one develops special insight, which is to realise the ultimate nature of the mind. The explanations given here are also in accordance with the lam rim teachings, specifically in the abbreviated lam rim teaching of Lama Tsong Khapa, where this presentation is quite clear.

The auto-commentary further explains:

If then asked what is the mahamudra presented here? To quote from the *King of Concentration Sutra*:

The nature of all phenomena is the seal.

Thus as proclaimed, the nature or emptiness of all phenomena is the seal, which when realised, frees you from all troubles, thus it is called great or supreme; for as mentioned again: 'it is great, supreme and immeasurable'.

The next part of the auto-commentary refers to Verse 11 and onwards, which describe the different oral traditions of the teachings and so forth. We will present them in later sessions.

Next Tuesday is the discussion session, which is good for you to attend. It is an opportunity for the senior students to share whatever they have understood to help the newer students to gain a better understanding. In that way it will be really useful and meaningful for both the newer students and the senior students. Then, as normal, the test follows the discussion. It will also be good for you to come to the test and to do it as best as you can.

So now for a quiz: According to the tantra, what is the mahamudra?

Students: Clear light mind.

Just saying 'clear light mind' doesn't really reflect upon what mahamudra really is. So what is it? Is it the clear light mind or is it the clear light mind realising emptiness?

Students: The clear light wisdom realising emptiness.

The immediate response was that mahamudra was clear light. So does everyone agree with that? Is it just the clear light?

Students: The realisation of clear light.

Well that, of course, is the case. However just being able to cite, 'it is the clear light realising emptiness' of course is not sufficient, it is important to understand a bit more detail about what type of mind that is.

Clear light and the path

'Clear light' is a vague answer because, as explained earlier, there is the basis clear light, the path clear light, and the resultant clear light. The basis clear light is the subtle mind at the time of death, which we explained earlier. Whereas within the path clear light, there is the example clear light and the actual clear light. The clear light that is the realisation of emptiness relates to the clear light of the path. The resultant clear light is what we call the dharmakaya. So this is a more specific explanation.

So in relation to the earlier question, the answer so far has been that mahamudra is the clear light mind realising emptiness. How is that mind generated within oneself?

Student: By going through the vajra body.

There are actually two ways of how the mind is generated. Just referring to the vajra body, which is in accordance to the explanation given, and relating to the vital points of the vajra body isn't, in itself, a full explanation.

Student: The substantial cause of the wind entering the central channel and the co-operative condition of the mind realising emptiness conceptually is example clear light. Meaning clear light is the co-operative condition of the mind realising emptiness, and the substantial cause is the wind entering the central channel.

A definition was given earlier, and it is best to rely on that definition to confirm how that mind is generated. The best way to assert something is to rely on the definition.

Student: Is it the union of bliss and void?

There is a difference between *spontaneously arising non-dual bliss and emptiness* and *inseparable non-dual bliss and emptiness*. The *spontaneously arising non-dual bliss and emptiness* is at the stage of example clear light; whereas the *inseparable non-dual bliss and emptiness*, meaning that emptiness and the bliss are inseparable just like water being poured into water, is the meaning clear light stage of realising emptiness.

I assume that you will find the definitions in the text, which I believe actually has an explanation of both the root text and the auto-commentary. So, you should find that this text clearly explains the tantric explanation of mahamudra.

In relation to bumbling around with the commentaries, there is a story in my home-town in Tibet of someone who was known to be a very courageous person. In fact he walked around with six different knives strapped to his belt. But the time came when he was attacked by a vicious dog and in his panic, he couldn't use any of his knives, so he had to resolve on picking up some dirt and throwing it in the dog's eyes. That's like having three commentaries with clear explanations of what type of clear light it would be, yet just saying 'it is clear light, clear light!!'.

It is good to refer to the specific explanations in the text and of course if you do refer to it, you would find out that it isn't too complicated for you to understand. So it is good to rely on the teaching in the text.

In the monasteries, when we received teachings from a teacher, it was customary for the teacher to ask 'have you memorised the root text of the teaching?' If some students were able to immediately respond 'yes, we have memorised the root text' then an explanation of the text would be given. It was considered that if one hadn't memorised the text and not able quote it, then there was not much point in giving an explanation of the text because nothing will really be grasped. Thus it was difficult to receive a commentary on a particular subject if one had not memorised the root text. So a monk who had memorised the root text would be given the job of requesting the teaching.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version*

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