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Realization Song of Mahasiddha Nāropa¹

ABSTRACT

The text on the so called realization song [in Sanskrit *upadeśa* and *gdams ngag* in Tibetan] by Mahasiddha Nāropa [1016–1100] entitled *phyag rgya chen po'i tshigs bsdus pa* [*Concise Māhamudrā*]. It consists of short introduction, translation of the original and edition of Tibetan text.

KEY WORDS

Māhamudrā, realization, nature of mind

A great professor leaving university and turning into a wild yogin – what could be a more heretical act from the point of view of academics and what could be more natural from the point of view of yogic tantra practitioners? The Indian tradition of the famous 84 Mahāsiddhas knows at least a few cases of this kind and one of them is that of Nāropa [1016–1100]. Being guardian of the Nalanda northern gate – one of the most responsible positions given only to the best – his academic career reached its' peak. Winning every debate he proved himself unmatched and there was hardly any further academic privilege he could fight for. At that moment, however, he realized that his understanding of Buddhist teachings was limited only to words, understood perfectly, but that words can not transmit experience itself, even though paradoxically this is what they are meant for. Realizing that there was a huge gulf between his intellectual under-

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standing and real inner experience (or more precisely lack of this experience), he decided to leave Nalanda and set off in search of the one who could teach him how to experience the meaning of the teachings of the Buddha.

When he announced his intention to seek the Guru who would reveal the sense to him, the congregation at Nalanda thought: ‘Among the former abbots there was no scholar so profound as our Nāropa. In performing the duties of an abbot he explained the Doctrine in a holier way than others; when he talked about grammar, logic, Sūtras, or Tantras, he gave superworldly explanations; when he performed the rites of the awakening of an enlightened attitude of confirmation, and other initiations, he was unsurpassable in grace; when he instructed those who practiced meditation he was especially gifted in explaining the experiences and realizations. If such an abbot were to go to another country we should be like fish on dry land’, and they all were plunged in despair.²

All the greatest scholars of Nalanda, five hundred as it is said in his biography, begged him to stay, but this was of no avail and Nāropa finally declared:

I know all the scriptures that are like the sea,
 All five branches of learning have I mastered
 With grammar and epistemology,
 Yet without a competent Guru
 The fire of my craving will not die.
 If my yearning be not stilled
 By the Guru’s grace which is like
 The nectar stream of Tantra essence
 Wide as the ocean, despite my attainments,
 Virtues and supersensible cognitions,
 I have not seen Reality.³

After many years spent together with his master Tilopa he obtained the experience of realizing the nature of mind called *māhamudrā*. Although this experience could not be expressed in words, as he admitted, he composed thirteen stanzas pointing it out. Pointing out not in the sense of describing the experience but more as a trial to trigger the same experience in the mind of a disciple. This kind of instruction is called in Sanskrit *upadeśa* and *gdams ngag* in Tibetan.

² *The life and teaching of Nāropa* [by lha’i btsun pa rin chen rnam rgyal], trans. H. V. Guenther, Shambala: South Asia Editions 1999, p. 27.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

gdams ngag refers essentially to the immediate, heartfelt instructions and admonitions of master to disciple concerning directly liberative insight and practice. *gDams ngag* in this sense is, in the final analysis, a product solely of the interrelationship between master and disciple; it is the non-repeatable discourse event in which the core of the Buddhist enlightenment comes to be manifestly disclosed.⁴

They are thus pointing out instructions only for the fortunate ones, as Nāropa puts it, for particularly gifted and close students who are ready to receive them properly. Before Nāropa himself was taught in the same way by Tilopa, his master who started his māhamudrā teachings in the following way:

Though māhamudrā cannot be taught,
 You who underwent hardships and pays respect to the lama,
 Who endowed with endurance of suffering and with intelligence,
 You, the fortunate one, treat your mind/heart in the following way!⁵

Having spent many years with his closest student and teaching him in the most extreme way,⁶ Tilopa prepared Nāropa for receiving the highest Buddhist teachings. In a similar way to what would soon follow – namely the twenty years spent by Marpa [*mar pa chos kyi blo gros*, 1012–1097] with his master Nāropa – Nāropa himself finally became ready for the same teaching and the same experience. As Nāropa was taught to treat his heart or his mind – since the word *snying po* used here is ambiguous – in the māhamudrā way, later he gave his heart-felt or mind-felt oral teachings [*snying gtam*] to an equally fortunate Marpa. Even though the original Sanskrit text is lost, the Tibetan translation can be treated almost as original, since it was translated by Marpa himself who was the first and most fortunate – as Nāropa once was – addressee of this teachings, and could be clarified directly with its author.

Soon Marpa became the legend of Tibetan Buddhism who was able to transplant Indian tantric Buddhism to the Land of Snow. Thus he is called *pha*

⁴ M. Kapstein, “*gDam ngag*: Tibetan Technologies of the Self”, [in:] *Tibetan Literature. Studies in Genre*, eds. J. I. Cabezón, R. R. Jackson, New York, Ithaca: Snow Lion 1996, p. 276.

⁵ Tilopa *phyag rgya chen po'i man ngag*, [in:] *nges don phyag rgya chen po' khrid mdzod*, Kalimpong: Shri Diwakar Publications, vol. tsa, p. 438 [phyag rgya chen po bstan du med gyur kyang// dka' ba spyod cing bla ma la gus pas// sdug bsngal bzod ldan blo ldan nA ro pa// skal ldan khyod kyi snying la 'di ltar byos//].

⁶ The biography of Naropa is probably one of the most incredible stories of spiritual development not only in Buddhist tradition but in the culture of the world. The hardships Naropa went through made Tibetans to explain his Sanskrit name to mean “sick corpse” since *na* in Tibetan means to be ill and *ro* means corpse.

mar pa lo tsa ba – Father Marpa The Translator. In Tibetan tradition there are two types of translators: *skad sgyur pa* meaning literally ‘the one who changes one speech into another’, and *lo ts’a ba* meaning ‘the one who translates not only words but also the meaning and experience’. Thus Marpa translated and transmitted the meaning of highest Buddhist teachings, in search of which Nāropa once upon the time left Nalanda.

In Tibetan tradition miracles are classified in two categories: the so-called ordinary miracles and extraordinary miracles. Into the first category the ability to fly or to go through a wall and to heal are included along with many others. The second category comprises in fact only one type of miracle: that is a change of mind. All Buddhist practice is in the end about transforming one’s mind, that in turn amounts to a total transformation of everything, since – as *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* says – everything is mind. This is the highest miracle and highest Buddhist magic. The text translated below tells the story of this transformation.

TRANSLATION

Mahāsiddha Nāropa

Concise Māhamudrā

In the language of India: *Māhamudrā sanyatamitha*

In the language of Tibet: *phyag rgya chen po’i tshigs bsdus pa* [*Concise Māhamudrā*]

Prostration to the state of great bliss!

First [Nāropa] taught the meaning of māhamudrā of perception:

As for the so called māhamudrā,
All phenomena are your own mind.
Seeing the outer object is deluded mind.
Like a dream it is empty of nature.

Secondly, [Nāropa] taught the meaning of māhamudrā of awareness:

Mind is also mere movement of mindful awareness.
Without essence it is the force of wind [*prāṇa*].

Empty of nature it is like space.
All phenomena – like space – stay equal.

Thirdly, [Nāropa] taught the meaning of māhamudrā of unity:

Speaking about so called māhamudrā,
By it's nature it is not to be shown.
That is why suchness of mind
Is the very state of māhamudrā.

Thus [Nāropa] taught māhamudrā of the view of perception, awareness [and] unity. Furthermore in case of māhamudrā of meditation there are three [points]. Firstly, [Nāropa] taught the meaning of māhamudrā of the way things are.

There is nothing elaborated and to be changed about it
If one sees and realizes it itself,
All manifestations and existence are māhamudrā
Because of great dharmakāya being utterly pervasive.

(original editorial note: In this place of the text, two stanzas can not be read) [Secondly, [Nāropa] taught the meaning of māhamudrā of the way of realizing]

One should spontaneously leave it essentially non-elaborated –
Inconceivable dharmakāya.
If one leaves it without searching, this is the meditation.
Through searching, meditation [becomes] a deluded state of mind.

Like space and magical display,
Since meditating and non-meditating are not two,
How could there be freedom [from delusion] or non-freedom?
The yogi realizes this way.

Once again concerning māhamudrā of behaviour, there are three and firstly [Nāropa] taught the meaning of māhamudrā of self-liberation.

Knowing suchness frees one
From all positive and evil karma.
Afflictions are great primordial consciousness;
Helping the yogi like fire in the forest.⁷

⁷ The same way the fire rapidly consumes the forest, it erases all karmas.

Secondly, [Nāropa] taught the meaning of māhamudrā of equal taste.

How there can be time for going and staying?
 If you went into a monastery,⁸ what is the meditation there?
 If suchness is not realized,
 Nothing else can give you but temporary liberation.

Thirdly, [Nāropa] taught the māhamudrā of indivisibility.

If you realize thatness, what binds you?
 From staying undistracted in this state,
 There is no staying in equanimity or not staying
 To be elaborated upon with remedy and meditated on.

Once again concerning māhamudrā of result there are three. Firstly, [Nāropa] taught the meaning of māhamudrā of manifestations and samsaric existence.

There is nothing at all established here.
 Manifestations self-liberated are the expanse of phenomena [*dharmadhātu*].
 Conceptions self-liberated are great primordial consciousness.
 Non-dual equality is the dharmakāya.

Secondly, [Nāropa] taught the meaning of māhamudrā of samsara and nirvana.

Like waters of a great riverrun flowing down
 Whatever you do has the meaning.
 Here it is the permanent state of Buddha itself.
 No place for samsara, [just] great bliss!

Thirdly, [Nāropa] taught the meaning of māhamudrā of the ultimate.

Phenomena themselves are empty of own nature;
 Intellect clinging to the empty one is cleared away right on the spot.
 Free from intellectualizing, no fabrication in mind
 This is the path of all Buddhas.

Finally [Nāropa] gave oral instruction and dedicated merit.

For the most fortunate ones
 I put this heartfelt advice in words.

⁸ Literally *dgom pa* means place far away from the city.

May, through it, all beings without exception
Abide in māhamudrā!

Granted by Mahāpaṇḍita Nāropa to Marpa Chökyi Lodrö in Puṣpahari.

Śubham astu sarvajagatām. In this way the whole māhamudrā was summarized in thirteen verses. Concerning these teachings, the divisions on the topic should be made consistently with the meaning and they should be understood in detail from oral instructions. One should not rely on debates. And since it was written down from old books I [5th zhwa dmar dkon mchog yan lag, 1526–1583] do not think I changed it.

EDITION OF TIBETAN ORIGINAL TEXT

Edition and translation are based on the following edition: edition based on: *nges don phyag rgya chen po' khrid mdzod*, Kalimpong: Shri Diwakar Publications, vol. tsa, pp. 445–449. The text contains also short interlinear commentary by 5th zhwa dmar dkon mchog yan lag.

phyag rgya chen po'i tshig bsdus pa bzhugs so//

rgya gar skad du/ Māhamudrā sanyatamitha//
bod skad du/ phyag rgya chen po'i tshig bsdus pa//

bde chen ngang la phyag 'tshal lo//

dang po snang ba phyag rgya chen po'i don du gsungs pa/

phyag rgya chen por brjod bya ba// chos rnam thams cad rang gi sems//
phyi rol don mthong 'khrul pa'i blo// rmi lam bzhin te ngo bos stong//

gnyis pa rig pa phyag rgya chen po'i don du gsungs pa/

sems kyang dran rig 'gyu ba tsam// rang bzhin med de lung gi rtsal//
ngo bos stong pa nam mkha' 'dra// chos kun mkha' 'drar mnyam gnas pa'o//

gsum pa zung 'jug phyag rgya chen po'i don du gsungs pa/

phyag rgya che zhes brjod pa ni// rang gi ngo bos bstan du med//
de phyr sems kyi de bzhin nyid// phyag rgya chen po'i ngang nyid do//

de ltar snang ba/ rig pa/ zung 'jug gsum gyi lta ba phyag rgya chen po bstan pa la/ slar yang sgom
pa phyag rgya chen po la gsum gyi/ dang po gnas lugs phyag rgya chen po'i don du gsungs pa/

de la bcos shing bsgyur du med// gang gis de nyid mthong rtogs na//
snang srid thams cad phyag rgya che// chos sku khyab gdal chen por bas//

'di nas bcaid gnyis pa'i mtshan mi snang/ [gnyis pa rtogs tshul phyag rgya chen po'i don
du gsungs pa/]

rang bzhin ma bcos lhug par gzhag/ bsam du med pa'i chos kyi sku//
ma btsal bzhag na sgom pa ste// btsal zhing sgom pa 'khrul pa'o blo//

gsum pa rtogs tshul phyag rgya chen po'i don du gsungs pa/

mkha' dang cho 'phrul ji lta bar// bsgom dang mi sgom gnyis med pas//
bral dang mi bral ga la yod// rnal 'byor pas ni de ltar rtogs//

slar yang spyod pa phyag rgya chen po la gsum gyi/ dang po rang grol phyag rgya chen
po'i don du gsungs pa/

dge dang sdig pa'i las rnams kun// de nyid shes pas grol bar 'gyur//
nyon mongs ye shes chen po ste// nags la me bzhin rnal 'byor grogs//

gnyis pa ro snyoms phyag rgya chen po'i don du gsungs pa/

'gro dang 'dug dus ga la yod// dgon par phyin na bsam gtan ci//
de nyid ma rtogs gang gis kyang// gnas skabs tsam las grol mi 'gyur//

gsum pa dbyer med phyag rgya chen po'i don du gsungs pa/

de nyid rtogs na gang gis 'ching// ngang la ma yengs gnas pa las//
mnyam par gzhag dang ma gzhag ces// gnyen pos bcos shing bsgom du med//

slar yang 'bras bu phyag rgya chen po la gsum gyi/ dang po snang srid phyag rgya chen
po'i don du gsungs pa/

'di la gang yang ma grub ste// snang ba rang grol chos kyi dbyings//
rtog pa rang grol ye shes che// gnyis med mnyam pa chos sku'o//

gnyis pa 'khor 'das phyag rgya chen po'i don du gsungs pa/

chu bo chen po'i rgyun 'babs ltar// ji ltar spyad kyang don dang ldan//
'di ni rtog tu sangs rgyas nyid// 'khor ba yul med bde ba che'o//

gsum pa mthar thug phyag rgya chen po'i don du gsungs pa/

chos rnams rang rang ngo bos stong// stong par 'dzin blo rang sar dag/
blo bral yid la mi byed pa// 'di ni sangs rgyas kun gyi lam//

mthar gdams shing bsngo bar gsungs pa/

skal ba rab tu gyur pa la// bdag gis snying gdam tshig tu bsdebs//
'di yis 'gro ba ma lus pa// phyag rgya che la gnas par shog/

mkhas pa chen po nA ro'i zhal snga nas mar pa chos kyī blo gros la puṣpa ha
rir gnang ba'o// //

Śubham astu sarvajagatām/ de ltar shlo ka bcu gsum gyis phyag chen ma
lus par bsdus te bstan pa ni dmigs dbye ba don dang mthun par byis kyī/
zhib tu ni zhal las shes par bya'o/ 'khrugs pa rnams la yid brten mi bya
la/ 'di dpe rnying dag pa rnams ltar bris pa yin pas bcos par mi bsam mo//

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