

BEYOND AMAZING  
September 28, 2011

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Recently I was reflecting on my interest in Mahamudra meditation, perhaps the pinnacle of dharma practice in the Karma Kagyu tradition, the Tibetan Buddhist lineage to which I find myself most naturally resonant. I calculate that my wife Margaret and I have travelled over 40,000 miles just to hear teachings on this one topic alone. That is over one and one half times around the circumference of the earth and something like 500 teaching sessions over 23 years, just on the subject of Mahamudra meditation. I figure I must be into it.

Almost all of those miles were undertaken to hear one lama, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, speak on Mahamudra. This last weekend we travelled to Columbus Ohio to hear Rinpoche give a two-day intensive on this subject. This particular weekend teaching was perhaps the most concise and profound that I have ever heard, so I want to say a little something about it here. Readers might want to know what is so fascinating about Mahamudra.

I should point out that Mahamudra by definition is indescribable. It is beyond words, beyond mental elaboration and the embellishment of language. You should know that going in. The particular take on Mahamudra meditation that Rinpoche taught this last weekend was first presented in Tibet around 1958, just before the diaspora in Tibet, the Chinese invasion of that country that sent Tibetans fleeing their homeland. This resulted in the spread of Tibetan Buddhism all over the globe.

The particular person who first taught this special teaching was Khenpo Gangshar Wangpo, an abbot from eastern Tibet. My teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was there, on the spot, and heard this teaching from Khenpo Gangshar himself just prior to his own escape from Tibet. There is no space here to properly describe Mahamudra meditation or Khenpo Gangshar's particular take on it. It is available for those interested in a book entitled "Vivid Awareness" by the Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche from Shambala Publications. Here I will just try to communicate to you how precious and singular this particular teaching is. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche this last weekend told two personal stories that might help to bring this home to you. The first story is about how Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gained confidence in Khenpo Gangshar.

Khenpo Gangshar appeared at Thrangu Monastery, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's monastery, and all the monks there were struck by his presence. It was clear that Khenpo Gangshar was teaching from a rarified mental space and that he was singularly dedicated to sharing his insights with everyone present, both monks and lay people. Khenpo Gangshar could see that the Chinese were about to invade Tibet and that there was no time for gradual or progressive methods to learn this particular dharma practice. Instead, he presented a direct method for gaining awareness, knowing that everyone in Tibet might need it very soon. He cut to the chase.

I asked Khenpo Rinpoche how he gained confidence in Khenpo Gangshar at the time and he told this story. One of the things Khenpo Gangshar did was to take one of his personal robes and cut it into many small pieces, offering a piece to every monk present in the monastery, over 400 of them. He went around presenting these patches of cloth to everyone without exception. My teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche thought to himself that it was the dharma teachings of Khenpo Gangshar that were most valuable, not the bit of cloth. And sure enough, Khenpo Gangshar gave every monk in the monastery a piece of cloth except Khenpo Karthar. He was

the sole exception. This struck Rinpoche.

Then Rinpoche thought that, well, having a piece of cloth from such a high teacher might make a wonderful memento to keep. As soon as he thought that, Khenpo Gangshar gave Rinpoche a piece of the cloth. This was one reason Rinpoche gained confidence in Khenpo Gangshar. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche stated that after Khenpo Gangshar's teaching at that time, all the monks present were visibly changed, having seemingly become more compassionate and gentle. And there is more.

The great teacher Chogyam Trungpa was also present for these teaching by Khenpo Gangshar and considers him his main teacher. He personally told this story to my teacher concerning Khenpo Gangshar:

Khenpo Gangshar had been invited by Trungpa Rinpoche to teach at his monastery Surmang Dutsi Til in Kham (eastern Tibet), which he did. At one point Khenpo Gangshar became very ill and died. As is the Tibetan custom with high lamas, Khenpo Gangshar died in meditation posture and was left sitting in that posture for several days before disposing of his body. Often high lamas show signs of warmth and continued presence for a number of days following their death and a kind of vigil is kept.

Chogyam Trungpa kept such a vigil with the body of Khenpo Gangshar for several days, separated only by a very thin cloth curtain. Every once in a while, Trungpa Rinpoche would peek behind the curtain to see if the body of Khenpo Gangshar had collapsed from the meditation posture or was still in it. As mentioned this went on for some days.

At some point Trungpa noticed that a puff of air somehow moved the curtain, so he peeked behind to curtain to see what had happened to the corpse. At that moment the eyes of Khenpo Gangshar suddenly opened and there he was staring out at Trungpa. Khenpo Gangshar had come back to life.

Of course this was amazing. When he had regained consciousness Khenpo Gangshar described that after death, while in the bardo, he had been visited by two great lamas, including Jamgon Kongrul the Great, who had inspired him with this particular Mahamudra teaching and told him to return to life and share it with certain monks and others who needed to hear it at this time. And so he did.

When Khenpo Gangshar returned, he was ablaze with fervor to share this particular concise or direct method of realization with all he encountered. And that is how he happened to travel to Thrangu Monastery where Khenpo Karthar was living at the time. Khenpo Gangshar traveled and taught this special Mahamudra teaching widely throughout Kham in eastern Tibet just before the Chinese invasion.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche then explained that after some years, Khenpo Gangshar stopped giving this particular teaching and once again became the person he was before he first died. He did not mention the special teaching any longer. That is the story and this from my memory of this last weekend, so I hope I have not missed anything essential. Why relate this?

I share this with my Facebook dharma readers just to point out how very, very special this particular teaching was to hear. It not only was absolutely concise, but it was direct to the point of being almost incendiary. It condensed an enormous amount of dharma training or teaching into very few words, words that struck at the heart of confusion and made clear what each of us

could do or have to do to become more aware – to wake up.

I won't attempt to paraphrase the teaching itself, only to say I have never experienced a teaching like it and I believe that many present would probably agree with me. It makes me want to wake up out of whatever confusion I am tolerating and just be present. That is about all I can say for now.