Glimpses of Mahamudra
An Online Course on the Tantric Teachings of Chögyam Trungpa
Taught by Judith L. Lief

Talk One: Maintaining the View

JUDY: Well, this is the beginning—the beginning of our study together of glimpses of *mahamudra*, or the practice instructions of the Vidyadhara, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. This is actually a fourth retreat here, so we're actually able to talk about this topic in a beautiful setting, and also within a broader setting of the many people, invisible, online folks, who I'd like to acknowledge as well, although they don't exist yet. [*Laughter*] Or maybe they do, but they're doing something else right now.

It's rather intimidating to be talking about a topic such as mahamudra. It is the essential heart-blood teachings of the Kagyü lineage, and it is the heart of what the Vidyadhara presented to his students in his teaching in North America. Today I wanted to give a little bit of background and a little bit on the view of mahamudra.

Mahamudra is a Sanskrit term. *Maha* can mean "big" or "great"; *mudra* can mean "gesture" or "seal" or "symbol." It has many meanings. But briefly, *mahamudra* means "great symbol," (00:02:00) and we'll be talking about that, in many ways, over the course of this week.

There are a couple of lineages that come together in the mahamudra tradition, and it's really interesting to begin first by acknowledging the great honor and blessing to receive these teachings, but also to get a sense of two main streams that come together in the mahamudra tradition. One is called the "long lineage," and one is called the "short lineage." I'm not quite sure why. Many teachers trace mahamudra back to the early *mahasiddhas* of India, in particular to a famous mahasiddha known as Saraha. That's one lineage.

One thing I love about mahamudra is when you look into the origins, you see they're actual, real people—real people like us—and, in many styles, many types that were attracted or longed deeply or were willing to completely disrupt their lives in search of wisdom, in search of understanding and realization. Even better, they started out confused and made many, many mistakes along the way. They were real. They were genuine. I can relate to them, kind of. [*Laughter*]

Siddha just means "realized"—realized, (00:04:00) having attained spiritual powers of some sort. The highest siddha is the realization of wisdom, the attainment of complete nonconceptual, direct understanding of the nature of reality. There were lots of siddhas, and there's a style of the siddha lineage of noninstitutionalization: most of the stories of the mahasiddhas were somebody . . . Joe Schmo

decides to go look for a teacher, and they wander around and go through many adventures, and somehow they end up encountering a teacher, who then instructs them. The instruction is very individual, personal, human, from one person to another, and it took many forms. It tended to be in poetic form, or in the form of gestures, or in the form of creating situations. It wasn't a systematic presentation, but it was an evocative style of teaching. Working with whatever the student brought, the teacher would create the situation needed for that student to awaken.

The other thing about the mahasiddhas is that they had active lives. They were doing things. They had jobs. Many of them were like working-class people. It wasn't a philosophical or a kind of academic quest; it was a quest much deeper than that, coming out (00:06:00) of realizations of the difficulty of life—the need to change, the raw quality of life. There was such a yearning, such a yearning for wisdom, that these early explorers (this Indian siddha tradition) were willing to put themselves through harsh discipline; upsetting, weird situations; challenging, enigmatic teachings and stick with it—stick with it—because of having some kind of glimpse. Some kind of glimpse drew them forward, some kind of glimpse of reality.

Sometimes mahamudra is talked about just very simply as seeing things as they are—seeing things as they are. The implication, of course, is that we don't (and I'll talk more about that); but in the frozen structure of our emotional mind/heart/body, there are little breaks, little cracks in the system where a little bit of insight comes through. And that begins to haunt us. As the Vidyadhara was talking, we become haunted because we have the pain of seeing those gaps close up; then we're back in our regular old world, and it really sucks even more than it did before. [*Laughter*] It's like if you're used to being in a slum, it's fine with you, until you visit your friend in a mansion. Next thing you think, "Wait a minute. Something's missing here." (00:08:00)

Saraha happened to be an arrow maker—he worked with an arrow maker, a woman. That was his job. That's why he's called "Saraha the Arrow Maker." Other mahasiddhas had other jobs. They ground sesame oil; some of them were academic and very learned; some of them were basically like homeless people, living on the streets and eating garbage. You never knew what they were like. There was no one type. So another thing about the origins in the siddha tradition is that it completely cuts through all sorts of wimpy notions of spirituality and deluded ideas of what it is to be realized, what it is to be "holy," whatever word we want to use. If we have those ideas, we would walk right by these siddhas and never give them a glance. We'd think, "That's just a bum on the street," or "That's just a weird person." One of the mahasiddhas is known for being lazy and sleeping all the time. We'd say,

"That's a lazy bum." You wouldn't see it. Mahamudra is, how can we see more clearly? How can we not pass by, due to our preconceptions, not pass by wisdom that is being offered to us by the world?

That mahasiddha line was very much revered by the Vidyadhara. He loved to talk about Saraha and (00:10:00) tell Saraha stories. In the early days, when I first started practicing, we were always reading from the *Songs of Saraha*. We didn't really understand anything, but we listened to them a lot, and it was very much a part of the training within this tradition, in the early days.

The other lineage is the lineage that goes back to the central figure of Vajradhara. Vajradhara represents nonconceptual, direct understanding, the inseparable union of wisdom and compassion, that which cannot be put into any words. So that's why he's a picture. (It can't really be put into a picture either, but at least they're trying.) It's said the real origin of this other lineage stream is the indescribable, essence of awakening. So you could see that as an origin, where everything comes from, or you could see that as really the undercurrent of all the surface activities that are involved in following a path.

Again, from that initial awakening of mind, that lineage became visible in real people, a series of real people, that traditionally are described as the originators of the Kagyü tradition. The first were Indian masters, so there's a link there (00:12:00) with the mahasiddhas. Tilopa was a boy tending his goats or something—whatever he was tending, goats or sheep or cows—and his story is that he had a dream or a vision while he was out in the field: a traditional story, encountering a magical hag-like figure, a wakeup-call figure, which led him to go on his quest. That was his story. The next person in the lineage, Naropa, was totally different: a very accomplished—accomplished—professor at Nalanda University, a very refined character. So you have your Tilopa, who ends up being the bum on the street, eating fish guts, and then somehow, the very refined character who studies with him, or Naropa. Those are the Indians, and then finally you have a Tibetan.

Then you have Marpa. Marpa is the transition, the link, between the Indian tradition and what became known as Tibetan Buddhism. Marpa was a farmer, quite grumpy, beer drinker, family guy, and a brilliant translator all rolled into one—so yet another lifestyle.

I don't want to belabor the point, but I want to make clear that this tradition, at its heart, (00:14:00) is not about being a particular kind of person. It's not about being spiritual. It's not about joining some kind of club. It's not about finding some better way to be. It's about looking directly into your own experience and working with the particularities of that experience, not in generalities.

There are many ways that mahamudra is presented. Some people present it totally as its own thing, as its own school. I met students who said, "I don't practice vajrayana; I practice mahamudra." I

was taken aback when I heard that. These are good students. It was Traleg Rinpoche students, and I thought, "Huh, that's food for thought." Many teachers view mahamudra as particularly suited to the modern age, to Westerners. And it's not like vajrayana in a lot of ways, or aspects. It doesn't require much in the way of rituals. It does not require that people go around doing *sadhanas* and *pujas* and ringing bells and *dorjes* and all that kind of stuff. You don't even necessarily need a shrine or anything; you just need to get down to bare bones and look at your experience directly. Some people don't like forms, don't like rituals and that kind of thing, and that simple approach would be a perfect way of presenting mahamudra to such a person. (00:16:00) And knowing that, it's helpful for when we actually do rituals and we more elaborate practices that we not forget the core point and get lost in the forms, but stick with the essence.

So I wanted you to know how the Vidyadhara presented mahamudra, his particular way of presenting it, and know that there are many ways. It's a very vast tradition. The Vidyadhara presented mahamudra within the context of vajrayana—in fact, within the context of the three-*yana* tradition. He presented it as the pinnacle of realization of the lower tantra, of the Kagyü tradition, and he equated it with a yana, one of the tantric yanas, called *anuttarayoga*, "none higher yoga." He joined the metaphor of the nine yanas, which is more from a Nyingma tradition, with the Kagyü understanding. He presented it as the epitome of the Kagyü understanding, lower tantra, and then he went on to talk about *maha ati* in terms of the Nyingma tradition, and the highest realization within that tradition. As a holder of both, he talked in different ways, but he tended to (00:18:00) to place the ati teachings as a further development from mahamudra.

Some teachers see mahamudra andmaha ati as just different methodologies for doing the same thing. Some people, of course, being humans, have "this is better" or "that's better" and all that, but who cares about that? The powerful thing about the Vidyadhara's presentation, from my perspective, is that he placed such an emphasis on preparing the ground so that the mahamudra could be really experienced in the way it is meant to be.

The problem with mahamudra teachings, if one could use that word, is that—they're so simple, they're so direct, they're so based on experience, they can only be pointed to inadequately with words—is that they're easy to misunderstand. It is easy to think we actually get it when we don't: very, very easy, because we're very smart and we're very verbal and very conceptual people. We hear something about the nature of mind, and we hear it and can try to use our rational mind to capture that, but it can't be captured in that way, so it's kind of difficult. The Vidyadhara really emphasized, you have to get grounded in sitting practice to have even a chance of really understanding this. You have to place

it in a context of the (00:20:00) compassion and wisdom and training in the mahayana way in order to have even a chance of understanding it.

The other thing about mahamudra which I think can be challenging in the West: if you sometimes just read about various mahamudra practices and exercises, it can seem just like fiddling around with little mental games. Why would you do that? How would it benefit? The world is on fire. Why would you spend time doing that? So placing it within the context of strong determination and aspiration to actually help this suffering world is really, really important.

Mahamudra focuses on how we perceive altogether, at the most core level. It focuses on questioning what is the nature of mind, what is the nature of phenomena, and what is their relationship? And it starts from the glimpse or the meditative or human realization of the sky-like nature of the mind. That's the starting point: the sky-like nature of the mind: not the figuring out mind, not the "I'm smart and you're dumb" mind, (00:22:00) not any particular type of mind. It's like the sky. Like the sky, you look at things and there's no limit; there's no boundaries. It's completely pure and open and spacious: space, space of mind. A lot of times, mind is seen as a calculator or a functionary that kind of keeps us on track and all that, and this is like going down, down, down below the whole thing and throughout the whole thing. Within the whole thing there's this idea of vast, clear space.

Mahamudra raises the question of awareness too. It challenges us to connect with a quality of awareness that isn't here or there. It's not ours, and it's not someone else's, and it's not something given to us or something that's lost. It's not created or built up by studying hard, and you don't lose it by being forgetful. It's a kind of pervasive awareness. The Vidyadhara pointed to that in the talk as well—a pervasive awareness. It doesn't come from anywhere. It doesn't go anywhere. It's the nature of that clear sky.

There's a sense of the beginning point of mahamudra. Most teachers, including the Vidyadhara, emphasize holding a certain view, (00:24:00) not forgetting what you're doing, not forgetting who you are. When you have a tiny little glimpse of who you are, remember. Hold onto that. You could say, "Well, that's weird. We're not supposed to hold onto things in Buddhism; we're not grasping onto this and that." In fact, you're supposed to hold this view. But this view, you can't really hold it. There's nothing to hold, but you better hold on to it, or you're not holding the view. There's a sense of collapse that often happens, collapse. That's what happens when we don't hold the view: our minds shrink. Our being shrinks. It collapses, congeals, solidifies. My mother used to tell me, "Don't make faces like that. Your face will freeze that way." It's sort of like we do that with our minds. We scrunch down, and then

they stay that way. There's a quality in the mahamudra of noticing the scrinching down and—*phew!*—opens out. Scrinch down and—*phew!*—opens out. So we work with that, among other things.

I wanted to do a couple of readings to give a sense of two important aspects of being able to glimpse—see—things as they are. It's really simple. There are two sides: (00:26:00) (1) we do see things that aren't there; (2) we don't see what is there. That's fundamental mahamudra teaching. We don't see what's actually going on; we do see what's not going on. There's a lot of direct exploration of how we perceive things. We perceive in generalities and labels. That's how we perceive: generalities and labels. Basically, you could say we perceive a world that we made up, and then that reflects back to us, and then we take it to be solid and real. Meanwhile, it's like the clear, open sky is floating by: "Hello! Hello! Here I am." We don't see it at all.

Since Saraha is credited as the originating figure of the whole thing, I have two short quotes from him. It also gives you a sense of the style of teaching. He's teaching in the form of poems and songs, short little things.

This one is about seeing what is not there, the first side: "The ignorant press their eyes and see one lamp as two. Like this, in mind's nature, where seer and seen are not two, alas, the mind appears as two things." That's the first. Again, it always comes (00:28:00) back to perceiver and perception: you and the phenomenal world. Then: "are not two." So that's another theme in terms of the view we'll be working with: the complete inseparability of you and phenomena, perceiver and perception with not a tiniest bit of difference. There is no way that you can pull anything out of the fabric of the total reality of this very moment. That's a first one. You can see, they don't spell out. There is a systematic approach to teaching, a systematized approach to mahamudra, but this is a poetic approach. They're not totally separate, but somewhat.

This second quote is about not seeing what is there (the other was seeing what's not there). We are not seeing what is there. (As though we weren't messed up already.) "Although many lamps are lit throughout the house, those with no eyes to see remain in darkness. Like this, though spontaneous wisdom is all-pervasive and nearby, before the ignorant it is far, far away." That's not seeing what is there. I think that notion that for the ignorant it is far, far away, is very close to the notion that any kind of realization has to be for very special people, (00:30:00) for other people. It seems so special, so distant, so unreachable, often. We get discouraged and think there's no way. It's far, far away. I don't see it; nothing's happening. I sat two days and nothing happened. It's pretty far away. Maybe if I sit one more day, I'll get one day closer. But it's been said, "You don't get any closer, sorry to say." That's the bad news. But you don't get any further away, either. That's the good news. You're not going anywhere.

The whole notion of the path is different, at this point. It's not exactly trying to get anywhere, and it connects so much with the ground.

Another thread that was so powerfully presented by the Vidyadhara is the notion of overcoming, cutting, spiritual materialism, at all more and more subtle levels. It all has to do with fantasy, that there's some other place to get to, and our unwillingness to actually be where we are, and our blindness to seeing that as expression of empty, spontaneous wisdom of mind, displayed right here for us.

When the mahamudra teachings developed over time in Tibet, there were a lot of teachers who took these kind of (00:32:00) wild and crazy siddha expressions and put them into forms to help practitioners relate to this material. I think there was a realization that not everyone heard one stanza from Saraha and got it right away—that a lot of people needed to do a little bit more work. So that's a practical side. We'll talk more about that. It gets down to most mahamudra texts focusing on the subtleties of *shamatha* and the subtleties of *vipassana* in particular as clear seeing, as a tool for awakening the prajna to be able to see through ego and ego's projections.

There are many, many texts, with very detailed, step-by-step ways of looking at things. Yet, even people within that tradition, people like Gampopa, who was fairly by the books, known as a by-the-books kind of guy . . . On the side, he was teaching in more of the mahasiddha style, I was told. (I wasn't there.) [*Laughter*] I heard people were a little suspect about him.

And in terms of the Vidyadhara, he was doing both. He was very systematic, as you can see, going back again to step by step, preparing the ground, training people, getting them to the point where they can flash this (00:34:00) direct experience. At the same time, he was working in the ways that the mahasiddha tradition describes: creating situations, challenging people in various ways, working with the variety of individual styles in terms of the forms of their livelihood and the forms of their particular, major *kleshas*, et cetera, in a way that could awaken very unique individuals, as opposed to everybody going through one particular way. Just like the mahasiddhas, he taught people by having them build things, putting them in situations they didn't know anything about and seeing what happened, appearing in unusual ways, like Milarepa.

There's a famous Milarepa story that gives really the heart of the quality of mahamudra teachings, so I'm going to tell it. There're a lot of Milarepa stories about working with his particular student, Rechungpa, who was really difficult and ornery and pretty much kept screwing up, one way or another, all the time. So Milarepa presented various challenges to get Rechungpa to snap out of it. It was difficult—he told many, many stories about it. In one of the stories, Rechungpa and Milarepa were

walking along, and they came to a big plain, and suddenly there was a big hailstorm—(00:36:00) a huge hailstorm. Rechungpa was like, "Oh my God, this hailstorm!" Then he looked around, and Milarepa wasn't there. He thought, "Where did he go?" And it's said Milarepa was hiding inside a yak horn. There had been a yak horn lying on the field; they fall off. Milarepa went inside the horn, so he was fine; no hail was hitting him, and meanwhile he was enjoying seeing Rechungpa getting battered by hail outside.

People asked Trungpa Rinpoche about this story. "That's really weird. Does that mean he shrank or something? What's that about? It doesn't make any sense." Trungpa Rinpoche said, "The point is, Milarepa got no smaller, and the yak horn got no bigger." [*Laughter*]

In terms of the mahamudra, just as a beginning point, there's a really important word. That word is *look*—look. It's different than watching. It's different than analyzing. It's different than cultivating mindfulness or awareness. It's simple, and it's direct, and in the practices—we'll be doing short practices—the main practices all involve this element of looking, (00:38:00) just looking. So simple. So ordinary. So seldom done.

You could say, "Well, of course I look all the time. I see this. I see all the people all around." But you could ask yourself, "If I look at my looking, what am I actually doing?" I don't want to sound too complicated, but look. Look directly. It's ordinary, and it's profound. That's also the quality. It is not complicated. It is not distant. It is not special. It's an interesting combination, I think. Mahamudra is as simple as oatmeal but it's as charged as holding a live wire. It's both together.

That's another thing. We don't trust ordinary experience. That's another way of saying we don't see what's going on. We always want to make something somewhat special. We want to make ourselves somewhat special; we want to make our practice somewhat special; we want to get out of the ordinary. We don't want to be an ordinary schlub. We want to be something special. If our practice is nothing happening, then we think we've got to make something happen, and then we think we can manufacture something. (00:40:00)

This is connected with the very profound teachings of cool boredom. What if we didn't try to do any of that? We'd think, "Well, that would be a drag. We'd not be so special. We wouldn't be special at all!" It's like we suspect there's someone there, imaginary there, and we're like little kids saying, "Look at me. Look at me. Hey, Mom, look at me." It's a quality of wanting to be special, to be acknowledged—all of that.

It's very striking, the imagery of the world coming to you that the Vidyadhara touched on in different ways: the world can't come to us because we have all these barriers. We don't feel comfortable trusting what's right in front of our nose: the reality right in front of us. We don't trust it, so

we make something else up. That's what we do, and that's what we're looking at here. Looking. Look, look, look.

So I have a couple short quotes. One thing to point out: the heart of the section on mahamudra, where the Vidyadhara was talking about ground, path, and fruition, is a commentary on the "Song of Mahamudra," by Jamgön Kongtrül, which is in the book (00:42:00) in the back. You might want to look at that in your readings. It's in the appendix. According to Jamgön Kongtrül, "Ground mahamudra is the view: understanding things as they are." Again, that is getting beyond those two issues of seeing what is not there and not seeing what is there. Remember those two. Then there's a quote from the Vidyadhara, in terms of this special/ordinary thing. There's a lot of play between special and ordinary in mahamudra, and he says (this really challenges our usual perception, at least mine): "When the world is ordinary, it is always wonderful." "When the world is ordinary, it is always wonderful," he says. Usually, we work so hard to get *out* of the ordinary world to make something wonderful happen.

Okay, actually, I'm going to do a different order. I was hoping in each of the talks in this program we could have a brief practice period in the middle—very brief, five or ten minutes max—so we'll do that, and then I'll do the concluding reading and questions, Q and A.

(recording cuts out and back in)

Practice Period

JUDY: So the first fundamental and ever-repeated (00:44:00) instruction in mahamudra is to relax. Don't try to do too much at all. Just relax, and just look at your current experience, as it is right now. Just look: any thoughts or sensations or feelings or whatever, sense perceptions. Notice any tendency to alter or edit your experience. Notice the commentaries and opinions about whatever your immediate experience might be. Notice the weird idea that you are experiencing something. (00:46:00) Look into what is that you, what is that experience.

Where is the experience? And where is the you? And where is the experiencing? At what point does an arising of a phenomenon become your experience? When does it become your experience? What experiences do you draw in? What do you push away? (00:48:00) The Vidyadhara says that experiences arise and then we edit them. And then he said, "Ditch the editor." [*Laughter*] Then, just as the chant says, "Rest simply without altering it," which is the same as ditching the editor. You cannot be too simple.

Okay, to continue, the view, again, maintaining this view—which is not really a view that you can hold onto in the usual way, like "my candidate is best"—is connected with . . . It's not a striving kind of approach, mahamudra. It's relaxed; it's playful. As Rinpoche says, there's a fresh outlook, a sense of fresh versus stale experience. All these things, if you're a mahamudra practitioner, you can observe in your thought process and in the way you go about your life: fresh or stale; (00:50:00) adult or childlike, playful. There is something called "natural relaxation." There's a Tibetan term, *pagyang*, "natural relaxations."

I think Rinpoche said once, "Relaxing your quivering nervous system" (something like that). Does anyone experience quivering nervous systems? Like all the time?

STUDENT 1: Yes.

JUDY: So relaxing that—relaxing that.

I go to this exercise class because I'm getting old and decrepit, so I have to do that torturous things. A couple weeks ago, school was out, so someone brought along a couple kids while we were doing the class. On one side of the class, there are all of us like in synchrony with this instructor yelling at us, "Do this! Do that!" We're gritting our teeth. It's like just trying to endure and get to the end of the class. Then on the other side of the room were these kids, and they were running around, and they were having a grand time and playing with all the equipment, getting an equal amount of exercise, if not more, completely delighted, and I'm thinking, "God, that's just like the way it is." [*Laughter*] That just sums it up, you know? [*Laughter*] Striving, striving, trying to survive, trying to not degenerate even faster, and then they're just like . . . It was great.

I think the image of (00:52:00) playful delight is, again, part of this mahamudra. It is a feeling; it is an appreciation; it is a playfulness—at the same time, deadly serious, in a very groundless kind of way, deadly serious, groundless way. While there's talk of joy and delight and playfulness and natural, spontaneous wisdom arising, at the same time, there are stories of Milarepa building one tower after another and it getting beaten up and then having to build a next tower and then a next tower—hard, manual labor. So there's a quality of ordinariness there, too: hard, manual labor. But having done so, you can relax. It's like this place. There is a lot of hard, manual labor to create this space, both what we've done and other people who built the building and bought the land and painted and all that, and all the people who set up the shrine room: very, very ordinary hard, manual labor. And now having done so, they could relax—they could relax.

I want to read just this one section from the ground mahamudra, because it's so essential for going forward. It's talking about (00:54:00) these glimpses of reality and what to do with them, and it's connected with the topic of nowness, which came up also in the Vidyadhara's talk, and which is a very, very, very misunderstood term, often. It's called "Resting in Nowness."

> The natural, ordinary state has to be cultivated and worked with in three ways. The first is by not preparing too much. It is by cutting off our preconceptions from the past. The second way is by not expecting a greater flash. It is by cutting off our preconceptions of the future. The third way is by not holding onto our present flash experience. It is by cutting preconceptions of the present. We simply rest our mind, this very ordinary mind of nowness.

I think a lot of times people hear about cutting off all the arising from past—when you look at your meditation practice, how much is regurgitating stuff from your past? A lot of times people talk about not dwelling in all sorts of fantasies and plans for the future when you practice. But not so many talk about cutting off preconceptions of the present. A lot of people say, "Yeah, I'm in the present now," and then they get attached to "now." I think that's connected with the ordinary/special thing, (00:56:00) the feeling that if you can cut those things off and be present for a while, that's special. Here it says, "Forget that, you can't be attached to that either." Just the whole thing goes, right?

Going forward, it says,

> This resting of the mind can be achieved by natural techniques. The posture that you've developed through shamatha discipline, the awareness techniques that you've been using, such as following the breath, still apply. As a result of such techniques, you begin to notice there are moments of gap, moments of fresh outlook, moments of letting go, moments of a natural sense of existence. There are moments of pagyang, or "natural relaxation." At those points, you perceive glimpses of mahamudra. That is the practice.

That's another interesting point. You have these techniques. We're all doing just basic techniques; you never change the basic technique. But it organically—he talked about organic as well, last night, organically—develops in certain ways. But all the pointers to mahamudra experience that he mentions are times when we forget to try to make something happen in practice, when we lose, even for an instant, the second sense of "I am practicing." We (00:58:00) forget sometimes that "I am practicing," and it's just practice. Instead of "I am riding the breath," it's just breath. Instead of "I am being aware," it's just awareness. From time to time, we tangle ourselves up by our own efforts to be good and do the right thing and practice well and all that, and there are times when it drops away—that drops away. But it only happens because of the discipline preceding it. And it's uncomfortable and a raw

kind of space. Even going back into early, early times when Rinpoche talked about the rising of vipassana from shamatha, he said it can feel as though you're messing up your practice. You can feel it as irritation or as some kind of undermining of your good discipline. So it can have many different feeling tones.

I think that's enough for a starter, and we could have time for some stories or questions or dialogue.

STUDENT 2: I wonder if you could say something about the name *mahamudra*. What is the symbol? I don't quite get what the symbol is. What is it a symbol of?

JUDY: Mhm. We're going to talk a lot about that in a future talk, but briefly, it's that (01:00:00) all experience is stamped by this, by the same qualities, which are emptiness and luminosity. The notion of symbol, which we'll explore much more is, in this case, a very, very different notion of symbol than our usual approach. We have a symbol of something; we think, "This is a symbol of that . . .[Ponting to thangka of Vajradhara] . . .that's a symbol of awakened mind." This is a symbol of awakened mind. [pointing to questioner] That's a symbol of Robert. [*Laughter*] There's a sense of a symbol of something. In the mahamudra, the symbol and what's symbolized are the same.

STUDENT 2: Right, that's what's confusing, because symbol is sort of the basis of conceptuality and language, but that's not what mahamudra is about.

JUDY: Would you say that again?

STUDENT 2: Symbol is sort of the basis of conceptuality, having an idea. You have a kind of model, or. Language is all symbols, but mahamudra seems to be beyond that, so it seems odd to say symbol.

JUDY: Well, it's a broader sense of symbol. It's kind of like WYSIWYG. What you see is what you get. There is nothing behind it. There is nothing outside it. There's nothing underlying (01:02:00) it. It's like immediate expression of the entirety.

STUDENT 2: So it doesn't transcend symbolism.

JUDY: It doesn't transcend anything.

STUDENT 2: It's a symbol of itself, basically.

JUDY: There's no itself. It's a great symbol—a great symbol, mahamudra. There's one genuine—you couldn't even say one, actually—gesture, that display of the essential nature of things, and it's completely ordinary, completely right there, and there's nothing behind it. Nobody's making it, creating it; it's not pointing to somewhere other. There's nowhere to point. We'll talk more about it.

STUDENT 3: Since I just started this path, the idea is that you sit and you don't expect anything. Nothing is going to happen. But I expect a lot of things. I expect to be more calm, to be—

JUDY: Yeah, you expect a lot of things.

STUDENT 3: A lot of things. And now there is another thing to expect—[*laughter*] forget that I'm practicing. So now I know that I need to . . . all the discipline . . . There is going to be a moment, so there is something else to expect, so how to harmonize both things (01:04:00) and how . . . Yes, how to harmonize both?

JUDY: Well, here's where light touch is so important. You'll notice expectations all the time. They seem to never stop, at least for me. Even expecting there to be lunch next: you expect that. But begin with seeing the kind of clutter and the way that what we think is important is never here. It was there or somewhere ahead, never here. It's like that math thing where you get closer and closer and closer and never reach the end . . . What's that called?

STUDENT 4: Zeno's paradox.

JUDY: Yeah, something like that. You get closer and closer; you never get there. That's what we do for ourselves. We set up things, we never get there, and we miss. We fixate on certain things, and then we miss everything else we're not fixating on at that moment. Some people, their main preconceptions are of the past: they've decided how things are, and then everything, amazingly, becomes like that, because they decided that's the way they were. Other people are really future-focused, striving, striving, striving to something that they think is going to make their life better. It's really hard to stay with your life just

the way it is right now and see that it's complete—you don't have to look (01:06:00) beyond that. It's paradoxical, because people then work really hard and they do things like practice and study and things like that. Again, it's maintaining the view, knowing that you're doing that as a way of cutting through those preconceptions, rather than just trying to figure out some strategy to make it happen.

At one point—it was a slightly different context, so I'm not sure totally relevant—the Vidyadhara said something really shocking. It was slightly in more the ati teachings, but I think it's relevant here. It was at the Crazy Wisdom seminar that he gave in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and at one point he said, "All these practices and study and stuff that you're all doing, it's just to keep you occupied until you actually just wake up." [*Laughter*] So that was kind of a shocker. You say, "Well, okay." I think he was trying to point out that things are more immediate than we realized. We think so little of ourselves and little of the world around us.

[*inaudible*]

STUDENT 5: In this tradition, there's such an emphasis on having a teacher. I was wondering, when you were talking about the gaps in everyday life, and maybe even in the early stages of practice, (01:08:00) if it's possible for someone to have a mahamudra experience but they just didn't know it was that, or is there this necessity of instruction and a teacher?

JUDY: Mhm. There's a whole talk on that, but I think that goes in the category of not seeing what is there, and the teacher role, traditionally, in mahamudra is just pointing out something that we didn't notice, being able to see what is there, which is the awakened, luminous, emptiness quality of reality. That's the role of a teacher. Sometimes the Vidyadhara referred to it as . . . Actually it should be called "devotion mahamudra" because it's so based on opening of the heart, not just a mental thing, and that usually comes about by connection to a teacher. But I think, again, it's an area of great preconceptions that we have of student and teacher and what the teacher does. I think we all hope the teacher will just do it for us. I do, anyway. That didn't work—the teacher would just lay it on you. But all they do is just point to something, and the rest is up to you. The Vidyadhara said that many, many times. "It's up to you, sweetheart," he would say.

Yes?

STUDENT 6: I'd like to ask about dropping. When you gave the pointers on meditation (01:10:00) in your first talk here, the summarized meditation, at the end you said, "We can just also drop it." You said, "We

could even drop the whole retreat," and everybody laughed, but then that was the end of the discussion about dropping it.

JUDY: We dropped that discussion. [*Laughter*]

STUDENT 6: But now you've revisited it with a lot more detail, and you said these three things: It's not I am practicing; it's just practicing. It's not I am riding the breath, it's just breathing. And it's not I am aware; it's just awareness. So when we come to that point about the dropping, it's not "I'm dropping it."

JUDY: No.

STUDENT 6: Is it self-existent dropping? [*Laughter*]

JUDY: It just drops.

STUDENT 6: So the point would be to acknowledge that and respect it, rather than to get upset by it or something.

JUDY: Well, I think it's to appreciate.

STUDENT 6: Appreciate.

JUDY: The problem is, then, that we tend to then try to make that happen. We say, "Oh, huh, yeah, that was cool. I actually wasn't so heavy-handedly there doing stuff. It was such a relief not to be me practicing." But, of course, then we go right back.

STUDENT 6: Well, then you say, "I gotta do (01:12:00) this again sometime."

JUDY: Yeah, and then of course that makes it worse.

STUDENT 6: Yes. That's bringing it back to "I am."

JUDY: Yeah. We'll talk more about that, but even in the hinayana instructions, which are filled with mahamudra instructions, you just drop that experience. The experience of dropping, you drop that. But you touch it first. There's a touch and go—we'll talk more about that. It's good to recognize there's a potential for not doing what we do and having much more kind of freedom and spaciousness of mind. It's good to notice that, and it's also good to notice how then we try to create space ourselves; we try to make space, and you can't do that.

STUDENT 6: Is it related to the concept of "I threw it all away"?

JUDY: "I threw it all away"?

STUDENT 6: Yeah, throwing it all away. Threw it away. Threw it all away.

JUDY: No, it threw you away. [*Laughter*] That's more like it. There's no "it," exactly, but it's just thrown away, like that.

STUDENT 6: Thrown away.

JUDY: Yeah. It's great. In Nova Scotia, they talk about people from away, so we could talk about people thrown away. [*Laughter*] No, but it's very much about that. We try so hard to create something in order to drop it. The practice, in a way, is we're trying really hard to do something that we need to completely drop. It goes back to Carmen's question as well. (01:14:00) Isn't that a funny and profound way of going about things?

So I think that's it. I created the sequence of classes to respect the way in which the Vidyadhara presented the mahamudra, so we're going right back, combing our hair from the root to the hinayana techniques, mahayana, and then more on mahamudra, the path. This is more about just a general view and introduction, and again, it's not that we're changing the techniques of the practice, but we're working with it from a different perspective: holding the view, not getting caught in the form and missing the essential point would qualify as holding the view, I think.

So thank you all. Should we dedicate the merit?

GENERAL: By this merit, may all attain omniscience. May it defeat the enemy, wrongdoing, from the stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death. From the ocean of samsara may I free all beings. By the confidence of the Golden Sun of the Great East, may the lotus garden of the Rigden's wisdom bloom. May the dark ignorance of sentient beings be dispelled. May all beings enjoy profound, brilliant glory.