

Finding Freedom

Texts from the Theravadin, Mahayana
and Dzogchen Buddhist traditions

introduced and translated by
James Low



Wandel Verlag berlin 2019



Khordong Commentary Series XIII

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ISBN: 978-3-942380-27-0

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published by edition khordong at **WANDEL VERLAG** berlin

First edition, 2019

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Printed by SDL in Berlin, EU on FSC certified 100% acid-, wood- & chlorine-free, biodegradable, recyclable, long-lasting paper, conforming to ANSI standard.

We are supporting NatureFund for planting trees: Blue Planet Certificate 105WN

Cover design and layout by Andreas Ruft, Berlin.

edition khordong is the publication series established by the german non-profit Khordong e.V., inspired by the late Kyabjé Chimed Rigdzin Rinpoche (1922-2002), published by **WANDEL VERLAG** berlin.

Please visit our websites:

Web: khordong.net tsagli.de wandel-verlag.de simplybeing.co.uk

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Wandel Verlag berlin 2019

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PREFACE

THE OCEAN OF BUDDHADHARMA, the Buddha's teaching and practice, is vast. So many views and paths, such richness and variety of styles and methods – yet they all focus on the task of helping us awaken from the sleep of our assumptions. We are not who we think we are. The true depth and wonder of our potential is hidden from us by our own busy activity through which we seek to maintain the illusions we believe in.

This book offers three approaches to awakening. The first section, *Fighting the Good Fight*, is concerned with how we can commit ourselves to the mindful activity of renouncing our familiar and often comforting limiting habits. Here the orientation is towards leaving our familiar ego-home and going on a journey to seek something which seems only to be available elsewhere. By renouncing samsara we hope to gain entry into nirvana and enjoy the happiness which is free of all suffering.

The second section, *Mistaken Identities*, is concerned with how we can commit ourselves to developing the honesty and courage necessary for facing the karmic consequences of previous actions arising from our limiting habits and the many transient mistaken identities which we have adopted. Here the orientation is towards recognising how our self-centredness has harmed others and made us blind to our interdependency. By accepting that we have been the cause of so much suffering we see that we must turn to face every difficult situation without self-pity or blame.

For this we need the courage of the transcendent qualities of generosity, morality, patience, diligence, concentration and wisdom and especially the mental clarity necessary for maintaining the view of the emptiness of all phenomena.

The third section, *Sweet Simplicity*, is concerned with how we can relax and release ourselves from all limiting habits and thus effortlessly abide in our limitless intrinsic freedom. Here the orientation is towards awakening to the actuality of our mind as it is. For this to occur we need to receive the transmission which is grounded in non-conceptual clarity. We cannot think our way out of samsara since samsara is itself constructed out of thought. We seek only 'early retirement' from the burden of the ceaseless activity of maintaining delusion. By letting go of our central role as the indispensable master of ceremonies of our life drama we find ourselves in the intrinsic freedom of our true home, our unborn mind which cannot be found by seeking yet is always freely available.

These three sections are quite different in tone yet are harmonious and compatible in their underlying message of freedom. The Buddha offered all he was to help us and if we offer ourselves fully to the path then we will awaken with the same smile he offers us.

The texts were translated from Tibetan by me with the guidance of CRLama. They have recently been revised for this book. Barbara Terris typed many revisions. Without her collaboration, support and untiring efforts this book would have remained asleep in the bundles of my aging papers.

May we all find the path we seek!

James Low, 2019

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

THE ROOT OF SUFFERING is alienation from our source and this suffering is maintained by non-attention to how our mind actually is. The fact of this non-attention is obscured by our ongoing activity of imagining how we are in ways that conceal rather than reveal what is simply present. When we do not awaken to our own mind as it is but rely on beliefs that we have inherited from our families and cultures we continue in the delusions these beliefs generate. If we can catch a glimpse of how erroneous our common beliefs are then two paths open up. The first indicates that there is a lot to be done and therefore we should strive. The second indicates that we suffer due to succumbing to the illusion of lacking the direct non-dual presence of our own awareness and therefore we should relax. When we seem to only have concepts to rely on in order to work out how we are, we can either avoid the issue altogether, which leaves us in delusion, or we can seek information. However the accumulation of such information presented as 'knowledge' offers us only concepts about our idea of our mind. This indirect, mediated relationship generates cover-up rather than revelation.

In daily life the mind itself seems invisible and somewhat irrelevant and so is easily taken for granted. We have a mind – of course we do. And that is that. For most of us most of the time our concern is more with our personality and our experience of ourselves as we change and develop with the world around us. What is happening for me, to me,

as me, seems to be who I am. And since these happenings are ever-changing there is always something new to identify with, reflect on, or respond to.

From the Buddhist point of view this way of experiencing life is unlikely to generate much happiness since it is inseparable from our sense that our personal identity is not as stable as we would like it to be. Insecurity, anxiety, and uncertainty feed both our sense of alienation and our longing for a reliable sense of belonging. The Buddha's teaching points the way to a different sense of oneself, one that is less dependent on happenstance and reactivity.

The Buddhas' illuminating insight is liberating if it is lived. It provides a path to liberation if understood and aligned with. But someone hearing his teaching for the first time may find it radical and shocking. We all have good days and bad, yet if we are lucky then life seems basically okay. However the Buddha indicates that we feel this because at the moment we have a comfortable cell in the prison of samsara.

Causal factors lead us to be born in different realms with different kinds of bodies and different abilities and qualities. As specific causal factors are exhausted new ones arise through which we find ourselves in a new form with no recollection of what went before. When we see our existence in terms of transience and limitation then the ideas of liberation, freedom and enlightenment become much more meaningful. Buddhism is not an add-on to the life we have but offers an awakening to a new vision of our potential.

This book has three sections, each addressing the question of what our mind is and how it functions. The Buddha taught many different views or re-orientations to help us loosen up from our habitual fixations. He was very aware of the rich diversity of beliefs and temperaments that sentient beings manifest through variations in interest in and access to their environment, levels of volatility and impulsivity, degrees of finesse in embodied motility and so on. To simply present one 'truth' and hope that everyone would find it meaningful was not the Buddha's way. Uniting wisdom and compassion he revealed many thousands of pathways towards calmness and clarity, relaxation and creativity, profundity and connectivity. A short book like this can only touch on some key themes. However, if we let them, they can act as a mirror, allowing us see more clearly who and how we actually are, free of the disguising identities we habitually adopt.

The first section, *Fight the Good Fight*, contains a key text belonging to the Theravadan tradition of Buddhism. Here the mind as we ordinarily experience it is understood as a tendency to believe in the inherent existence, or individual reality, of ourselves and all other sentient beings. Holding on to the idea that I am someone and you are someone else, I have to work out if I like you (as I take you to be) or do not like you. Our mind, seemingly organised by and around our ego self, is concerned with winning and losing, with getting more of the pleasant and less of the unpleasant. This entails a Sisyphus-like effort since all situations, as complex, compounded events, are unstable and impermanent and therefore have to be repaired and recreated again and again. Sometimes impulses arise in us which undermine all that we have established and sometimes it is outer events which hurl us into unpredictable states of becoming.

The text presented in this first section is THE DHAMMAPADA which sets out clearly the importance of ethics as the necessary frame of reference if we wish our experience to be fulfilling. Negative actions lead to negative consequences and positive actions lead to positive consequences. This may seem over-simplistic and even naïve but such a sense of the determinism inherent in the unfolding of cause and effect provides a perspective, a distance from enmeshment, that allows us to review our intentions in the light of both their short and long-term outcomes. Activity of body, voice, and mind generates its own outcomes and consequences. No other, no god or devil, is rewarding or punishing us. It is the logic of intention and enactment that drives the multiplicity of possible resultant experiences.

Who am I in this situation? What am I up to? How do I think about you? Who do I take you to be? Who do you seem to take yourself to be? If we are able to pose such questions so that they let us see our habitual identifications in a new way then more options become available. We gain a meta-vision that offers some protection against the vexations, provocations and seductions of the engulfing moment. The Buddha pointed out that suffering, limitation, disappointment and so on arise from causes and if these causes are no longer activated then suffering will end. The two key causes of suffering are i) ignoring the actuality, the how-it-is-ness, of each situation and ii) imagining that our interpretation is the simple truth. Believing what we imagine, our assumptions seem self-valid while our

ego-self's craving for something real to hang on to is pacified by being fed intense illusions.

Our minds are busy. In order to slow them down we need to cut back on our aroused involvement since desire and aversion distort and obscure the actual situation. The main Theravadan methods for such slowing are: meditation to develop undistracted focus; ethical restraint of impulses and increased attention to others as other; and engagement in analysis of our assumptions and beliefs so that we can see the deluding quality of our comforting complacency. As long as my mind seems to be simply its current content of thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations and so on there is little reflective space. Therefore these three methods of slowing are mobilised together to illuminate the possibility of letting go, of disengaging, so that new options are revealed along with a new sense of the one who may choose or not. This leads to calmness and clarity and to a fresh, mindful ease that is no longer driven by unconsidered mental events.

The second section, *Mistaken Identities*, belongs to the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism and focuses on the famous text, THE SHARP WEAPON WHEEL. This beautiful and moving text highlights the power of karma and the terrible fact that we cannot evade the consequences of our actions except by awakening from our own dualistic delusions. We have mistaken the rich display of emptiness for endless real entities and this mistaken identification will have ever-multiplying consequences if we do not recognise what has happened. When we separate self and other and act as if we were more important than others, this self-cherishing hides our own potential and blinds us to the potential of others.

Our Buddha potential, the capacity for awakening which is always already present in all beings, is our true identity. All the constructs that we hold about ourselves and others actually do the opposite of what we believe them to do. We rely on our thoughts, feelings, and sensations to show us ourselves and the world. We act on the basis that they tell us something true and dependable. But in fact they are empty constructs, delusions, obscurations, misleading fantasies which take us ever further from the simple truth of how it is. We impute a real existence to ourselves and others and also to all that we encounter. We see people, dogs, trees and so on as distinct separate entities each having their own inherent existence. This is the primary delusion of reification which arises in the absence of clarity about emptiness, the absence of inherent existence. There

is no essence or substance to anything we encounter since all phenomena are dependently arising and have no individual existence of their own.

The great scholar sage Nagarjuna sets this out clearly in chapter 18 of his *ROOT VERSES OF THE MIDDLE WAY*. Verses 2 and 3 address the absence of inherent existence or 'self' in sentient beings. Verse 9 addresses the absence of inherent existence in all phenomena.

- v. 2 *If there is no 'me' to be had
How could there be anything 'mine'?
With this pacification of 'me' and 'mine'
There is no clinging to 'me' and 'mine'.*
- v. 3 *Those who do not cling to 'me' and 'mine'
Are also without existence.
Those who do not cling to 'me' and 'mine'
See clearly and therefore do not see existents.*
- v. 9 *Unknowable by anything other; peace;
Not propounded by any propositions;
Free of thoughts; free of distinctions –
Such are the characteristics of the ungraspable.*

The sense of self, I, me, myself, the inner sense of who I am, is not our friend but our enemy. This may seem alarming. If I am not who I think I am, then who am I? Well, this might seem like a reasonable question but the very way it is framed points to our key problem. If I am not this, then I must be that. I am here, I exist, so I must be someone. If I let go of one identity, say being a child, then I have a new one, being an adult. But from the Mahayana point of view all such identities are delusions, mistakes which lead us astray, seeking to turn shadows and echoes into reliable substantial entities. Exchanging one mistake for another is no liberation from the land where mistakes are normal.

Analysis of the structure of limitation reveals that the key to freedom is to cut off all identities. Actually such identities are just identifications. They have never been real 'things' but are conventions whose status is established by shared consensus. My identity is a mental event not a material one. When this fact becomes clear, all identities, that is to say all

my beliefs and concepts about illusory appearances that I take to be real 'things', are seen to dissolve by themselves. Now I have nothing and am nothing – yet here I am! Who am I? I can't say, nor can all the Buddhas. I am nothing and yet I appear. This is the non-duality of form and emptiness which has been set out so clearly in the HEART SUTRA. This is a mystery to be lived. It is not a problem to be solved. But if you take it up as a problem you can spend/waste your whole life coming up with solutions. All such solutions are composed of thoughts, memories and so on, and when seen clearly rather than merely believed in, are revealed to be mere gossamer.

The midsection of the text invokes the powerful activity of Yamantaka, a fierce form of the Buddha. This marks the transition from the general Mahayana focused on analysis to a more dynamic Tantric mode in which the powerful presence of enlightened energy manifesting many symbols provides a new dimension free of the duality of samsara. This is appearance and emptiness redolent with the wisdom of the Buddha – a method of transformation that turns poison into enlightening elixir and limitation into the radiance of the Buddha's mind. In an instant I drop my habitual identity and become this fierce Buddha. My ordinary self and my Buddha self are both without real existence so it is not that I stop being my usual 'me' and become someone 'else'. Both are illusions like a mirage or a rainbow. The past is gone – this is a new moment, open, fresh, undeniable and yet ungraspable.

The third section, *Sweet Simplicity*, presents four short texts. The first by Tsultrim Zangpo, also known as Tulku Tsulo, offers an account of emptiness that opens the way to the Dzogchen tradition of Buddhism, the central focus of the other three texts. Tulku Tsulo highlights the importance of the ground or source. If you know where things come from then you have more sense of what they are. An orange is not an orange all by itself. Its 'orange-ness' arises from its having grown on an orange tree. When we look at our mind there is a lot going on – the arising of experience is unceasing. Yet these arisings come and go, self-arising and self-vanishing. This is not a dogma – you can look for yourself and directly gain this clarity. There is always movement, movement showing itself as object and as subject. "This is what is happening to me." That is a thought with both object and subject aspects. If we take it at face value it may seem to be a definitive statement of something real yet it also expresses the mutually

influencing coming into manifestation of an arising object-formation and a corresponding arising subject-formation. The subject is not a fixed identity or even a fixed reference point. It is part of the dialogic flow within which the notion of 'objects' and 'subjects' is merely conventional.

Yet there is presence, awareness, a lucidity within which all arisings are revealed. If we look for this presence we find nothing – the looker is empty and ungraspable, and so is all that is looked at. This reveals the lucidity of the mind as non-dual seeing, the all-revealing clarity of ungraspable awareness. Empty awareness, empty clarity, empty appearance, empty relaxed open contentment: this is the whole, the undivided, unfragmented, integral great completion. Everything is as it is. When we do not enter into duality we do not enter into judgment. When awareness shines forth free of reification it is uncontaminated by bias, by comparing and contrasting, and so the intrinsic perfection, the perfect this-ness of everything is bright and clear.

The next text is *The Evocation of Samantabhadra* which is believed to be the actual statement of the primordial Buddha. It shows clearly and in detail how the infinite dramas of the six realms of samsara are enacted within the theatre or sphere of the unborn mind. This sets the frame for Gonpo Wangyal's brief introduction to the mind as it is. This is a practice text and each sentence can be activated by sitting with it in opening presence. The concluding text by Ayu Khandro is also a brief Dzogchen practice text. It is an excellent reminder for those who have received many teachings and also functions well as a first taste of how to become aware as awareness. Here we are at the limits of language. The meaning is disclosed through participation alone. Texts such as these are often described as being 'self-secret'. Their meaning is not something that can be grasped and no amount of conceptual study can prise open the seemingly hidden, but actually evident, truth. The texts and what they point to have the indestructible vajra seal – they cannot be opened by dualising curiosity. The meaning is open and it opens to us if we open to it as it is by dropping our habit of incorporating all we find into our pre-established body of knowledge.

These three sections are not presented as items for intellectual speculation but as methods to end suffering. The first section highlights the need for calm clear consistent effort mobilised by the stick of the dangers of karma and the carrot of the hope of peace.

The second section presents similar areas of experience but in a more personal and provocative way. Feelings are now part of the path rather than merely an impediment. The vitality of the text catches us – this is about me! This is what I do and how I get lost! Passionate liberation achieved by utilising all the potential of our situation is the path set out here. The orientation has moved from the relative clarity of discerning the difference between good and bad to seeing that all that arises is empty and therefore liberating and simultaneously full of our projections and identifications and therefore imprisoning. It is not that we have to let go of these limitations in order to find freedom, for freedom does not lie somewhere else. It is by seeing the emptiness of limitation that we are free wherever we are. Emptiness is the golden key to unlock this door to nonduality. It is available everywhere yet remains hidden from the elective blind.

The third section highlights the fact that the ground and source of everything is not a god or a conceptual factory but is an empty ungraspability. This would suggest that we might simply stop grasping. Relax and release. I tie myself in knots by identifying with the idea of a self which can be tied in knots. Relax and release. Open to what is occurring. Stay open whatever is occurring. No limits. No beginning or end. Open, clear, responsive – these three inseparable modes of the mind as it is and as it always has been are the fruit we find at the end of our journey from here to Here.