Guru Padmasambhava's, *Pointing Out Instructions Given to the Old Woman*: A Commentary

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1. Guru Rinpoche's, *Pointing Out Instructions Given to the Old Woman* as discussed in this commentary

"You are surely one who has greater devotion than King Trisong Detsen. Old woman, cross your legs. Fold your legs in the vajra posture and straighten your spine. Align your spine and relax your mind. Now you listen. The Buddha has taught limitless Dharmas. I am going to teach you the very heart essence of those limitless Dharmas. Those to whom we refer to as Buddhas are actually no different from sentient beings. The only difference between Buddhas and sentient beings is that Buddhas know this Buddha nature and sentient beings do not. If you understand the nature of mind, you are a Buddha. If you do not understand it, then you are a sentient being who wanders in samsara.

In order for sentient beings to have the method which suits them according to their individual capacity, it is for this reason that the Buddha taught all of the eighty-four thousand categories of the Dharma. They are all for the purpose of helping beings to realize this pristine awareness or primordial wisdom inherent in their own mind streams. Now I am going to give to you, old woman, the very essence of these pith instructions, the very heart essence of all of these eighty-four thousand categories of Dharma. You need not have any feeling of discouragement, thinking that you are not very bright or that you have less intelligence or wisdom. You don't need to think in that way.

- If you purify the fixation to outer objects, then naturally appearances are liberated in their own place.

- If you purify the inwardly fixating mind, then mind itself is naturally liberated.
- When clear light luminosity shines forth and you recognize the true nature of your own mind, then you have recognized awareness itself as the mind of enlightenment.

If you look directly at awareness itself, then conceptual thought will be naturally liberated in its own place. Old lady, if you meditate like this, you will become a Buddha. Old Lady, if you meditate like this, you have no need for fear at the time of death. You will not have any fear. If you meditate like this, there is nothing better that you could do with this life.

Remember that your life is impermanent, and there is no telling when you will die, so you should make effort only in these pith instructions that I have taught you. You should only make effort in this. To strive in the activities of this world for your children or husband and so forth, even if you were to engage in all of these great worldly activities for thousands of years, just a single moment of recognizing the true nature of mind is of far greater meaning than all of the countless worldly activities that one could accomplish. Give up all worldly activities and simply focus on these pith instructions of mine. If you practice according to these pith instructions for the rest of your life, then Old Lady, you will have no fear at the time of death."

Herein resides,

A Brief Commentary on, Guru Rinpoche's *Pointing Out Instructions Given to the Old Woman*

Homage and prostrations to the lama and supreme deity!

2. Background of Guru Rinpoche's, *Pointing Out Instructions*

An old woman who had offered Guru Rinpoche curd and fruit during one of his retreats requested these instructions. She requested instructions that require little hardship, are easy to understand, and are very effective. Guru Rinpoche acknowledges her request and begins by praising her devotion, saying, **"You are surely one who has greater devotion than King Trisong Detsen."** Some of you may not be familiar with the life story of Guru Rinpoche, so you may not know exactly who King Trisong Detsen is. King Trisong Detsen was the king of Tibet during the time of Guru Rinpoche. He is the one who invited Guru Rinpoche to Tibet and sponsored Guru Rinpoche. He was his greatest benefactor. This king had great love for the Dharma. It was due to him and his bringing Guru Rinpoche to Tibet that the Dharma spread far and wide there.

The first thing that Guru Rinpoche taught the old woman was the importance of proper posture, the seven point posture of Vairochana. First, he said to the old woman, **"Old woman, cross your legs. Fold your legs in the vajra posture and straighten your spine. Align your spine and relax your mind."** Then he pointed his finger at the old woman and he said,

> **"Now you listen. The Buddha has taught limitless Dharmas. I am going to teach you the very heart essence of those limitless Dharmas. Those to whom we refer to as Buddhas are actually no**

different from sentient beings. The only difference between Buddhas and sentient beings is that Buddhas know this Buddha nature and sentient beings do not. If you understand the nature of mind, you are a Buddha. If you do not understand it, then you are a sentient being who wanders in samsara."

This primordial wisdom of Buddhahood, this pristine awareness of the Buddhas is possessed by all beings. But as sentient beings we simply do not recognize this intrinsic nature. Therefore, all sentient beings have the cause of Buddhahood, and even more so those beings who have the fortune of having achieved a precious human rebirth with the eighteen freedoms and endowments. They in particular have the potential to achieve Buddhahood. There is a temporary difference between Buddhas and sentient beings, but at the very basis there is no difference whatsoever. There is no one who has more or less potential for Buddhahood. It doesn't make any difference what ones present qualities are or background is, or whether one is male or female. All have equal potential for enlightenment.

Guru Rinpoche went on to say,

"In order for sentient beings to have the method which suits them according to their individual capacity, it is for this reason that the Buddha taught all of the eighty-four thousand categories of the Dharma. They are all for the purpose of helping beings to realize this pristine awareness or primordial wisdom inherent in their own mind streams. Now I am going to give to you, old woman, the very essence of these pith instructions, the very heart essence of all of these eighty-four thousand categories of Dharma. You need not have any feeling of discouragement, thinking that you are not

very bright or that you have less intelligence or wisdom. You don't need to think in that way."

Guru Rinpoche continues, saying that he is going to point out the true meaning of the enlightenment of the Buddhas in three pith statements. I will explain these three in an abbreviated fashion, and also a more extensive elaborate version. First, I will teach the abbreviated form.

3. Guru Rinpoche's Three Pith Instructions in Brief

3.1) First: **"If you purify the fixation to outer objects, then naturally appearances are liberated in their own place."**

3.2) Second: **"If you purify the inwardly fixating mind, then mind itself is naturally liberated."**

3.3) Third: **"When clear light luminosity shines forth and you recognize the true nature of your own mind, then you have recognized awareness itself as the mind of enlightenment."**

4. Commentary on the Three Pith Instructions

4.1 Commentary on the First Instruction

"If you purify the fixation to outer objects, then naturally appearances are liberated in their own place."

Regarding the first instruction, to purify the fixation to outer objects, these pith instructions are exemplified by the instructions given by Tilopa to Naropa. Tilopa said to Naropa, **"Naropa, it is not appearances themselves that bind; it is the fixating mind that binds."** The first instruction by Guru Rinpoche is the same in

meaning as these pith instructions from Tilopa to Naropa. Guru Rinpoche said, **"If you look directly at awareness itself, then conceptual thought will be naturally liberated in its own place."** A conceptual thought is naturally arising; it is self-arising and self-liberated. Without fixation to outer appearances, then there is nothing whatsoever that can bind the mind. Whatever it is that appears, there are all these appearances that are witnessed by awareness. There is earth and stones and mountains, rivers and trees, friends, brothers and sisters, parents and enemies, loved ones; all sorts of limitless phenomena appear to the mind. If there is no fixation in the mind, then the appearances themselves can not do any harm. It is fixating on these outer objects that causes the inward suffering of the mind. If there is no fixation, then the appearances are naturally liberated in their own place. When one does not grasp at outer appearances, then appearances are purified. Still, one can think, *Oh, so when appearances are purified, then they no longer manifest.* However, this is a misunderstanding. Appearances ceaselessly manifest.

They appear, yet what is purified is that which taints or seems to cause the appearances. The appearances seem to be tainted or to become tainted, but it is through the fixation and grasping mind that they appear that way. When we say appearances are purified, it is the fixation and craving toward them in the mind that is actually purified. So, it doesn't mean that appearances are exhausted, and they no longer appear, that they cease to appear, because appearances still appear very clearly. In fact, they may appear even more clearly than before, but one sees their empty essence. As the appearances clearly appear, one also simultaneously sees their true nature. One sees the empty essence of all things. It is as if all appearances become like a reflection in a mirror. The reflection clearly appears in a mirror, yet you cannot reach out and grab it, because it is merely a reflection. It is not actually an object truly existing on its own side. It is just an empty reflection. For instance,

think of the reflection of the moon in water, or a person appearing on the television screen. A person appears on the screen, but there is not actually a real person in that box. It is just an illusory manifestation. In the same way, if one is no longer bound by the fixating mind, then appearances clearly appear, yet they are experienced for what they are, empty in essence. There is no longer any clinging attachment of those appearances.

This is the explanation of the first pith instruction, which is concerned with the outer objects that are apprehended by the mind. When there isn't any fixation to these appearances, then the fixation to outer appearances are purified. If one can meditate in this way on appearances without fixation, then appearances are purified.

4.2 Commentary on the Second Instruction

"If you purify the inwardly fixating mind, then mind itself is naturally liberated."

The second pith instruction is the purification of the inwardly apprehending mind. The purifying of the inwardly fixating mind is referring to the liberation of awareness itself. If one releases fixation on whatever arises in the mind, then mind itself is liberated. So what is fixated on within the mind? The mind grasps at the concepts and discursive thoughts that arise within it. This instruction regards the discursive thoughts of the five poisons, the five afflictive emotions. Whichever of the five afflictive emotions that arise, then there should be no grasping to or fixating on it, no clinging or holding to that afflictive emotion. For instance, with the afflictive emotion of anger, if one doesn't grasp at anger, then it will not disturb the mind. Anger will not have the power to disrupt or disturb the mind if one does not grasp at the emotion or follow after it. One recognizes that whatever emotion,

whatever thought or concept that appears in the mind, is empty of inherent nature, and that it is not actually different from the essence of mind itself. Awareness itself has the nature of emptiness. Just so, whatever appears in the mind, all of the concepts and afflictive emotions are also endowed with empty nature. They themselves are not other than empty nature; therefore, there is nothing to grasp at whatsoever.

In the case when there is no grasping, when there's no following after thoughts and emotions, then they arise from the empty ground of awareness and dissolve back into the empty ground of awareness, just like waves on the surface of the ocean. The ocean has many waves, but the waves are not different than the ocean. The waves arise out of the ocean and are of the same nature of the ocean itself. They dissolve back into the ocean without disrupting the vast water of the ocean in any way. The nature of the ocean never changes as a result of this arising and dissolution. In the depths of the ocean, it is the same; it never changes as a result of the waves. In the same way, we have all of these waves of awareness that appear as thoughts and afflictive emotions. When we understand the true nature of those thoughts and emotions, when we know their nature to be that of emptiness, then they cannot do any harm to the mind. They cannot create any defilement to awareness itself. Therefore, the afflictive emotions and discursive thoughts are purified. They are liberated in their own place. Once we know their true nature, then there cannot be any stain to awareness itself.

In this case, what we are referring to is that discursive thoughts and afflictive emotions are liberated as wisdom, as the wisdom of intrinsic awareness. What causes this to occur is simply recognition of their essence. When the essence is understood, when it is directly experienced and there is no grasping or no following after the discursive thoughts and afflictive emotions, and we abide

within the recognition of the essence without following or grasping after them, these thoughts and emotions are transformed into wisdom. They are liberated as primordial wisdom or pristine awareness. Therefore, liberation and primordial wisdom are synonymous. They are the same thing, because liberation itself is wisdom. When this occurs, it is said to be like entering into an island of gold. If you arrive at a golden island, then everything there is gold. There is no ordinary earth or stones to be found there. Similarly, when one recognizes the empty essence, then there is nothing but wisdom. There is no potential for defilement or obscuration, because understanding the empty essence liberates everything. Everything simply becomes the nature of wisdom, meaning that there is no longer any trace of the conceptual mind, of discursive thought or of afflictive emotion. That doesn't mean that discursive thoughts and afflictive emotions do not arise, but that grasping, or the incorrect perception that perceives them to be truly existent, does not taint them. Therefore, it is not discursive or conceptual thought that causes karma or that becomes an accumulation of karma. In that way, there is no karma creating discursive thoughts to be found at all, because the empty essence is seen. For as long as the empty essence is seen, then there is no fixation; then there is no karma created. Therefore, thoughts are liberated. All thoughts, whatever arises in the mind, becomes the nature of wisdom.

4.3 Commentary on the Third Instruction

"When clear light luminosity shines forth and you recognize the true nature of your own mind, then you have recognized awareness itself as the mind of enlightenment."

Next, is the third pith instruction regarding the way to meditate or to practice the clear light. This pith instruction is regarding the abiding of the mind itself, the

true abode of awareness. The first instruction is with regard to the outer object or the outwardly apprehended objects and appearances. If one does not grasp at appearances, then the appearances are purified. The second pith instruction regards the purification of mind itself by overcoming the fixation to that which is inwardly apprehended in the mind, the discursive thoughts and afflictive emotions. The third is an instruction to be used during the time of practice. It regards the abiding of awareness itself, establishing the faultless, stainless essence as the true abiding of awareness, the true nature of the mind itself. Mind has the nature of clarity or luminosity; however, that luminosity or clarity is empty in essence. Therefore, it is the union of clarity and emptiness. Clarity, or luminosity, manifests as appearance. It appears, yet the appearances are empty in essence. It is the non-dual union of clarity and emptiness. These are the natural characteristics of intrinsic awareness. Even though there is the display of awareness as luminosity, it is empty of any inherent nature. This is what is maintained in practice. By maintaining this in meditation through practicing stabilization of the recognition of the inherent abiding of awareness itself, then there are the temporary experiences of bliss, clarity, and non-thought. When there is no grasping at these three temporary experiences, then it becomes completely perfected meditation. If there is grasping, then one falls into error or fault.

In this way, all phenomena are none other than the display of the primordial wisdom of pristine awareness. One must recognize this pristine awareness for oneself. One must recognize one's own true face, one's own true awareness. If one meditates recognizing one's own true nature, then this is utterly free of the designations based on the mind of duality. Concepts such as a good or bad birth, inferior or superior wisdom, the greater vehicle and the lesser vehicle, young or old, or clear faculties or not so clear faculties, all of these have no basis. They lack

any substantial nature. When abiding within the view that realizes the true essence, these are all understood to be of one single nature. All are understood to be of this very essence. Therefore, those designations based on duality no longer apply. And so Guru Rinpoche said, **"Old lady, if you meditate like this, you will become a Buddha."**

5. Additional Advice

Then Guru Rinpoche gave some follow up pith instructions to the old woman saying, **"Old Lady, if you meditate like this, you have no need for fear at the time of death. You will not have any fear. If you meditate like this, there is nothing better that you could do with this life."** There is no greater meaning that you could possibly give to this life that surpasses this. Guru Rinpoche continues,

> **"Remember that your life is impermanent, and there is no telling when you will die, so you should make effort only in these pith instructions that I have taught you. You should only make effort in this. To strive in the activities of this world for your children or husband and so forth, even if you were to engage in all of these great worldly activities for thousands of years, just a single moment of recognizing the true nature of mind is of far greater meaning than all of the countless worldly activities that one could accomplish."**

Even just a moment of meditating on the true nature of mind is extremely vast and profound in meaning. However much you devote to worldly activities in this life, you will never finish them. There will never be an end to worldly activities. No matter how much you strive to finish your worldly activities, there is always something that needs attending to. As long as you try to finish all of your worldly

activities, there is never any end to those activities. Continuing Guru Rinpoche instructs, **"Give up all worldly activities and simply focus on these pith instructions of mine. If you practice according to these pith instructions for the rest of your life, then Old Lady, you will have no fear at the time of death."**

The title of these pith instructions is the *Finger Pointing Instructions*, because Guru Rinpoche taught them to the Old Lady while he was pointing his finger at her. As Guru Rinpoche gave these pointing out pith instructions to the Old Lady, she practiced them for the rest of her life and through this, she achieved liberation. She attained great levels of accomplishment. She became fully liberated and accomplished in one life. Also, Yeshe Tsogyal wrote these pith instructions down, and so they are actually pith instructions that came directly from the mouth of Guru Rinpoche himself.

6. Summary of the Three Instructions

It is very important to understand the three key points that are taught in these very concise pith instructions. The first pith instruction points out that whatever outwardly appearing objects there are, they cannot bind the mind in and of themselves. It is not actually the outer appearances that harm, but it is the mind that grasps and becomes attached to those appearances. The mind that grasps at the outer objects is the source of harm. It is the fixation that is binding, not the appearances themselves. If there is no fixation on the outwardly appearing objects, then the appearances are liberated. Outer appearances are self-liberated upon arising. In summary, the instruction is to abandon fixation and attachment to outwardly appearing objects.

The second pith instruction is regarding the mind that grasps at that which appears inwardly. When thoughts and emotions arise from the mind, one

recognizes their empty essence or recognizes them as the innate expression of awareness itself. One does not grasp onto or fixate on them; they are spontaneously liberated in their own place. If they are liberated, then there is no karma that is accumulated. If there is no accumulation of karma, then that is liberation. That is freedom from samsara. When there is liberation, when the arisings of mind are liberated, then they are understood to be what they are in their pure nature, which is the spontaneous display of the two form kayas. All that is an expression of mind is liberated as the nature of Dharmakaya, arisen from the Dharmakaya.

The third instruction points out that whatever experiences arise during meditation, they are empty of inherent nature. Therefore, there is no fixation or attachment to the qualities that arise in practice. Being without fixation and attachment, the meditation itself leads to Buddhahood.

So, tomorrow we engage in the practice. We will all be together doing the practice of Guru Rinpoche. The point of this is as follows. Right now we have the concept of ourselves as ordinary beings, so we have the experience of ordinary beings. We experience our body, speech, and mind as ordinary and defiled, because it is tainted by the activity of the five poisons, the five afflictive emotions. Our body is experienced from the perspective of impure ordinary beings, so then we have the phenomena of non-virtue of the body, such as the three non-virtues of the body. Second, we experience speech from the perception of ordinary defiled beings, and so we have the phenomena of impure speech, the four non-virtues of speech, such as idle chatter and so forth. From the experience of ordinary defiled beings, we experience the phenomena through the door of mind, the three impure non-virtues of the mind.

When we meditate on the Yidam Deity, we start to identify our pure nature as the pure nature of the Yidam Deity. We start to identify our own nature as not different from that. We generate ourselves in the form of the Yidam Deity, and these impure perceptions are gradually transformed into pure perceptions. Through reciting the Deity's mantra, visualizing the Deity's enlightened form, and engaging in the meditative absorption with our mind, then we get closer and closer to that pure perception, to the pure phenomena of the Deity. Gradually our impure perception is transformed into the pure perception of the Deity, the pure phenomena of the Deity. That is the function of the Generation Stage. We transform our experience from an impure ordinary experience to the pure experience of the Yidam Deity.

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