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INSTRUCTIONS IN THE MAHAYANA VIEW WHICH CLARIFIES THE TWO TRUTHS

BY

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This is one of four texts in this volume written by Patrul Rinpoche. Although famous as a scholar at the end of the last century and much in demand in the great nyingma teaching monasteries, he was very fond of travelling as an ordinary monk and pilgrim. When he was given a room and food for the night he would often repay the hospitality by giving the family a simple dharma teaching that highlighted the essence of the doctrine. These short teachings became very popular because they were given in simple language, often in nomad dialect, and addressed to the reader, no matter how unlettered, with respect.

This text deals with one of the great dharma questions: what is the relationship between the relative and the absolute, between samsara and nirvana? In the hinayana view they are seen as polar opposites with minimal contact: you can exit into enlightenment but you can't come back. In the mahayana view there is an exploration of the continuum existing between the lowest hell and the highest buddhahood. The relative is seen as contained within the absolute, and with the absolute pervading the relative. However, the obscurations that hide the absolute nature are generally seen as having to be discarded before realisation can occur. This is significantly different from the dzogchen view, where on the basis of the initial direct introduction the practitioner can gradually resolve the obscurations into the natural condition.

Although Patrul Rinpoche uses the mahayana madhyamika structure, his standpoint is the dzogchen view. Thus he states, "To believe that the ordinary world and its inhabitants are real is the false relative. The antidote to that is to meditate on their transformation into the illusion-like pure deities and mandala palaces, and this is the pure relative." To include the tantric path of transformation in the 'pure relative' is certainly close to the dzogchen view that the paths involving effort and transformation are not the natural way.

His focus is on the primacy of self-understanding and he takes a swipe at scholars who do not apply their learning to themselves. "If one keeps phenomena as one's object of knowledge and does not apply the antidote to the afflictions, then one's experience will become a source of

pride and craving.”

Patrul Rinpoche’s style in this text is scholarly and he makes a fair use of quotations to illustrate his points. But his focus is on leading the reader towards practice, on showing that it is not just a matter of discussing theory that exists in relationship to oneself but of adopting and integrating a view that becomes oneself, that reveals oneself to oneself. And he illustrates the purpose of learning and the general nyingma dzogchen view very clearly when he says, “Although the minds of bewildered sentient beings are clarity and emptiness, they do not recognise this. By abiding in the clarity and emptiness of awareness the inseparability of the two truths is actualised. Although the two truths are actually inseparable one needs to rely on the conventional knowledge of the two truths as separate to gain awakening – and it is for this reason that they are distinguished.”

This understanding of the two truths is very useful for the dzogchen practitioner since it helps to remove the guilt, sadness, anger and sense of failure that can arise when the state of presence is lost. With an understanding of the unbroken thread of continuity linking samsara and nirvana – a major theme of all the tantras – when the experience of integration passes due to involvement in the content of awareness there are more routes of access back to integration. As long as there is a sense of having lost it, of having made a mistake, habitual judgements have a way in and the cycle of comparison, recrimination, aspiration and all the familiar dualistic attitudes start again. Thus the view acts as a safety net to keep the fall from presence in openness a short one so that re-entry through relaxation is quickly revealed. This prepares the way for the ultimate goal, the gift of the unchanging ground, which is the effortless integration of meditative balance (mNyam-bZhag) and subsequent experience (rJes-Thob).

THE TEXT

For those who wish liberation there are both the dharmas of realisation and the dharmas of practice.

THE DHARMAS OF ACTUALISATION

Regarding the dharmas of actualisation, there are two aspects. The first takes as its object of understanding 'as it is' in general (gNas-Lugs)¹, while the second concerns itself with knowledge of how one actually is oneself.

AS IT IS IN GENERAL

This has relative (Kun-rDzob) and absolute (Don-Dam) aspects.

1. Regarding the first of these, in general all appearances between the lowest hell and post-meditative experience of the tenth bodhisattva stage belong to the relative.

Moreover the relative can also be false or pure. For those who have not entered the dharma

all experience belongs to the false relative. For those who have entered the first part of the first stage² and are starting to develop understanding, all experience belongs to the pure relative. When that is forgotten, there is only the false relative. Having gained the first stage, all that appears to the mind is within the pure relative. The ceaseless presentation of appearances is the relative and it has to be seen to be deceptive. The appearances that occur between the first and tenth stages are affected by the subtle habits of having engaged in belief in real entities for a long time, just as the smell of musk lingers in an empty container. For a buddha who has totally abandoned these subtle habits there are no such appearances whatsoever, and he abides solely in the absolute free of interpretation.

To believe that the ordinary world and its inhabitants are real is the false relative. The antidote to that is to meditate on their transformation into the illusion-like pure deities and mandala palaces, and this is the pure relative.

2. Secondly, the essence of the absolute is all-encompassing space³ free of interpretation. Although it is indistinguishable from the essence of the two aspects of the relative, yet a distinction is made according to the way the absolute is or is not understood. Thus there is the absolute: of natural revelation⁴; of the manifesting of actualisation of the absolute⁵; of destroying doubts by hearing and reflecting on the dharma; of the experiences developed by yoga; of ordinary people's interpretation of the general ideas; and of superior people's direct experience of awareness.

To be more specific, the stages⁶ of ordinary people are those where there is attachment to appearance which is seen as being inherently real. This is known as the false relative. Seeing that appearances are deceptive and being without attachment to them is the experience of the superior stages. This is known as the pure relative. Buddhas are free of all real and unreal appearances and are without the discrimination of attachment or non-attachment. This is known as the absolute.

Thus at first there is both appearance and attachment. Then there is only appearance without any attachment. And finally there is the absence of both appearance and attachment. Thus there is false understanding, the understanding of relative knowledge, and the understanding of absolute knowledge. For ordinary people the wisdom of relative knowledge is developed by deliberate examination. While for those with superior capacity their understanding is direct.

Regarding absolute all-pervading space, although it is beyond the conventions of knowing and not-knowing, in order to understand how it is, we make use of the notions of understanding and not understanding.

In order to actualise the ultimate inseparability of the two truths we must see that to interpret the relative as really existing and the absolute as not existing is not to be in accordance with the view of the middle way (dBu-Ma). From the time one has an easy actualisation of the pure relative one is free of all limits of being and non-being, permanence

and impermanence and merges in the inseparability of the two truths. As it says in the YUM (PRAJNAPARAMITA), *“Whatever is the actual truth or as-it-isness of the relative, that also is the actual truth or as-it-isness of the absolute.”*

However in order to aid understanding it is sometimes useful to look at them as if they were actually different, that is, to distinguish between the two truths. Thus the experience of delusion is the appearance of many real entities – that is what is called relative. The experience of the ending of delusion is when there is no perception of even an atom’s worth of either real entities or of the non-being of entities – this is what is known as the absolute. As Santideva says in the ninth chapter of THE BODHICARYAVATARA,

When both existents and non-existents
Cease to present to the mind
There is nothing else.
Being free of perception
Mind is truly at peace.

With regard to actuality, the truth which is to be awakened to, the ultimate great all-pervading space free of interpretation is without any basis for the discrimination of the two truths and so one should not discriminate. Moreover the Buddha’s complete understanding does not distinguish between the two truths.

Regarding the deluding appearances which present themselves, do not separate them in terms of the two truths but abide in the inseparability of appearance and emptiness and the inseparability of awareness and emptiness. To awaken to, or to actualise this, is the non-dual original knowing, the understanding of the Buddha. Truly knowing the two truths as they are separately, they both become merged inseparably as the non-dual original knowing of union, the liberation which does not abide anywhere.

HOW ONE ACTUALLY IS ONESELF

Although one may understand As It Is in general, the situation of the object which is to be known, how one actually is oneself as the knowing subject may not be known. If one keeps phenomena as one’s object of knowledge and does not apply the antidote to the afflictions, then one’s experience will become a source of pride and craving. Due to this, belief in one’s own true existence grows stronger and so it is important to actualise how one truly is in oneself, in one’s mentation, in one’s mind, in one’s intellect. Whoever is the knower of the knowledge must be directly awakened to. There are two aspects to this. Firstly the truth must be understood in its two modes, and then ultimately the inseparability of truth must be awakened to.

- a. Regarding the first of these, one must see that the general as-it-isness of the objects of knowledge, the relative appearances, is without inherent self-nature and is like an

illusion. From the absolute point of view they neither exist nor do not exist, just like the sky. The relative truth is to understand the great middle way of the ultimate inseparability of the two truths, the all-encompassing space free of all limiting interpretation, by means of the intellect or mentation. Santideva says, "*The absolute is not within the sphere of the intellect. The intellect desires the relative.*"

Thus towards whatever intellectual understanding one has, if pride and craving arise then that pride and craving is the work of demonic delusion and due to it one's understanding will become false. *THE SUTRA OF THE INCONCEIVABLE REALM OF THE BUDDHA* says,

What is called 'attainment' is unstable,
What is called 'clear realisation' is greed;
Instability and greed are the work of demonic delusion.
Those with great pride believe 'I have gained this'.
What is called 'my clear realisation' becomes discursive thought.

The unmediated actuality of relative intellectual understanding is absolute. If you examine yourself as the mind or consciousness or intellect that understands then you will see that in no way is it a substantial entity. From the very beginning mind has been empty of existing and not existing. It has been empty of beginning and ending, of coming and going, of permanence and impermanence and of past, present and future and is therefore called the absolute actuality. *THE SUTRA REQUESTED BY KASHYAPA* says, "*Mind is not within, and neither is it without. And it cannot be perceived as something other than these.*" And *MAITREYA'S REQUEST* says, "*Mind is without form, without colour, and without resting place, just like the sky.*"

- b. Now we will consider the manner in which the as-it-isness or how-it-isness of the mind abides as the ultimate inseparability of the two truths. When the two truths are applied to the single mind itself this is only the use of names and signs. It is nothing more than conventional identification. The ground all-encompassing space is without conceptual mind (Sems-Med) and so the two truths are without foundation. The result of the buddha's understanding is without conceptual mind and so the two truths are without basis.

Although the minds of bewildered sentient beings are clarity and emptiness, they do not recognise this. By abiding in the clarity and emptiness of awareness, the inseparability of the two truths is actualised. Although the two truths are actually inseparable one needs to rely on the conventional knowledge of the two truths as separate to gain awakening – and it is for this reason that they are distinguished.

In this way the non-interpretative as-it-isness of knowledge and the non-interpretative as-it-isness of the knower are merged inseparably with one flavour. Thus all phenomena and beings are just emptiness and so all outer and inner phenomena are free of the interpretations of being and non-being, permanence and oblivion, and so are

uncompounded like the sky. Experiencing that there is no seer and nothing to be seen, no thinker and nothing to be thought, there is then clear vision and a non-deceptive understanding.

THE DHARMAS OF PRACTICE

There are two ways of practising these instructions:

i. For those who are very intelligent there is direct (Chig-Chhar) practice, since they have behind them the accumulation of merit and wisdom gathered in previous lives. Those fortunate ones whose profound good karma has ripened will spontaneously understand on just hearing the teaching on the two truths and will be able to remain in that state of actualisation. Moreover in meditation they will abide in the sky-like state of the two truths free of interpretation in which both knowledge and knower are empty and devoid of self-substance. When meditating like that there are no bad thoughts that have to be cleared away and no good thoughts that should be relied on. Maitreya said,

In this there is nothing to clear away and
Not even the least thing to be kept.
By clearly looking at actuality
When you truly see you will be completely free.

Having practised in that way for all manner of appearances, appearance is devoid of inherent self-existence and one maintains the dreamlike state of the union of the two truths. As regards those dream-like illusory sentient beings who do not understand this, with an illusory loving and compassionate enlightened attitude, gather the illusory accumulation of merit and wisdom for the sake of all beings. Make a vast aspiration to benefit sentient beings.

ii. Those who are less able should start with the four reflections⁷ and progress through the stages of practice. If they do not do this then they will only gain a general understanding of the profound truth.

All thoughts and appearances, however they are, are relative. Being awake to how they actually are is the absolute. The intellect that understands that is relative while the lack of inherent self-existence in the intellect is the absolute. The sound that expresses the two truths is relative while the lack of inherent self-nature in that sound is the absolute. The non-duality of these aspects is the union of the two truths. Thus the nature of knowledge and the Buddha's understanding are beyond perception as the union of the two truths. This is called 'all-encompassing space free of interpretation'. Within it there are neither beings nor phenomena having inherent self-existence.

To understand this is the view. To remain in that state is the meditation. To compassionately benefit others with the accumulations and so on is the conduct. To dissolve

subject and object in intrinsic openness is the result. All-pervading unbiased original knowing is the quality. The accomplishment of automatic benefit for beings is the activity. Do not hold names and signs to be inherently meaningful. Know that names, words and signs serve to demonstrate meaning.

The mind that understands appearances is without inherent self-existence and so it is said to be without substantial self, without being, without personhood, without performer. And what is here said to be without inherent self-existence is truly without it. Because there is no true existence there is also no non-being and this so-called being 'without' is totally free of all 'being' and 'non being'. These are only words.

Consciousness that has a true awareness of object is not dependent upon the senses. Nor does it arise from the object. And it does not abide in the middle between subject and object. It is not inside, nor is it outside. When it arises it does not come from anywhere. When it ceases it does not go anywhere. And so it is said of consciousness that its arising is empty and its passing is also empty. In the sutras it is said, *"For one who really sees, no phenomena whatsoever appear."*

In the Prajnaparamita literature it is said, *"Mentation leads to involvement in the realms of desire, form and formlessness. When there is no mentation there is no involvement anywhere."* In a sutra it is said, *"When no activity whatsoever is performed that is known as being at ease. (rNal-'Byor, yoga)"* Therefore if ordinary people practise in the state of the absence of phenomena that is the supreme dharma. In a sutra it says, *"Now what is the supreme dharma? It is the absence of the perception of phenomena."* In the Prajnaparamita literature it is said, *"Because what is called enlightenment cannot be perceived as an enlightenment per se it is only a name. Buddhahood also cannot be perceived and so is only a name."*

The intrinsic as-is-ness of all phenomena is like the sky. To see that this is never an object of consciousness nor of original knowing, is the view. To abide in this manner without being fixed, is the meditation. Then to collect merit in the manner of an illusion for the sake of sentient beings who are illusory, is the conduct. The vanishing of the notion of illusoriness into spaciousness is the ultimate result.

All-encompassing space free of interpretation is beyond speech, thought or expression. It is also without a knower who might perceive it as an object of knowledge. So regarding the view and meditation of actuality free of entities, view and meditate only as sky to sky.

Natural meaningfulness (Yang-Dag Don) is beyond thought and dualistic experience. Nor is it just nothing and so it is beyond evaluation in terms of being or non-being.

When people are not frightened by the profound meaning of emptiness and abide in it with happy devotion, this is explained as being a sign that they have the good fortune to have heard and practised it previously and will quickly gain enlightenment.

Actuality (Chhos-Nyid) is like the sky, a spaciousness that is beyond thought. To awaken to it is the inexpressible state of original knowing, the intrinsic equalness free of activity and

calculation. This is the understanding of all the buddhas of the three times.

Absolute thusness is like a barren woman's child, there is nothing concrete, nothing to think about in this ordinary original state. Relative subject and object are merged as illusion and can be used without acceptance, rejection or desire. This is the practice of the Buddha's understanding.

Until your mind gains the power of this understanding you should avoid attachment to all forms of wealth and possessions. Remain in the mountains like a wild deer and abide on the path without deviation or backsliding.

Towards all outer and inner situations, be they agreeable or disagreeable, be without happiness or sorrow, desire or aversion. The greatest friend on the path is to have the support of unborn presence.

Wisdom is to experience that your mind is like the sky and compassion is to not abandon illusory sentient beings. By acting in accordance with the view incorporating their union, one will quickly gain the great original knowing that does not rest anywhere.

The text *MYANG-'DAS* says, *"Emptiness is not to perceive emptiness or not emptiness. The self-expression of emptiness appears everywhere and having appeared it becomes empty and so appearance and emptiness are in union. One can only realise this within oneself and nowhere else and so emptiness is said to be the realm of original knowing of one's own awareness which sees everything clearly."*

Ma-Chig Lab-sGron says, *"If there is no mentation whatsoever then errancy will never arise. Destroy discriminating perception!" And she also says, "Mind is free of duality so look as if there were nothing really there to look at. If you look too strongly then you will not see your own mind. Or even if you see a little you will not experience how the mind itself is. So don't have even a speck of real object to look at."*

The pure as it isness of mind itself is emptiness and clarity, the state free of reification. With the arising of awareness free of interpretation and dualistic perception, at the end of meditation appearance manifests in the manner of an illusion. So for months and years practise the relaxed state of clarity and emptiness which is the inseparability or union of meditative balance and its subsequent achievement.

NOTES

¹ The 'How it is', 'as it is' or 'as is' are ways of talking about the manner (Lugs) of abiding (gNas). It is how everything abides. All appearances abide, that is to say, we locate them somewhere according to our identification and interpretation. When we are under the power of ignorance, when we are unaware of our own ground, we experience ourselves and all phenomena within our delusion ('Khrul-Lugs). We take them to be abiding in the way that we imagine them to be abiding. Yet there is no reality to our delusion since from the beginningless beginning all that manifests, including ourselves, has been inseparable from the pure ground, the unconditioned,

the 'just is'. This is free of all artifice and elaboration. It is the way 'things' actually are, the original way. It is not a way to anywhere since in the truth of their actuality no phenomena have been born nor come into inherent existence and therefore are free of coming or going. Actuality is not a condition or a state but is simply how it is. Awakening to the absolute or infinite or intrinsic truth, one is present with 'as is', unartificial and unadulterated. But when under the power of delusion and within both impure and pure relative truths, we encounter the 'as if', the imagined, the world and ourselves according to our beliefs. Moreover, in relative truth there is the seemingly impenetrable barrier of taking the 'as if' to be 'as is'.

² The ten bhumi stages of the bodhisattva path begin with an initial insight into emptiness and then proceed towards an ever more deep and precise appreciation of unobstructed wisdom. The *DASABHUMIKA SUTRA* lists them as follows: 1 the Very Joyous; 2 the Stainless; 3 the Light Maker; 4 the Radiant Intellect; 5 Difficult to Master; 6 the Manifest; 7 the Gone Far; 8 the Immovable; 9 Good Intelligence; 10 Cloud of Dharma. These ten stages give a clear structure to the Bodhisattva path and help meditators see what progress they are making.

³ All-encompassing space is a way of translating dharmadhatu or Chos-dByings. It is the infinite spaciousness within which everything occurs, without occurring at all. It is inseparable from the ground source of all and offers infinite hospitality to each arising, just as it is. In this book 'infinite hospitality' is also used as an alternative translation.

⁴ As in deep sleep, orgasm and unconsciousness.

⁵ Rapid maturation due to past karma as with Milarepa etc.

⁶ i.e. up to and including the seventh bodhisattva bhumi.

⁷ Reflecting on precious human existence, impermanence and death, the sufferings of samsara, and the nature of karma.