

*Essence of  
Vajrayana*

*Also by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso*

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GESHE KELSANG GYATSO

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*Essence of  
Vajrayana*

THE HIGHEST YOGA  
TANTRA PRACTICE OF  
HERUKA BODY MANDALA



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# Acknowledgements

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This book, *Essence of Vajrayana*, is a complete and authoritative explanation of the Highest Yoga Tantra practice of Heruka body mandala, a powerful method for accomplishing full enlightenment in this lifetime.

The author, Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso Rinpoche, worked tirelessly for several years to prepare this profound text, bringing to it the inestimable benefit of his own vast scholarship and meditational experience. From the depths of our hearts we thank him for his inconceivable patience and kindness in giving us this precious commentary, which for the first time unlocks the secrets of this sublime practice for the Western practitioner.

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Roy Tyson,  
Administrative Director,  
Manjushri Mahayana  
Meditation Centre,  
June 1997.

## Preface

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The main subject of this book, *Essence of Vajrayana*, is training in the stages of the path of Highest Yoga Tantra. Gaining authentic realizations of the uncommon paths of Buddhist Tantra depends upon training in the common paths of Buddha's Sutra teachings, such as the twenty-one meditations of the stages of the path. These are explained in *Joyful Path of Good Fortune* and *The New Meditation Handbook*.

To begin with we need to understand what meditation is and how important meditation is for the attainment of both the temporary happiness of this and future lives, and the ultimate happiness of liberation and full enlightenment. Meditation is a mental awareness that concentrates on a virtuous object. It is necessarily mental awareness and not sense awareness. The sense awarenesses of a Buddha are virtuous whereas the sense awarenesses of sentient beings are always neutral. For example, although our bodily actions can be virtuous or non-virtuous depending upon our motivation, our body awareness itself is always neutral. In the same way, the actions of our eye awareness can be virtuous or non-virtuous but our eye awareness itself is always neutral. Therefore, as meditation is necessarily a virtuous mind whereas our sense awarenesses are necessarily neutral, it follows that we cannot meditate with our sense awarenesses.

Another reason why we cannot meditate with our sense awarenesses is that for us the direct object of meditation is the generic image of an object, and our sense awarenesses cannot perceive generic images. Moreover, although eye, ear, nose, tongue and body awarenesses can focus on forms, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile objects respectively, they cannot remember them. Since meditation involves remembering, or

holding with mindfulness, the object for an extended period of time, the only type of awareness that we can meditate with is mental awareness.

Meditation is a mental action, or mental karma, that causes us to experience mental peace. At the beginning it does not matter if our meditation is successful or not, because simply by generating a good motivation and trying to meditate we are creating the cause for future mental peace. As humans, we need certain basic conditions such as food, clothing, accommodation, and money; but whether or not these things bring us happiness depends upon our peace of mind. If our mind is not at peace we shall not be happy, even in the best external conditions.

Meditation is the source of all mental peace and happiness. It is true that people who do not meditate, and even animals, occasionally experience peace of mind, but this is only as a result of the virtuous mental karma they created through meditation in previous lives. By training in meditation we can attain a permanent cessation of delusions and thereby experience the permanent inner peace of liberation, or nirvana. We need to attain liberation because for as long as we are trapped in samsara, the vicious cycle of uncontrolled death and rebirth, we shall never find real peace and happiness.

We can attain the ultimate peace of enlightenment by training in the meditations explained in this book. We need to attain enlightenment so that we can benefit all living beings. At present our mind is obscured by the inner darkness of ignorance, which prevents us from seeing the true nature of all phenomena; but by training in wisdom and compassion we can completely remove this inner darkness. Once we have done this, our very subtle body, speech, and mind become inner light, the nature of omniscient wisdom. This is enlightenment, or Buddhahood. Having dispelled all darkness from our mind, we become a Buddha and can see all phenomena of the past, present and future directly and simultaneously. We are then in a position to benefit all living beings without exception by bestowing blessings, emanating whatever they need, and guiding them along spiritual paths.

To encourage ourself to train in the stages of the path to enlightenment, we should continually recall the three special characteristics of our human life: its freedom and endowment, its rarity, and its great meaning. Due to the limitations of their body and mind, those who have taken rebirth as animals, for example, have no opportunity to understand or practise the path to liberation. Only humans are free from such hindrances and have all the necessary conditions, known as 'endowments', to engage in spiritual paths, which alone lead to everlasting happiness. This freedom and endowment is the first special characteristic that makes our human life so precious.

The second special characteristic of our human life is its rarity. Although there are many humans in this world, each one of us has only one life. One person may own many cars and houses, but even the richest person in the world cannot possess more than one life, and, when that is drawing to an end, he or she cannot buy, borrow, or manufacture another. When we lose this life, it will be very difficult to find another similarly qualified life in the future. Our human life is therefore very rare.

The third special characteristic of our human life is its great meaning. If we use our human life to accomplish spiritual realizations, our life is immensely meaningful. By using it in this way, we actualize our full potential and progress from the state of an ordinary, deluded being to that of a fully enlightened being, the highest of all beings; and when we have done this we shall have the power to benefit all living beings without exception. Thus, by using our human life for spiritual development we can solve all our human problems and fulfil all our own and others' wishes. What could be more meaningful than this?

Through contemplating these three characteristics we arrive at the determination:

*I will not waste my human life because it is so precious, so rare, and so meaningful. Instead, I will use it in the most beneficial way.*

We hold this determination as our object of meditation without forgetting it, and meditate on it single-pointedly for as long as possible.

Having developed this deep desire to make our life meaningful, we then ask ourselves, 'What is the essential meaning of a human life?' Finding good external conditions cannot be its essential meaning, for even animals can do this. Many animals are very skilled at finding food, protecting their families, destroying their enemies, and so forth; these abilities are not exclusively human. However, it is only humans who have the opportunity to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings. This is the real meaning of our human life. With this understanding, we can extract the full meaning of our human life by receiving the empowerment and commentary to Heruka body mandala and then putting the instructions into practice.

In general, Vajrayana is the actual quick path to enlightenment, but whether or not we attain enlightenment quickly through Vajrayana practice depends upon our faith, motivation, and understanding. In particular, gaining the realizations of Heruka body mandala – the very essence of Vajrayana – depends upon our having strong faith in the instructions and a clear understanding of their meaning. Then, with a pure motivation, free from selfish intention, we should practise these instructions sincerely and continually until we attain our final goal.

*Geshe Kelsang Gyatso,  
Dallas, Texas,  
March 1997.*



# *PART ONE*

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## *Generation Stage*



*Heruka Father and Mother*



# *Preliminary Explanation*

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The commentary to the Highest Yoga Tantra practice of Heruka body mandala is presented under three main headings:

- 1 The preliminary explanation
- 2 The explanation of the practice
- 3 Dedication

## **THE PRELIMINARY EXPLANATION**

This has five parts:

- 1 The pre-eminent qualities of Heruka
- 2 The origin of these instructions
- 3 The benefits of practising these instructions
- 4 Examples of previous practitioners who accomplished attainments through these instructions
- 5 The qualifications of a sincere Heruka practitioner

## **THE PRE-EMINENT QUALITIES OF HERUKA**

The Sanskrit term 'Heruka' is composed of the three syllables, 'He', 'ru' and 'ka'. 'He' teaches the emptiness of phenomena in general, and 'ru' the emptiness of persons in particular; together they reveal the emptiness of all phenomena. 'Ka' refers to the union of Heruka's mind of great bliss and the emptiness of all phenomena. This union is Heruka's Truth Body. An I, or self, imputed on this Truth Body is definitive Heruka, the real nature of Buddha Heruka. This can only be seen by Buddhas.

Another term for Heruka is 'Chakrasambara'. 'Chakra' means 'wheel', and in this context refers to the 'wheel' of all phenomena. 'Sambara' means the supreme bliss, which is

called 'spontaneous great bliss'. Together 'Chakra' and 'sambhara' reveal that by practising Heruka Tantra we gain a profound realization that experiences all phenomena as one nature with our mind of great bliss. This realization directly removes subtle dualistic appearances from our mind, and due to this we quickly become definitive Heruka.

To lead fortunate disciples to the state of Buddha Heruka within one life, Buddha Vajradhara manifested his compassion in the form of interpretative Heruka, who has a blue-coloured body, four faces, and twelve arms, and embraces his consort, Vajravaraḥi. Attaining the state of Buddha Heruka depends upon abandoning the twelve dependent-related links of samsara by gaining the realizations of the four doors of liberation; and in particular it depends upon realizing the union of great bliss and emptiness. These are symbolized respectively by Heruka's twelve arms, his four faces, and his embracing Vajravaraḥi.

It is possible that those who do not understand the deep meaning of Buddha's Vajrayana teachings may feel uncomfortable with Heruka's wrathful aspect. Such practitioners need to understand that all phenomena are equal in lacking inherent existence. In ultimate truth, emptiness, there are no wrathful or peaceful aspects because all phenomena are of one nature. Therefore, those who possess deep knowledge of ultimate truth have no basis for developing unpleasant feelings upon perceiving unattractive objects because they realize that ultimately there are no truly existent unattractive or attractive objects.

For example, although Heruka's long necklace of human heads may seem to be real, in fact it is a manifestation of Heruka's omniscient wisdom. All the various features of Heruka's body are merely manifestations of his omniscient wisdom and do not exist outside of his mind. However, for faithful practitioners, visualizing the wrathful aspect of Heruka is a powerful method for swiftly receiving his blessings and protection. It is for this reason, as well as to display in a visible manner how to progress along the entire path of Sutra and Tantra, that Buddha Vajradhara emanated the wrathful Deity Heruka.

Buddha Vajradhara, Buddha Shakyamuni, and Buddha Heruka are the same person, differing only in aspect. When Buddha turned the Wheel of Dharma of Sutra he appeared in the form of an ordained person, when he turned the Wheel of Dharma of Tantra in general he appeared in the form of Vajradhara, and when he turned the Wheel of Dharma of *Heruka Tantra* in particular he appeared in the form of Heruka.

Heruka is Buddha's mind of compassion manifested as form. Only Buddhas have the ability to display their minds as form. We sentient beings are unable to do this because our mind and body are different natures, but a Buddha's mind and body are the same nature and so wherever their mind goes their body goes too. We always perceive a gap between our mind and its object. This is a mistaken perception, or mistaken appearance. Having completely abandoned this mistaken perception, Buddhas have the ability to display their mind as form, such as the forms of living beings and inanimate objects. For this reason it is said that Buddhas' emanations pervade the whole universe.

Buddha's mind of omniscient wisdom has thirty-seven parts, known as his 'thirty-seven realizations conducive to enlightenment'. These thirty-seven realizations appear in the form of the thirty-seven Deities of Heruka's mandala. We normally say that there are sixty-two Deities in Heruka's mandala, but if we count each union of Father and Mother as one Deity there are thirty-seven Deities. The thirty-seven realizations conducive to enlightenment of Bodhisattvas are causal paths and the thirty-seven realizations of Buddhas are resultant paths. A general explanation of these thirty-seven realizations can be found in *Ocean of Nectar*.

### THE ORIGIN OF THESE INSTRUCTIONS

These instructions were originally taught by Buddha at the request of Vajrapani and Vajravarahi. Buddha taught three root and five explanatory Tantras of Heruka. The three root Tantras are: the *Extensive Root Tantra*, which has three hundred thousand stanzas; the *Middling Root Tantra*, which has

one hundred thousand stanzas; and the *Condensed Root Tantra*, which has fifty-one chapters. Of these, only the last was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan. The five explanatory Tantras, which are commentaries to the *Condensed Root Tantra*, are: *Vajradaka Tantra*, *Abhicharya Tantra*, *Mukha Tantra*, *Sarwacharya Tantra*, and *Little Sambara Tantra*.

Later, great Indian Buddhist Masters such as Luyipa, Ghan-tapa, and Krishnapada wrote commentaries to these root and explanatory Tantras, as did many subsequent Tibetan Masters. In particular, Je Tsongkhapa wrote a very blessed and renowned commentary to the root Tantra of Heruka, entitled *Clear Illumination of All Hidden Meanings*, and a commentary to the Heruka sadhana, entitled *Dö jo*, which means 'Wish-fulfilling'. Later, other Lamas including Je Phabongkhapa also wrote special commentaries, based on the previous Indian and Tibetan commentaries. This commentary, *Essence of Vajrayana*, written especially for contemporary practitioners, is based on the instructions of Je Tsongkhapa and my kind root Guru, Trijang Dorjechang.

Traditionally there are three systems for practising the instructions of Heruka Tantra: the system according to Luyipa, the system according to Krishnapada, and the system according to Ghan-tapa. Ghan-tapa's system has two instructions: the instruction on the outer mandala of the five Deities of Heruka, and the instruction on the inner mandala of the sixty-two Deities of Heruka body mandala. This commentary, *Essence of Vajrayana*, is based on the latter. The lineage of these instructions is completely unbroken.

#### THE BENEFITS OF PRACTISING THESE INSTRUCTIONS

The *Condensed Root Tantra* praises the special qualities of Heruka practitioners. It says that all the Heroes and Heroines residing in the twenty-four places such as Puliramalaya and Dzalandhara enter into the bodies of sincere practitioners, blessing their channels, drops, and winds, and causing them to gain realizations of spontaneous great bliss, the actual quick path to enlightenment. Because these Heroes and Heroines are emanations of Heruka and Vajravarahi,

## *End of preview*

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