

The Five Buddha Mudras in Vajrakilaya Practice

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Today I will offer to you, dharma friends, some explanation on performing the mudras. In regard to this, Marpa said:

“Taking on the aggregate body of form—unrealized, it is a body of the four elements from which all disease and suffering originate. Realized, it is union with the deity, which turns back ordinary clinging.”

It’s said that when realized, this body is “union with the deity,” meaning the deities abide together with us. When one has not realized it, however, this body is an “aggregate body of the four elements.”

In regard to this, there are the three aspects of outer, inner, and secret. In the outer aspect are the four elements; in the inner aspect are the five afflictive emotions; and in the secret aspect are the five primordial wisdoms. Why are only four elements of the outer aspect mentioned? Since space is emptiness, it is not grouped with the other four.

This body is a union of both physical and mental aspects; therefore, it is complete with the five elements. These are first space, then earth, water, fire, and wind, totaling five. These are complete within the body, and we directly experience their properties when these five elements function. That is, we actually feel and experience the heat, cold, moisture, and so forth. Even though we physically experience the functioning of the four elements, if we examine their essential nature, it is emptiness.

All aspects of clarity are the five male buddhas. All aspects of empty nature are the five female buddhas. This is what is called the union of appearance and emptiness, or the union of clarity and emptiness, and so forth.

When we say “the union of,” this refers to the physical and mental aspects being unified together—the body and mind are together as a singular unit. The physical body is composed of the five elements. Among these five, flesh and bones are earth; blood is water; breath is wind; heat is fire; and mind is space.

As was said, “Unrealized it is a body of the four elements.” From the thought of an “I,” we’re obscured, and then we project onto this body concepts of “I am happy,” “I am suffering.” Then, there comes attachment to the happiness, aversion to the suffering—it progresses along like that. However, when we gain an understanding of the true nature: in regard to the “ground,” the outer aspect of the five afflictions is the five elements. When these afflictions ripen, they are the five

primordial wisdoms, which is the secret aspect. Thus, the outer aspect is the five elements; the inner aspect is the five afflictions; and the secret aspect is the five wisdoms.

Having said that each of the five is like that, it follows that this body-mind union is of the nature of the five father and mother buddhas. As it's said, this body-mind is "primordially pure from the very basis. Realized, it is union with the deity; unrealized, it is a body of the four elements"—an elemental form of earth, fire, water, and wind. Its essence is empty; its nature is clarity. The material aspect of an entity appears, yet the nature of that is empty. If one understands this—if it ripens—the pure deity is the self-embodiment of the five wisdoms, which ripens into the nature of the five father and mother buddhas; it ripens into the body of the deity, the sambhogakaya.

When the dharmakaya is realized, the sambhogakaya gathers like a rainbow. If the innate space-like nature of dharmakaya is realized, the radiance of the sambhogakaya, like a rainbow, appears naturally—the union of clarity and emptiness.

All of that within the secret mantra corresponds with the "symbol, meaning, and sign." Regarding the outer symbol, the gestures of the mudras are symbolic. When referring to sign, on a person's right and left hands there are ten fingers, which is a sign of the five father and mother buddhas. As for the meaning, if ripened, in its secret aspect, it's the five wisdoms.

The crown ornament of every deity has the five buddhas. Each of these possesses symbol, sign, and meaning; therefore, it's called secret mantra. Not because it's kept secret, but because it's unable to be realized.

The Buddha realized the ultimate meaning and then elucidated the teachings, and all of the practices and rituals originate from those. Our outer environment operates based on the functioning of the five elements. Both the outer world and inner sentient beings operate based on the five elements' functions.

In short, the method to realize that is: the basis is unripened due to self-clinging, the afflictive emotions, and the clinging to a duality of self and others. If that is sealed with bodhicitta, then there will be no self. Through bodhicitta one establishes selflessness as we see in the line, "All the perfect buddhas have arisen from the altruistic mind to benefit others." In benefiting others, we become selfless; there is no self or others. Based on that, appearances lack self-nature. They are the union of appearance and emptiness, the union of clarity and emptiness, and so forth, which is the sambhogakaya. The dharmakaya and sambhogakaya are like that.

"All phenomena are of the nature of the three kayas." The dharmakaya and sambhogakaya are pure kayas, and since a nirmanakaya has a combination of both pure and impure qualities, it is called a nirmanakaya. It is partly pure in its original primordial purity, but it is temporarily covered by defilements. It appears impurely in each of the six realms in the form of both tamers and those to be tamed. All of that condensed into a single meaning is also embodied in the mudras. The method of realizing that meaning is to purify the basis of clinging to a self and to duality.

When we engage in secret mantra practices and rituals, in the very beginning we recite, “May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness; may they be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.” This is the altruistic intent, the precious bodhicitta—we must fully arouse immeasurable love. At that time, if we become free from self-grasping, based on the quality of that, establishment of the five wisdoms and the three kayas endowed with the five wisdoms is complete. The symbol, sign, and meaning as they pertain to that are embodied in the mudras made with the fingers.

At the head of each deity is a crown ornament of the five buddha families. Which of these five is in the center of the ornament differs based on the deity being practiced.

In Vajrakilaya practice, Amoghasiddhi is principal and thus he is in the center. Below is a table that explains the seed syllable, location, finger, and color of each crown ornament deity in the Kilaya practice. For the five male buddhas:

Seed Syllable	Deity	Location	Finger	Color
OM	Vairocana	back of head	middle	white
HUNG	Akshobhya	forehead	index	blue
TRAM	Ratnasambhava	above right ear	ring	yellow
HRIH	Amitabha	above left ear	thumb	red
AH	Amoghasiddhi	crown	little	green

For the nature of the five female buddhas:

“MUM” (middle fingers)

“LAM” (index fingers)

“MAM” (ring fingers)

“BAM” (thumbs)

“TAM” (little fingers)

In the union of the five male and female buddhas, all appearance aspects are the male buddhas; all empty aspects are the female buddhas. Based on unifying that, both samsara and nirvana are accomplished. Thus, the “fingers crossing and hands pressing together” mudra represents the nature of the five wisdoms. The “hands opening up above the head” mudra represents the crown ornament of all the deities. It is accomplished like this within, and this meaning is shown and symbolized by mudras.

When making offerings, the five male and female buddhas are present along with all the offering goddesses. We do the “cloud and lotus turning” mudra: to the right are countless dakas, to the left are countless dakinis, all holding aloft offering substances, and we recite, “NAMA SARVA THATHAGATA . . .” Then, through the qualities of all the buddhas’ and bodhisattvas’ great compassion and power, and based upon the quality of their bodhicitta, inconceivable offering goddesses present offerings to all the pure realms. There are hundreds of millions of offering goddesses and dakas and dakinis who offer the essence of the six perfections, such as generosity, down to all the sentient beings in the six realms. The buddhas of the six realms engage acts for

the benefit of all sentient beings. This is then dedicated with “NAMA SARVA THATHAGATA AVALOKITE . . . ,” reciting the six mantras while doing the six mudras.

In brief, the meaning of the mantra is “Namo, by the force of my intentions . . .” This refers to one’s utterly pure intentions, and one needs to have immeasurable love. Based on this we become one with the immeasurable love of all the buddhas.

Then, “the force of the tathagatas’ blessings . . . ,” the great compassion of all the buddhas of the three times, is the immeasurable love, infinite like space. The four immeasurables are the power of all the buddhas, which comprises “the power and blessings of all the tathagatas.” And based on that, there is the “the power of dharmadhatu.”

Temporarily, due to the influences of delusion, there are both buddhas and sentient beings. However, other than being like water that freezes into ice, in actuality, ultimately, there are no real sentient beings. All beings are buddhas; they all have the nature of the Buddha, just as the nature of ice is water. Based on that, the Buddha said, “Sentient beings are buddhas, but they are obscured by temporary defilements.”

What are these temporary defilements? In brief, the root of the 84,000 afflictions is self-clinging. Self-clinging is ultimately ignorance, and ignorance ultimately is emptiness. There is this mere clinging in the mind to the thought of an “I.” In actuality, self-inherent entities do not exist; there is no existing self. We cling to a self where there is no self.

If you realize the actual reality of no self, then all sentient beings are of the nature of the Buddha. In order to realize that which has not yet been realized, temporarily relying on conventional love and compassion, knowing that ultimately the meaning of sentient beings is like ice melting into the vast ocean, we employ rituals to accomplish buddhahood.

The five family buddhas, father and mother, in their impure states are the five afflictions. When ripened, they ripen into the five primordial wisdoms. The only method to ripen that which is unripened is like a seed becoming a flower; to ripen the seed you need to water it. The mind of bodhicitta is similar to that water. If you want to melt the ice block of self-grasping, whose nature is cold, you need bodhicitta, whose nature is warmth. That warmth can melt the ice.

Similar to that, the buddhas, highly skilled in means, rely on methods of ripening sentient beings into buddhas by way of the symbols, meanings, and signs in Vajrayana practice, including employing rituals. Thus, when performing the mudras, we need to hold the visualization in that way.

In brief, the inner aggregates have the nature of the five families’ father and mother buddhas. The outer symbolic sign of that is the ten fingers. If one understands in this way, one is able to make offerings to the buddhas, purify the obscuration of beings, and have the ability to accomplish whatever is desired. As is recited, “. . . to make offerings to the noble ones and benefit sentient ones, all our aims and wishes, whatever they may be, in all worlds without exception—may they be fulfilled without hindrance.” The mudras have powers such as that.

For example, there are the five male and female buddha mudras in the Vajrakilaya practice as shown in the table on page 3. The “hands opening up above the head and moving down” mudra represents a stream of bliss-emptiness’ non-dual primordial wisdom bodhicitta showering down. One’s body is completely filled with nectar, including all the channels and elements, and the five afflictions ripen into the five primordial wisdoms. This is the embodiment of the five primordial wisdoms, and if it is realized as such, one realizes the union of the deity.

The deity is together with us: the seeds of the deity, the cause of the deity, which is buddha nature, the outer five elements, and so forth. The seeds of the five wisdoms are the five afflictions; when ripened, they transform into the five primordial wisdoms. If you understand in this way, the meaning of the secret mantra is very profound, and the mudras are quite meaningful.

For another example, when we recite, “From today, I will apply my body, speech, and mind to virtue,” if faith generates in the mind, we immediately fold the hands together. However, if the mind is not clear when we say, “I take refuge in the lama, I take refuge in the Buddha . . . ,” then we are just mouthing the words, and our hands don’t move at all. This is because in the mind there is no feeling whatsoever of going for refuge in the Buddha. However, if we clearly remember the qualities of the Buddha while reciting, “I take refuge in the Buddha . . . ,” our palms fold together, tears fall from our eyes, and a state of clear wisdom arises.

Individuals are of superior, middling, or lesser faculties. Those with superior faculties understand that the buddha is self-inherent; the qualities of enlightenment reside within. Those of the middling capacity, seeing the qualities of the Buddha, fold their hands in prayer, and tears fall from their eyes. They are physically moved to the point of the hairs on their body standing on end, and this physical response accords with their wisdom. Awakened from the sleep of ignorance, body, speech, and mind become one, and the mind becomes very clear.

Doing mudras is very beneficial and meritorious, and through performing them our visualization becomes clear. In the “Aspiration Prayer of Sukhavati” it says that when arriving in Dewachen, we will meet with hundreds of millions of buddhas, and at that time, through visualization and mudras, “Whatever is wished for will spring forth from one’s palms.” On the tips of the ten fingers, hundreds of thousands of dakas and dakinis will hold aloft multitudes of offerings and extend arrays of actually manifest offerings to an inconceivable number of buddhas and inconceivable pure realms. Through the cause of bodhicitta and the condition of temporal visualization, we are able to make such offerings. The ten fingers are the five male and female buddhas; the power of both the outer world and inner sentient beings is naturally complete. When one seals this with bodhicitta, the offerings multiply infinitely, and now the actually manifest offerings are incalculable, as vast as space. And as long as samsara remains, the offerings, too, will remain unceasingly. Offering clouds manifest such as these are called Samantabhadra offering clouds. Visualizing in this way, the virtue gained with each and every mudra is inconceivable.

If you understand this, you will be able to practice in this way. Some, however, do the mudras before they know how to chant. Actually, one should first learn to chant the sadhana well, then know the meaning of the mantra, and only then learn the mudras—this way it is extremely beneficial.

To summarize in a few words, Marpa said to Milarepa, “Having taken on this aggregate of form—unrealized, it is a body of the four elements. Realized, it is union with the deity, which reverses ordinary clinging.”

For all the sentient beings in the world in all six realms, except for the faults of temporary defilements, their basis is buddha nature. If you understand this, pure perception arises. As Milarepa said, “I don’t see consciousness; I see wisdom. I don’t see sentient beings; I see buddhas.”

If consciousness transforms to wisdom, then due to non-dualistic perception, we see sentient beings as buddhas. If we have not realized this, we see lamas and the spiritual teacher as defective aggregates. Through the nature of our afflictions, everything external is seen as impure, similar to how people who have jaundice see everything as yellow. Thus, do not grasp onto what seems true from our impure perception. It is our perception that is impure, and we need to put forth strong effort into generating bodhicitta to purify karma and imprinting.

Dharma friends, please keep these teachings in your heart.

Translated and rewritten by Dianne McKinnon and edited by Trisha Lamb in October 2020.