

# The Clear Illumination of Intent:

## An Overview of Tsongkhapa's Heruka Body Maṇḍala Sādhana

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### 1. Introduction

This paper will explore the structure and contents of Tsongkhapa's sādhana, the *Clear Illumination of Intent* (*dgongs pa rab gsal*) (*GR*). It will attempt to shed light on the characteristics of the text, as well as highlight its importance in helping spread the practice of Cakrasaṃvara within the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. Despite its importance in the Gelug tradition, there has yet to be any major study or English translation of this text. The *Clear Illumination of Intent* appears to have been written toward the end of Tsongkhapa's life, somewhere around the year 1415, four years before his passing (Thupten Jinpa 2019, 381–391). Tsongkhapa's text seems to be based on Ghaṇṭāpa's *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana* (*CS*) (D 1432).<sup>1</sup> While Tsongkhapa does not directly quote Ghaṇṭāpa, he follows the same structure as Ghaṇṭāpa, elaborating on the important aspects of the generation stage. The text is written in prose, structured in a typical Tibetan style, with Tsongkhapa laying out his outline of the text as he goes. The text starts by laying out the prerequisites for the practice and instructing the practitioner to set an altruistic motivation. This is followed by visualization of the outer maṇḍala and the thirty-seven-deity body maṇḍala, and finally by donning the armour, reciting mantras, and making offerings to local spirits. Many of the additions that Tsongkhapa makes to his sādhana can be found in the tantras themselves, or other texts written by Ghaṇṭāpa. Tsongkhapa also tries to explain various important points of the sādhana, explaining the meaning behind them, and their place in the greater scheme of tantric practice in general. Tsongkhapa's sādhana would later influence other prominent teachers in the Gelug tradition, whose meditational texts are still used to this day.

## 2. The Structure of the Sādhana

The *Clear Illumination of Intent* begins with a praise to the lineage gurus. Tsongkhapa then begins his outline of the sādhana, starting with the actual stages of meditation on the path (1).<sup>2)</sup> He further breaks this up into three parts, what to meditate on (1.1), where to meditate (1.2), and how to meditate (1.3). The third section takes up most of the text and includes all the visualizations and recitations. After performing the preliminary procedures (1.3.1.1.1), cleansing the three doors (1.3.1.1.2.1), and accumulating merit and eliminating unfavourable conditions (1.3.1.1.2.2–3), the practitioner is instructed to generate the outer habitat and inhabitant maṇḍalas (1.3.1.2.1–1.3.1.2.2.2). This is followed by the visualization of the body maṇḍala (1.3.1.2.2.3). After the body maṇḍala is generated, Tsongkhapa explains the visualization for donning the armour, the entry of the wisdom beings, and initiation (1.3.1.2.2.4). This is followed by offerings, praise, and meditation on the maṇḍala (1.3.1.2.2.5). The meditation session ends with mantra recitation (1.3.1.3.1) and torma offerings (1.3.1.3.2). After the meditation, Tsongkhapa advises practitioners on what to do between formal sessions, and during other sessions (1.3.2). The text ends with an explanation of the benefits one can gain by practicing this meditation (2).

As a preliminary, the practitioner is instructed to wake up early in the morning, arise as Heruka, purify themselves and sit on a comfortable seat. The practitioner should then swallow a nectar pill, and make offerings to local protectors. They should then take refuge and generate Bodhimind and purify their body, speech, and mind. To purify the mind, Tsongkhapa instructs the practitioner to recite “*śrītheruko’haṃ*” and reflect on its meaning. To purify the body, the practitioner should arise as two-armed Heruka, and to purify their speech, recite the vowels and consonants of the Sanskrit alphabet.

After the preliminary practices, the sādhana moves on to the practice of “accumulating merit for cultivating favourable conditions.” This section includes the practices of dharmakāya and saṃbhogakāya. First, the practitioner visualizes light rays emanating from a letter HŪṂ and gathering back to their heart, makes outer offering and recites the seven purities and the Herukasattva mantra. Tsongkhapa then begins his explanation of the dharmakāya practice. In the dharmakāya practice, the practitioner recites “*oṃ śūnyatājñāna vajrasvabhāvātmako’haṃ*” and visualizes that they dissolve into emptiness, through the gradual dissolution of the letter HŪṂ, corresponding with the stages of ordinary death.

Tsongkhapa calls this “the path of bringing death into dharmakāya.” In the saṃbhogakāya practice, the practitioner re-arises as the squiggle (*nāda*) on top of the letter HŪṂ, representing being reborn in the intermediate state. Tsongkhapa calls this “the path of bringing the intermediate state into saṃbhogakāya.”

Next, the practitioner visualizes the celestial mansion built on top of the stacked elements. This is the visualization of the outer maṇḍala. Although this visualization is not explicitly mentioned in Ghaṇṭāpa’s *CS*, Ghaṇṭāpa instructs practitioners to visualize the outer maṇḍala in his shorter text, the *Cakrasaṃvarakāyamaṇḍalābhisamaya*. Tsongkhapa follows this method. Next, the sādhana explains the visualizations for simultaneously generating the habitat and inhabitants through the “five manifest awakenings” (*mgong byang lnga*). This involves a visualization of generating the maṇḍala in five stages corresponding to the five wisdoms. Tsongkhapa says that this practice is the practice of arising as the nirmāṇakāya and calls it the “path of bringing rebirth into nirmāṇakāya.” The practitioner is then instructed to visualize the habitat and inhabitants in a gradual way. Here, the celestial palace and its two main inhabitants (Heruka and Vajravārāhī) are gradually visualized in detail.

After the visualization of the outer maṇḍala is complete, the practitioner visualizes the body maṇḍala. Before the visualization, Tsongkhapa offers a detailed explanation of the significance of the body maṇḍala practice in Ghaṇṭāpa’s tradition. For the body maṇḍala visualization, the practitioner visualizes their coarse body itself as the inner habitat maṇḍala, and their subtle body as the inhabitant maṇḍala. Here, the deities of the wheel of great bliss (Ḍākinī, Lāmā, Khaṇḍarohā, and Rūpiṇī), the 24 heroes and heroines (Khaṇḍakapāla, Mahākaṅkāla et cetera) of the three wheels of body, speech, and mind, and the eight gate and corner goddesses (Kākāsyā, Ulūkāsyā et cetera) are visualized.<sup>3)</sup> The deities are placed on the subtle channels (*rtsa*, *nāḍī*) and elements (*kham*s, *dhātu*). This completes the visualization of the body maṇḍala. The practitioner then meditates on the purity of the body maṇḍala. It is at this stage where the four joys (*caturānanda*) are practiced. This practice includes sexual practices (visualizations) and is related to the completion stage. The sādhana continues with visualizations of putting on the armour, the entry of the wisdom beings, and initiation. After the outer, inner, secret, suchness offerings, and recitation of praises, the practitioner is instructed to meditate on the maṇḍala. Tsongkhapa goes into detail on the various and levels methods of meditation. Tsongkhapa

then offers a variety of mantras to be recited and offers advice on how to complete a mantra retreat. The practice itself ends with a detailed tormā offering and a dissolution of the maṇḍala. The practitioner ends his or her practice by arising again as a two-armed Heruka. At the end of text, Tsongkhapa explains what to do before and after the meditation session and explains the benefits of doing this practice. By practicing this sādhanā practitioners will be able to practice the completion stage and attain enlightenment in this life, or at the very least, in their next life. The colophon notes that the text was composed at Ganden Monastery and inscribed by Kashipa Rinchen.

Table 1

1 The Actual Stages of Meditation the Path
1.1 What to meditate on
1.2 Where to meditate
1.3 How to meditate
1.3.1 The essence of the meditation session
1.3.1.1 What to do at the beginning of the session
1.3.1.1.1 Preliminary procedures
1.3.1.1.2 How to practice the yoga limbs
1.3.1.1.2.1 Cleansing the three doors
1.3.1.1.2.2 Accumulating merit for cultivating favourable conditions
1.3.1.1.2.3 Eliminating unfavourable conditions by meditating on the protection wheel
1.3.1.2 What to do during the actual session
1.3.1.2.1 Generating the habitat—the seat of the celestial palace
1.3.1.2.2 How to train in the limbs of yoga of the habitat and inhabitants
1.3.1.2.2.1 Simultaneous generation of the habitat and inhabitants, Heruka Yab Yum, through the five manifest awakenings
1.3.1.2.2.2 Gradual visualization of the generation
1.3.1.2.2.2.1 Visualizing the habitat
1.3.1.2.2.2.2 Visualizing the inhabitants: Heruka Yab Yum
1.3.1.2.2.3 Meditating on the purity of the body maṇḍala and the like
1.3.1.2.2.3.1 Meditating on the coarse body as the habitat maṇḍala
1.3.1.2.2.3.2 Meditating on the subtle body as the inhabitant maṇḍala
1.3.1.2.2.3.2.1 Meditating on the body maṇḍala
1.3.1.2.2.3.2.2 Meditating on the purity of the body maṇḍala
1.3.1.2.2.4 Putting on armour, entry of the wisdom beings, and initiation
1.3.1.2.2.4.1 Putting on the armour and entry of the wisdom beings
1.3.1.2.2.4.1.1 Putting on the armour
1.3.1.2.2.4.1.2 Entry of the wisdom beings
1.3.1.2.2.4.2 Initiation and sealing
1.3.1.2.2.5 Making offerings and praise, and meditation on the deity maṇḍala
1.3.1.2.2.5.1 Offerings
1.3.1.2.2.5.2 Praise
1.3.1.2.2.5.3 Meditation on the maṇḍala
1.3.1.3 What to do at the conclusion of the session
1.3.1.3.1 How to perform mantra recitation
1.3.1.3.2 How to perform the tormā offering
1.3.2 What to do before and after the session
1.3.2.1 What to do before and after the session
1.3.2.2 What to do during other sessions
2 The Benefits of Practicing Such Meditation

Source: Outline translated based on Tsongkhapa's outline in the *GR*.

## 2. Conclusion

The *Clear Illumination of Intent* is Tsongkhapa's sādhanā and commentary of the Heruka Body Maṇḍala practice in the tradition of Ghaṇṭāpa. It closely follows the structure of Ghaṇṭāpa's CS but is far more detailed in its explanations and visualizations. The sādhanā offers extensive explanations on the important visualizations and theories in the practice, acting as a complete meditation manual for practitioners. Tsongkhapa supports his explanations with quotations from the Indian tantras and treatises, making the text even more credible. He also incorporates the practices of the three kāyas and explains how this practice fits into the greater scope of Vajrayāna practice. Furthermore, although the GR is a sādhanā aimed at practitioners of the generation stage, it includes practices of the completion stage as well, such as the four joys.

Centuries later, Tsongkhapa's GR would become the basis for Heruka body maṇḍala sādhanas of other major Gelugpa lamas, such as Pabongkha (1878–1941). Those sādhanas are still practiced today in Tibetan monasteries and by other lay practitioners. The GR played an important role in the spread of Cakrasaṃvara practice in the Gelug tradition.

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### Notes

- 1) See Fukushima 2022 for an English translation of Ghaṇṭāpa's text.
- 2) See Table 1 for the full outline of the text.
- 3) For a chart of where the deities are placed in CS, see Fukushima 2022. Tsongkhapa's explanations are more or less the same.

### Abbreviations and Primary Sources

- GR *dGongs pa rab gsal* by Tsongkhapa. *bcom ldan 'das 'khor lo bde mchog gi lus kyi dkyil 'khor gyi sgrub pa'i thabs dgongs pa rab gsal shes bya ba*. D 5326, P 6164, TL vol. 15 (*nga*) 1a–27b.
- CS *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana* by Ghaṇṭāpa. D 1432, P 2149, N rGyud 'drel vol. *na* 240a–242b, C rGyud vol. *wa* 223b–225b.

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