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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Essence of Mahamudra
- Buddhist Summer School Online January 2021
- Interview with Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel
- Interview with Dechen Davies
- News from Maitripa Centre, Healesville
- News from Nyima Tashi Buddhist Centre New Zealand
- News from E-Vam Buddhist Institute U.S.
- News from Akshara Bookshop
- News from Shogam Publications
- E-Vam Institute 2021 Summer Teaching Program
- E-Vam Institute 2021 Autumn Teaching Program



Essence of Mahamudra

Traleq Kyabgon Rinpoche



This is the first of a series of four talks Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche gave on Mahamudra Meditation in Sydney in 2009. The next three talks will be featured in consecutive E-Vam newsletters.

I am happy to take this opportunity to speak on a topic which is so profound and vast.

As you know, all of the traditions of Buddhism that Tibetans practise came from India. We inherited the practices from Indians, brought over by both Tibetans and Indians. Not only were Tibetans travelling to India in search of the most precious, most esoteric, and the most advanced teachings. They then brought the teachings back to Tibet, translated the texts and explain to the Tibetans what those practices were all about. It was also the Indian teachers, even those who didn't speak any Tibetan, also came to Tibet to share teachings.

So that's something that we actually need to think about. The Buddhism that we

practise we basically owe to the Indians. The Indian origin of Tibetan Buddhism is to be valued. I think it's very important not to overemphasise the notion that as Tibetans we came up with something really extraordinary, but to value the roots from which it came. I believe that to be very valuable because, after all, our roots mean everything.

Tibetan Buddhism encourages that notion as do many other Buddhist traditions. In the Zen tradition they talk about *The Transmission of the Lamp* which is a very sacred Zen text that talks about the transmission of the lineage.

Buddhism came to Tibet in two waves. They are known as the "spreads" of Buddhism: the early and later spreads or

disseminations. The first one was known as the Nyingma school, meaning “ancient”. Nyingma, in this context, means the “first,” the first Tibetans who embraced Buddhism. So the first people to embrace Buddhism became known as “Nyingmapas.”

Buddhism was basically destroyed in the 9th century, around the time of King Langdarma. There was a lot of conflict and factions within the courts – a Buddhist faction and a Bonpo faction of non-Buddhists. The Bonpos still wanted to practise their ancient Bön religion.

Originally what is often referred to as the lama dance or “Black Hat” dance – the dancers wear costumes with flared sleeves and broad hats, sometimes masks and other attire. This was originally a Bönpo dance. Many of these rituals were eventually incorporated into the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The Black Hat dance and many other ritual practices have many elements of the Bönpo rituals remaining.

After King Langdarma’s death his two sons moved into power. One son was pro-Buddhist and the other was anti-Buddhist. They fought and the Tibetan kingdom ended up fragmented. This ushered in a whole new kind of Buddhism, which is known as “new”, the Sarmapas. Nyingma means “old or first school,” and Sarma means “new school.” So the Mahamudra types of teachings that are followed mainly within the Kagyu tradition come from that time, not only in Tibet but in India also. Those were turbulent times in India as well. The Moguls were making their way into India. The Moguls who saw themselves as Mongolian ruled India practically until the British came to India.

At this time a new development of Buddhism was taking place, known as Tantricism, which is a form of esoteric Buddhism. History scholars argue about the timing but roughly it began around the 9th, 10th century, to the 14th. These dates are not precise. You can even add a century or two or take a century or two off.

This new development in Tantricism that was brought to Tibet ushered in a whole new way of looking at tantric teachings – quite different from that which was introduced by Guru

Padmasambhava and other earlier Tantrikas, before Langdarma’s time. Buddhism was first brought to Tibet by Guru Padmasambhava and is seen in Tibetan and Bhutan and many other places as a master and a hero. In Tibet we think of Padmasambhava as the second Buddha: *sang gye nyi pa* (*sangs rgyas gnyis pa*). *Sang gye nyi pa* means “second Buddha” – *sang gye* of course means the “Buddha.”

With these new influences and events both in Tibet and in India – politically, sociologically, religiously – it was a very, very interesting time and also very unsettling as so many new things were happening.

When we think of Mahamudra teachings and so forth we need to relate to the notion that new forms of tantra were brought to Tibet. You would not find a lot of the old tantras in the Tibetan canonical

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literature. They are not there in the Tibetan canon, for example, but the new tantras are. So the old tantras were put into a separate collection, for example, the *Nyingma Gyübum* (*rnying ma rgyud bum*), and have remained separate.

The newer forms of Tantricism taught a form of graduated path to enlightenment, in its own way. It was somewhat modelled on the sutric approach to enlightenment, as taught in traditional Mahayana teachings. Mahayana, as it is taught in Tibetan Buddhism, emphasises two different approaches. One is the sutric approach, the exoteric approach, and the other is the esoteric approach. The exoteric approach of Mahayana speaks about five paths, ten stages of enlightenment and so on, which is a familiar model of a bodhisattva.

In exoteric Mahayana the model of a really good aspirant on the path to enlightenment is known as the “bodhisattva: the one who has generated enlightened heart,” which means one who has made the commitment to cultivate mind which is both enlightened, imbued with wisdom, and also with compassion, love and things of that kind. The cultivation of such altruistic qualities is practiced for a long time, so five paths, ten stages of the bodhisattva path are spoken about.

The tantric path of the new school, as opposed to the old school, is modelled on that. Even the old school talks about the nine *yanas*, nine vehicles and so on. It is slightly different because the old school approach is still not as gradual, not as descriptive, and the path is not presented in a very structured way as with the new school approach to Tantricism, esoteric Buddhism.

The newer wave of Tantricism was very structured. You start with the *kriya*, *charya*, *yoga* tantras which are different levels of esoteric practices of which the highest form is known as “Mahamudra.” Mahamudra in itself cannot really be described as a tantric practice in many ways and I will try to explain over these four teachings what I mean by that.

For now it is sufficient to say that the highest form of tantric practice you can do in the new tantras is what we call “fulfilment stage” practices. Practices like dream yoga, illusory body yoga and other forms of yoga, yogas that will help you to go deeper and deeper into yourself, not just using your mind but even your body. So you use physical exercises breathing exercises - the body, mind and breath, and visualisation bring together the mental aspect.

The mental aspect is the most important thing and visualisation is a very important part of that practice. So even when you are dealing with the body, you are thinking of the body in a visualised way. You are using imagination even with your body. You are not just thinking: Oh, this is body and this is mind. I’m just thinking this or I’m just imagining this or that. What you are actually imagining and what you are doing with your body and your breath are integrating them.

These teachings say that the breath, *prana*, is not just about breathing. I suppose it's like oxygen and energy so if we think of prana in that way, instead of just breath or wind, as it is often translated, then we might get a better sense of what we are working with. Sometimes, if something knocks you out for a few seconds or you are rendered breathless and suddenly you come back, you become rejuvenated and reanimated, brought back to consciousness – that is prana.

Tantricism says our breath and responsiveness is intimately related with our mind. When our mind becomes more alert and more conscious then we start to breathe again. Your bodily sensations, bodily feelings and prana become reactivated.

Mahamudra is seen as the highest form of tantric teachings that are discussed in Tantricism. How to integrate the body, mind and prana or motility – true integration.

As an aside, Prana has many functions. There are pranas that move downwards, pranas that move upwards, pranas that spread out all over your body, it is quite intricate. While tantra focuses on teachings like that, Mahamudra goes beyond that. In Mahamudra there is no need for visualisation or any specific forms of tantric or ritual practice. At the same time it is not like the exoteric approach to meditation and the path of spiritual practice outlined in traditional sutric teachings, the Mahayana teachings.

It is not the graduated path with the five paths and ten stages of the bodhisattvas and so on. Rather, it is a special form of meditation which really focuses on how to get into or uncover our own natural state, very much compatible with the Dzogchen teachings of the old school before Langdarma's time.

That's why a little bit of the historical background is important because there are similarities. Mahamudra has similarities with the Zen and Chan teachings of Japan and China as well. Mahamudra is very advanced but at the same time very accessible. It's more accessible than many other forms of esoteric practices.

If one does esoteric tantric practices then one is required to receive initiations or empowerments, *abbhisheka*, trans-

mission and receive instruction and then practice many rituals, visualisations, chant mantras and so forth. Tantricism is very affective in bringing contradictions into one experience explicitly. You bring contradictions together and then you are transported to another level of being, a state which you have not been familiar with within yourself. That is one of the extraordinary things about Tantricism. Tantricism is somewhat designed to be practiced in such a way that it brings everything to a head. It becomes visible to the practitioner. You can't play safe in Tantricism. That is why political correctness and tantricism do not always go together. All the tantras, the masters have passed on their practices and methods. One after the other, one transmits the essence of the practice to the other and the other and other. So that's



the thing about the highest form, what we call the highest yogatantra – *Mahamuttarayogatantra* it's called actually – which is the last stage of tantric practice.

Mahamudra goes beyond such practices. Mahamudra does not demand that we perform such rituals or that we do these kinds of yoga practices or anything like that. But that does not mean we do not pay attention to physical postures, breathing, diet. These are still important if you practise Mahamudra meditation. And explanation by a master is required.

The practice is about shamatha and vipashyana. It's not very complicated and elaborate. It's very direct and to the point. We use shamatha practice and vipashyana practice similarly to the way in which

these practices are done in the exoteric context but [we think of it] in a different way, a non-graduated way – almost in a non-systematic way. Instead of thinking, "I have to approach everything in a step-by-step manner" you think in terms of how to empower yourself, how to actualise yourself, how to realise yourself in a more direct manner.

That's what Mahamudra teaches – as does Dzogchen of the old school. Being in the *natural state* is what one is trying to attain and being in the natural state is equated with enlightenment itself. Enlightenment then is not seen as something remote, hard to reach, something that we have to wait forever for or that we will not be able to realise unless we subject ourselves to countless years of hardship and ascetic practices or something like that.

Enlightenment is presented, I suppose, in a much more human way. It is something that we can realise but that does not mean we can realise Mahamudra just like that.

Obviously, you don't attain Mahamudra or anything by being lazy. But on the other hand, we may think, "Oh, it will take forever – many lifetimes, or many, many years of arduous practice" and "Enlightenment is something so hard to get," that kind of thing. So avoiding those two extremes is the key, I suppose: knowing that you have to apply yourself, that you have to be attentive because that is the whole idea of doing Mahamudra practice – it is supposed to empower you. But the only way we can empower

ourselves is if we are being attentive, if we pay attention and we learn to be aware – all those things. I will explain this more over the four talks.

That is the key, and then enlightenment is not so remote. Enlightenment is not something only Buddhas have experienced because, after all, enlightenment also has degrees. Just like happiness – some of us are less happy than others, some are happier than us and we get worried and then we get less happy! Enlightenment is also like that. We should be thinking like that, in terms of degree.

We should not be thinking of enlightenment as a fixed state, that it is like we are trying to get to some kind of state. That is not the case with anything actually. Even when we want to get a PhD degree or get married or something, just because all your life you have been thinking, “I just want to get married and live happily ever after, and this person is going to give me all the comfort I need”.

It is a very important point and if we think like that then enlightenment becomes more tangible, something that

we can actually relate to and aspire to, otherwise it might be a bit too remote. I’m sure it is like that in life generally, in a way. Whatever it is that you aspire to – having that perspective is very important.

So in Mahamudra practice, basically what one tries to do then is to bring together one’s own actual state of being now and the state that we aspire to. In other words, what we want to become and what we already are – we try to bring them together. That’s the key and that’s what we always want to do but we always end up in conflict because we don’t see any way to connect what we are and what we want to be. Mahamudra teachings really talk about this on many different levels.

So that is a key point and it is talked about not just in regard to cognitive change, of how we should change our attitude in terms of how we see ourselves now and how we want to see ourselves in the future – not just in terms of enlightenment, spiritually or in religious terms, but even on the psychological or personal or normal level. So it is dealing not just with the spiritual level but

personally and psychologically as well – that’s the key.

In other words, Mahamudra teachings have something to say about how we should deal with our feelings, our emotions, our experiences, on a daily basis – what we experience, how we should relate to those experiences, things like that, so it is not just in terms of enlightenment, of attaining nirvana or Buddhahood.

And I think that’s a very important point because there are many different ways to deal with emotions and feelings and so on within Buddhism. Buddhism actually has a very rich literature on the subject, as you know, but Mahamudra teachings present a different angle to it.

I would like to talk to you a little bit about that over the next few talks. I will put that in context and talk about how meditation practices are done, how we use meditation to effect these changes, in terms of our emotions, feelings, thoughts and, of course, ultimately, how we try to learn to be in our own natural state, just learning to be, within ourselves. ■



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Interview with Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel

Felicity Lodro



Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel has studied and practiced the Buddhadharma for 35 years under the guidance of her teacher and husband Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche. She is the retreat master of Samten Ling in Crestone, Colorado and has spent over six years in retreat. She holds a degree in anthropology and an M.A. in Buddhist Studies and teaches throughout the U.S., Australia, and Europe. She is the author of The Power of an Open Question: The Buddha's Path to Freedom and The Logic of Faith: the Buddhist Path to Finding Certainty Beyond Belief and Doubt. Elizabeth will be teaching at the Buddhist Summer School 2021.

Felicity Lodro: Thank you for taking the time for this interview. We are excited that you can join us for the Buddhist Summer School January 2021. At the Summer School you are speaking on the Middle Way. How would you describe the Middle Way and what were some of your main reasons for selecting this topic?

Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel: In a more general way, the Middle Way describes a life of balance and moderation. The Buddha's life story is an example of how we can't find unconditional happiness through external pleasures, or through rejecting the richness of the sensual world. For example, we might think of the middle way as trying to moderate our lives between two opposing activities, such as working during the week and then doing

spiritual retreat on the weekends. That is a very practical and intelligent way to use our time. But, the practice is much deeper than how we organize our life around extremes. It refers to stepping outside this dualistic system of extremes altogether.

Eternalism and nihilism are philosophical terms that the Buddha referred to in certain texts, but it is also important to examine how these extremes express themselves in our lives. Experientially we might describe them as "rightness" and "doubt," or "hope" and "fear". Rightness (or fundamentalism) comes from our inability to embrace complexity and nuance. When rigid beliefs are challenged by circumstances, we fall into doubt. Rightness and doubt are two sides of the same coin. We might cling, for example, to the positive qualities we identify with a specific friend, and then feel betrayed when we see another side of him; or we might fall into despair when

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something happens in our spiritual community that we don't understand. We may fall into a spiritual crises when we find ourselves unable to reconcile these spiritual and temporal worlds, because we are clinging desperately to how we think life should look. The world is pretty rambunctious when it comes to our preferences, so to expect things to be as we think they should, lacks nuance, clarity and depth.

The Middle Way teachings offer a solution — a resting place — that take us beyond this system of dualism. I often use the metaphor of "the mind of an open question," to describe the wisdom aspect of this path, because almost everyone has moments of engaging life with openness and curiosity, which can accommodate a more nuanced way of looking at things.

This is important to recognize in ourselves. This way of poisoning the mind, makes dialogue, creativity and healthy participation in life, available to us.

I think we humans need us to find our way out of extreme thinking now more than ever. It is easy to look outside of ourselves and accuse others of being fundamentalists, but in truth, if we are willing to look, we can find a lot of fundamentalism in our own mind...and doubt too. It is really good to see — very freeing to expose all that to the light of our intelligence.

Felicity: Aspects of the Dharma describes some of our experiences as illusory, also that our attitudes and habitual tendencies create an internal personal environment that cause varying degrees of separation from reality. Believing everything we see hear and experience is real and permanent – eternalise, or that nothing is real nor has meaning - nihilism are seen as extreme views. What philosophical point of view would create a healthier and more moderated or central view of existence?

Elizabeth: The Middle Way teachings of the Mahayana offer us a way to investigate our assumptions about the world we encounter. As you say, we often see things in a course way, clinging to them as "real" or "permanent." Of course, this is tricky territory because if we look out in the world and say: "Oh, don't worry about anything, it isn't real," it sounds like a denial of experience. We never want to undermine our own or others' experience, which arises due to the nature of interdependence and is very powerful and acutely experienced. The point here is to respect the power of interdependence, while understanding that things are not limited to what we think of them.

So how are things then? And what does "real" or "unreal" mean in the context of the middle way? That takes time to unpack, because we have so many unexamined assumptions about "realness". I promise to challenge everyone's assumption about realness in this retreat, which is really fun!

I don't want to get too philosophical

here. Yes, these teachings do have a philosophical aspect, but they are meant to be directly and personally explored. Philosophical views are abstract, and the middle way path brings us out of abstraction ideas into a more direct relationship with reality. A great Buddhist master, Nagarjuna, said: "I prostrate to he who has abandoned all views." He was speaking about the Buddha, and the views he refers to here are eternalism and nihilism. He is suggesting that there is another way of being in the world that is insightful, in accord with how things are, and accessible by direct investigation. It is "first person science," which also requires a lot of heart

and devotion, because through practice we venture into discovering something very deep about our mind and its world.

Felicity: It is easy to understand the importance of moderating or carefully considering ones approach, behaviours and extreme or polarising attitudes and views. Sometimes it can be understood as not being too passionate in life, curbing joy, enthusiasm, and less engagement in life. Can you speak about the essence of the Middle Way in relation to engaging in life and enjoying life?

Elizabeth: It could be that some people think of the middle way as passive, neutral, disengaged or indecisive. That is a language assumption that also results

from a lack of information as to what the Buddha was actually saying. In fact, I would say that the middle way teachings invite us into a way of being in life that is courageous and lively, because it has to do with committing oneself to not shutting down around experience. Whoever trains in the middle way, learns to embrace both the pain and beauty of life without grasping and rejection. Life within the system of hope and fear keeps our mind constantly trapped in a disturbed state. Wouldn't it be joyful to get free of that?

Felicity: Thank you for providing such insightful answer. What a lovely interview. I look forward to attending your course at the Buddhist Summer School. ■

Interview with Dechen Davies

Matthew Dawson



Dechen Davies has been a student of Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche for more than 20 years, for 8 of those she was ordained as a nun. She has engaged in short term retreats and has been practicing meditation for more than 2 decades. Dechen will be teaching on the Joy of Meditation at the Buddhist Summer School 2021.

Matthew Dawson: Thanks for taking the time to do this interview Dechen. What school of Buddhism do you practice in within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition?

Dechen Davies: Kagyu-Nyingma traditions.

Matthew: And how did you first come across E-Vam Institute and the Kagyu and

Nyingma schools?

Dechen: It's probably a less common answer that I'll give. My parents introduced me to the Kagyu tradition. My parents ran a Kagyu Centre in Sydney in the 70s and 80s where I first grew up. After that we moved out of the Centre but were still very closely involved. As a family, we would attend teachings there and visit the Centre often. We would have visiting teachers stay at our house. So from a young age, I had Kagyu-Nyingma influences in terms of teachers just in my life in a more casual way.

Matthew: And how old were you when they first started inviting teachers around to their Centre?

Dechen: They ran the Centre before I was born. And so it was my early life, I think, probably up until I was about two or three, maybe two, was when we moved out of the Centre. Yes. I think my brother wasn't born when we were at the Centre. And it just wasn't appropriate to have a family there at the time. But in terms of when I was first introduced, I was a baby (laughs). I can't remember the first teachers. But there are photos of teachers holding me as a baby, so yeah, very young.

Matthew: How about your parents? How did they come across Buddhism or were their parents Buddhists as well?

Dechen: And their parents parents (laughs)...I'm not sure exactly how my mum first got involved with Buddhism. But I know that she was at the first retreat now known as Chenrezig Institute with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa. I think that was the first Tibetan retreat in Australia. I believe that was in the early 70s. And my dad was interested from a young age, from a teenager, reading some zen and some Trungpa Rinpoche books as well. But it makes me realize how little I do know because I couldn't actually tell you how they came to the Dharma.

And so when His Holiness 16th Karmapa passed away in 1981 and then his cremation was held at Rumtek. And

because my parents had the Sydney Kagyu Centre they went as representatives and I went with them. So I suppose that was a fairly big Kagyu influence in terms of early influences and getting to meet all the teachers as a baby at that point and attending His Holiness' cremation.

Matthew: Oh, so you actually went to Rumtek Monastery for the cremation?

Dechen: I mean, I can't remember it. But yes, I did.

Matthew: You were a baby or a small child?

Dechen: I was a baby. I was like one or two. And then you asked how I came to E-Vam Institute. So I started to independently develop an interest in Buddhism. I wasn't raised Buddhist. I was raised in a cultural environment with Buddhism. I wasn't taught anything. That was a specific instruction from my parents teacher. Not to teach my brother and I Buddhism. So we learnt about stories about the masters, we read King Gesar, we read Siddhartha's life story. So we had that cultural kind of environment. Also, we said mantras for insects when they died. And we understood, very superficially, about karma, but we didn't understand what Buddhism really taught. I really became interested when I left home. I separated myself from my parents because they were big figures in the New South Wales and Sydney Buddhist scene. I moved to Brisbane, became interested, started practicing and studying there. Then I was really wanting a teacher, and praying for and aspiring to find a teacher. Around that time, Traleg Rinpoche came to Sydney when I was down visiting my parents. And so I did Mahamudra teachings with him then. It wasn't the first time that I'd met him, but it was the first time I'd taken teachings from him. And from then on, I just kept taking teachings with him. And, yeah, that's how I got involved.

Matthew: And you say you had met Traleg Rinpoche previously, was that when your folks had invited him up to give a teaching at their Centre?

Dechen: That was when he would visited our house. I never attended the teachings then. But yes, he was doing teachings. But he might come over for a meal, both

Rinpoche and Felicity, so yeah, more on that kind of casual social basis.

Matthew: It's amazing to hear that kind of background because I've known you for around 10 years, but I had no idea about that. I sort of knew that your parents were Buddhists, but I didn't know that they actually ran a Buddhist Centre up in NSW and that you were raised from such a young age, in that kind of environment. So I guess your background would colour how you see spirituality and the modern world because you've grown up in that kind of environment. So I just wondered what your thoughts on how you see spirituality, and how you see being a modern person and engaging with spirituality is for you?

Dechen: I mean, it's hard to say how your background colours your perception, isn't it? Because it's hard to say unless you butt up against someone with a different background. I was discussing this the other day. I think that I have less of a problem accepting what a lot of modern people might consider non-scientific ideas, like karma. I work in science, I work in research, but I don't have any issue with karma. And there's no kind of dissonance within myself in accepting that. And I think that perhaps, in that way, I might be similar to someone who was raised in a Buddhist country where it's just part of your belief system. I feel like I don't have to put in energy to reconcile my modern beliefs and my spiritual beliefs. In terms of practicing in a modern world, I think that is the key to it. We put in a lot of energy into trying to understand what is faith, and what can I back up with evidence, and though those things are important to a degree, we use so much energy doing it that it can take away from just relaxing and going with a belief system that you've decided to go with. And I don't mean that in a blind way, that we should accept things in a blind way, but I feel like a lot of people struggle with just the energy is what I see. There's a lot of energy having to be put out, or if you don't think that you're putting out energy reconciling then perhaps you're kind of almost repressing and going, "I'm just going to put it on the back burner". But to me, that also is a way to expel energy putting it on the back burner, because it's still there, unresolved.

And that sounds like I'm being a bit psychoanalytic. Do you get what I mean? With something like karma or rebirth I'm very aware that I might come across as very unscientific, but I don't care because I don't have to worry about it. Like I get on with my life. It's not an issue for me. In terms of, other ways of living in the world. I don't know, have I answered the question?

Matthew: I think you have. I feel like what you were getting at was that there seems to be a lot of resources dedicated to making everything scientific. And some of that energy could be directed into just doing an experiment on yourself. To see whether you think it works for you. And yeah, everything seems to be, well, at least most things seem to be quantitative and backed up with statistics and everything like that. But on the other hand, there's also that subjective experiential aspect to life as well, which is very hard to quantify and break down into, numbers and pigeonhole. I very much resonate with what you're saying about the energy being dedicated to different world views.

Dechen: And I think that it's a misplaced energy in some ways because, we all are believing things that aren't scientific all the time. You just decide what you're going to believe and that's it. You have some thought about it, but then you go with it. That's just my opinion.

Matthew: I understand that you were a nun for a while. So you were part of a monastic community for a time in the Tibetan tradition. Might you want to say something about what that was like? And how do you think it compares, lifestyle wise, to being a lay practitioner?

Dechen: It's very different. I'd clarify by saying I wasn't part of a monastic community. I was a monastic. But I didn't ever live in a monastic community. So I didn't really get to experience that. As a nun, there definitely was something about when I would be with other monastics, that just felt wonderful. And I'd see someone and I'd be drawn to them, even seeing Catholic nuns, I'd be drawn to them, just as others who have also committed to that way of life. And I was speaking to other nuns and monks, they also felt like that a lot. So there is



something about community that is really important, but I didn't experience that. So yeah, I was ordained for eight years. In terms of the difference between ordination and being a lay person... I suppose it really does depend on how you are a lay person. I spent three years training to be a monastic and so my life was different, but it wasn't as different as it is now, if that makes sense. So, pre taking robes was not as different as post taking robes. And that makes sense because pre taking robes, you're gearing up, you're preparing for something. So it's not such a big shift in your life. The key one is, when you're wearing robes, it's a massive symbol to everybody that you are on a different path. And that they should probably treat you differently. And also to yourself every morning, when you put on robes, it's a reminder that you have taken vows and what that means, and what your purpose that you're giving to your life is. The actual activities might not differ to somebody who is able to spend a lot of their time practicing and studying the Dharma as a lay person. But there aren't many lay people who have the ability to make vow commitments every day and then also twice a month, making confession and purifying your vows. You know, unless you're doing something like Vajrasattva practice regularly maybe some lay practitioners don't really experience that. I think that although the activities might be dissimilar to someone who is living in a retreat centre, or is full time in a Dharma centre and not having another job outside of that, the difference is that it's very unlikely that you'll be asked by others to

come for a drink. (Laughs) Like, I say that as a joke, but it's actually true. People aren't going to ask you to so many events, to so many social things. If you say no, you're not going to have people question you on it, or they're not going to say, 'Oh, come on just this once.' You know, you have a very visible sign and people kind of leave you alone in that sense.

Matthew: Yeah, that's an interesting one. On a personal level, taking the no intoxicants vow has been a really interesting experience for me because I started to notice in social situations, how much people talk socially, just about drinking alcohol. So one thing taking that vow has made me take stock of is the types of social groups that I mix with. But also I find in some social situations even if someone knows you are a Buddhist, that in some ways, you might not get invited to so many social situations, like going for a drink because of the perception that Buddhists don't drink or like to have fun. I mean, it hasn't happened overly to me, but on occasion I've felt that way. I could be projecting too of course. I'm just saying that I can relate to what you're saying about the robes being a symbol. And that it sort of tells the world to perhaps treat you in a different way.

Dechen: We just mentioned drinking, and that's kind of an obvious one, but it's also other kind of wastes of time, and conversations. So, as a nun, people wouldn't make sexual jokes around me. Generally, I can think of a few exceptions. But there would be less kind of inane conversations. Less gossip. In general people have a sense that you are a holy

person (Laughs). I mean, most people who knew me, knew I wasn't, but there is some level of respect for the robes, and that certain behaviours around someone wearing robes is not really appropriate. And if those conversations happened, I generally stayed quiet. And that happens. If people gossip around me now, I often stay quiet. But I think I'm more perceived as rude for not joining in. Whereas in the past, I had a good reason.

Matthew: And might you want to say something about – and this ties in to the social dimension of being a Buddhist – Buddhists engaging in social issues. Might you want to say something about that?

Dechen: Are you talking about coming from what we've been talking about or social activism?

Matthew: I'm talking more about social activism. I guess it can be seen as an extension of those social situations, for instance, you're in a social situation having a conversation and a social issue might come up, whatever that issue might be.

Dechen: I think as a Buddhist, you should be engaged and you should not be apathetic to the world. You should take an interest, when you have the energy and the ability to do so. Some people don't have that ability. And I think it's completely fine if they turn a bit insular in their focus. But I do think where possible, you should be engaged. However, it's important to do that with a sense of a greater perspective and that we are aware, in terms of the impermanence of things. The world constantly changes. And we should have great intentions to change the world. But also understand that it will never be perfect. While beings have a dualistic mind, they will never be free of suffering, no matter how hard we try. But that shouldn't dampen our efforts. Also, because we don't have great wisdom, and we can't see clearly, even if we think we're doing something righteously, and we have all the facts, that whatever we do, may actually end up causing harm to others. So that's, I think, evident throughout history. People thinking they're doing good, if you look back, perhaps there have been ramifications that were unforeseen. And so I think having some sense of, always having good intentions, we should try our

hardest, but not be fixed on what we're doing, not become obsessed, and oppositional or polarised. It may be that perhaps people who are doing something different, maybe their course of action might be the best one. We don't have great wisdom to see, we don't have that foresight to see what the implications of our actions will be. So engaging in activism, engaging in social issues, while also maintaining a greater perspective.

Matthew: And what advice would you have to people interested in spirituality in general and Buddhism in particular, who have the interest or the inclination? What advice would you have for them?

Dechen: Do it. Keep doing it. Do it with

joy! I really think this is important. And it's what I'll be talking about at Buddhist Summer School practicing with joy, because, if you turn it into a hard slog, it's not going to happen. And you're just not going to want to do it. And it sounds obvious, but I feel like spiritual practitioners, Buddhist and others can really fall into this pit of turning it into another form of self-flagellation, finding another way of having negative thoughts about yourself. Guilt because you didn't practice. Guilt because you didn't act the way you should have. Yes. So do it, but try to create positive reinforcement around it. For example, always end on a high, don't push yourself until it feels negative.

Matthew: That's a very important point.

Dechen: Yeah. I mean, there's no point being an unhappy spiritual person or an unhappy Buddhist. Personally, I think joy is one of the most fundamental qualities. If you're joyful, you have the energy to practice, you are going to impart positive energy to other people. Even if you're not actually practicing, you're going to be in a mind that is more likely to practice. So to me, that's one of the keys.

Matthew: I'm looking forward to dropping in on your Buddhist Summer School course. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Dechen: Okay. Thank you Matt. ■

Maitripa Centre, Healesville Update



It has been an interesting year for Maitripa. In 2019 as many may know, due to a massive effort by some of the Sangha and contractors we now have a very impressive and immaculately renovated kitchen area. Due to covid we haven't been able to show it off very much. Thank fully, we are looking forward to welcoming back groups to Maitripa in the near future.

Maitripa has been closed since March 2020 due to covid restrictions. The last group activity was a double-site booking on Labour Day weekend between One Heart Yoga & Meditation and Ziran Kung Fu Academy. (We managed to secure, through extensive searching and

subsequent travel, enough toilet paper to see both groups through!).

Since then we have been attending to routine maintenance tasks plus a few minor upgrades to make sure Maitripa is in good condition for re-opening.

During lockdown we stayed busy with a range of upgrades. We have installed a new solid-wood staircase outside the lower bedroom wing (driveway-side) in order to keep our exit-pathways safe. We have improved the plumbing in the upper bathroom block, small laundry, wash room and smaller resident kitchen. Also, we now have an improved hot water supply to these areas and the excess piping has been removed.

Michael Neighbour has been a powerhouse in the gardens over the last couple of months since restrictions have allowed for him to come on site. His contributions have included fire hazard reduction, reduction of harmful weeds, rejuvenating some of the garden beds with new shrubs, and ferns, planting trees throughout the property, and installing possum guards on trees near buildings to minimise any potential damage. We are very fortunate to have Michael at Maitripa and extend our sincere appreciation for his efforts.

New residents Damian and Bec settled into Maitripa just a few weeks before the lockdown and were absolutely wonderful at adapting to the new situation and carrying out various maintenance and gardening tasks.

We have developed a clear covid-safe plan at Maitripa and look forward to welcoming the different groups and the E-Vam sangha once again. It is already looking like a busy start to 2021. We look forward to hosting retreats again soon, both group and solitary, and are open for bookings and site visits. If you would like to find out more or inquire about holding a retreat at Maitripa please feel free to contact us at info@maitripacentre.org

Wishing everyone a safe and healthy Summer ahead. ■

*Daniel Blaze
Maitripa Caretaker*

News from Nyima Tashi Buddhist Centre Auckland, New Zealand



We at Nyima Tashi send our warmest greetings to all and offer the best wishes for everyone's good health and happiness.

Nyima Tashi opened for 2020 with the annual Auckland Buddhist Summer School. This was the first Summer School in our beautiful new premises at 717 New North Rd in Mt Albert. This year's Summer School featured the masterful Zen teacher, Ekai Roshi, as well as the lucid Judy Lief from Shambhala in the US and also Dr Tony Fernando, a practicing psychiatrist based in Auckland with a special interest in how to support medical professionals to develop and maintain Compassion.

Plans were well underway for a 7-day retreat with Lama Chonam & Sangye Khandro on the practices of Troma Nagmo Chod from the Dudjom lineage in April 2020. But as the situation with COVID-19 rapidly unfolded and out of concern for the wellbeing of our esteemed Teachers and the many students who were arriving from overseas, the course was cancelled. We continue to hold the sincere aspiration that it will be possible to invite Lama Chonam & Sangye Khandro back to Auckland in the future to receive teachings from this most auspicious lineage.

Like many other Centres around the world, Nyima Tashi has spent many weeks with its doors closed to visitors through the various measures taken by the NZ

government to contain the spread of COVID-19. Through this time, activity at the Centre has not ceased as it has been a ripe opportunity for practice and retreat.

Nyima Tashi offered teachings via zoom starting with topics elucidated by the 9th Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche such as Mahamudra practice & Compassion.

When open to the public, Nyima Tashi has concentrated on short term courses that have been well attended by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Examples of these courses are "Are we Unhappy?", "Learning to Sit" and most recently a short introductory course explaining the basis of the practice of Tonglen.

Throughout all of this, regular activity of the Centre has continued through weekly meditation classes and Book Club – which this year has been reading Shogam's publication of Traleg Rinpoche's book "Desire : Why it Matters". The Shedra class has focused on Traleg Rinpoche's teachings on Mipham Rinpoche's great treatise "Gateway to Knowledge".

We wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge our genuine indebtedness to the indomitable Ani Jangchub Lhamo whose unceasing devotion upholds the precious legacy of The 9th Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche. We look to the 10th Traleg Rinpoche with the unending aspiration that He will one day return to His Centre here in Auckland. ■

Meaghan Duffy

For more information about Nyima Tashi:

Website <https://nyima-tashi.org.nz>

Email nyimatashi.nz@gmail.com



The anniversary of Traleg Rinpoche's parinirvana

News from E-Vam Buddhist Institute in the United States



This year due to Covid we had our first online Retreat, Study Group Series and Meditation Day via zoom. The Sangha in the U.S. live quite a distance from one another so the opportunity to meet online on such a regular basis brought a closeness and intimacy that we really weren't expecting. In this year's annual retreat we studied a series of teachings on Grasping and Fixation, and a second series on Mahamudra by Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche. The teachings were so profound and extremely helpful in navigating this most difficult of years. Lama Jinpa, a western Lama from Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's Sangha provided guidance for Chenrezig Puja, a practice we did daily on retreat.

Over October and November we explored two study group topics. The first topic was the study of the book "Nyima Tashi", a translation of a text from the first

Traleg Tulku, Nyima Tashi. This was a profoundly moving time to reflect on our teacher's beginnings as a Master in the Mahamudra tradition. The second study group topic was on the "Essence of Dzogchen". We studied a series of teachings by Traleg Rinpoche, now included in Shogam Publications new book, "Actuality of Being". The teachings by Rinpoche supported by the book provided not only some of the pith instructions of Dzogchen but also some detailed practice advice. It was both a theoretical and practical study journey. To complete this year's activities three of the Sangha members – Julie Breczynski-Lewis, Joyce Isabelle and Nina Widger led a day of meditations. Reviewing the Dzogchen practices, contemplating the 4 immeasurable – love, joy, compassion and equanimity; and resting the mind in tranquility meditation. A beautiful way to

complete our practice and study time together for the year. We look forward to continuing more online activities throughout 2021. Please check out the E-Vam US website <https://evam.org> or Facebook for details, or send an email to office@evam.org for further information.

Earlier in the year E-Vam assisted Shogam Publications to fund raise for the documentary now being completed on Traleg Rinpoche's life. We wish Shogam every success with the premiere and eventual release of the documentary. Premier invitations will be going out in the new year to all the donors and Sangha who have made this project possible. Thanks to all.

We pray for the long life of Traleg Rinpoche the 10th. On behalf of the US Sangha I want to wish everyone a safe and prosperous New Year. ■

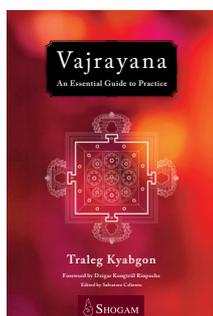
Traleg Khandro

News From Akshara Bookstore

Akshara Bookstore offers an extensive collection of Buddhist Books and Ritual items, and I am always amazed by how people come to the store young or old and are blown away by the range of Buddhist titles. It also surprises me that there are so many hidden Traleg Rinpoche enthusiasts who come to the store eager for the Dharma!

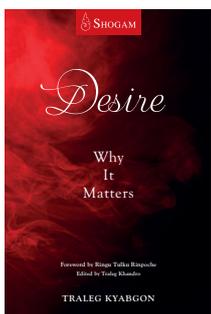
During Melbourne's lockdown, although Akshara was closed to walk-in customers, we were open online for contactless delivery. And with the help of the latest Traleg Rinpoche Shogam Publications, people enthusiastically kept purchasing their Dharma books locally. These books are excellent. If you haven't purchased a copy of Rinpoche's latest Shogam Releases, make sure you drop by Akshara or call us to get a copy.

New Releases from Shogam books include:



Vajrayana: An Essential Guide to Practice

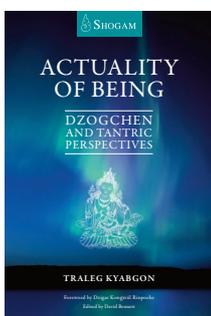
Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche explains the profound meaning of Vajrayana, inclusive of the Six Yogas of Naropa, and Dream Yoga demystifying the practices and providing the necessary elucidations.



Desire: Why it Matters

In this book, Traleg Kyabgon discusses the notion of desire from Buddhist and other perspectives. He reviews commonly held beliefs of desire that are often misguided and can be diametrically opposed. On the one hand there is the belief that desire is an important human experience that is natural, which leads to happiness and pleasure. Then there is the juxtaposition that desire is a type of demon whose expression leads to

diminishment and destruction. There has been a long standing belief in some Eastern, Western religious and philosophical traditions that all forms of desire are bad and that our ultimate goal is a state of complete desirelessness.



Actuality of Being: Dzogchen and Tantric Perspectives

Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche elaborates on key aspects of the view, meditation and action of Dzogchen practice and outlines the way in which confusion arises; the notions of self-existing wisdom, primordial purity and non-conceptuality; the four levels of mind; the three ways of resting the mind; the three aspects of energy; authentication of body,

speech and mind; and the actualization of the ground; and presents profound practice methods to deepen one's understanding and experience.

Here is a link to the Shogam Website orders can be made through Akshara books! <https://www.shogam.com/books/>

Also, congratulations to Sangha member Matthew Dawson's new Publication company Platform Booksellers and Publications and the wonderful new release of "Making Friends Out Of Enemies" by Dungsé Lama Pema.

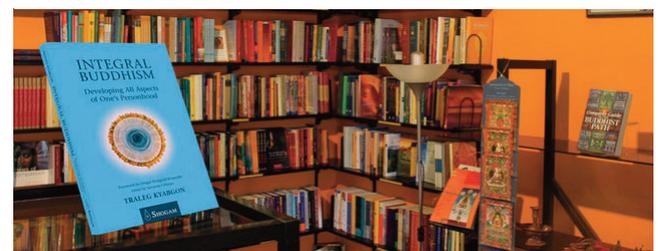
"When destructive emotions control us, we fail to act in ways that benefit others. Instead, our enemies of pride, jealousy, anger, greed, and ignorance hurt ourselves, and moreover, the beings and the environment around us. This book introduces us to the classic Tibetan Buddhist "mind training", or lojong, instructions, which tell us how to regain our profoundly peaceful and compassionate minds."

Also soon to be released by Platform is a new book compiled from talks given at E-Vam Institute: *Timeless Truths and Modern Delusions: Buddhism, the Perennial Philosophy and Modernity*, By Dr Harry Oldmeadow.

As the sub-title of *Timeless Truths and Modern Delusions* signals, this compilation of talks and articles focuses on Buddhism, the perennial philosophy and contemporary tensions between tradition and modernity. The author expounds the traditionalist perspective informing the work of such figures as René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon, focusing on their affirmation of traditional religious forms and their critique of modernity. Harry Oldmeadow explores the challenges and opportunities facing Eastern religious traditions in the contemporary West, examines the role of several key figures in the East-West encounter, and elucidates traditional doctrines about time and cosmic cycles. The book is directly addressed to Buddhist practitioners but will repay the attention of anyone seeking a spiritual path amidst the confusion of our age.

Both these book are and will available for order via Akshara books, and you can check out Platform Booksellers and Publications here: <https://platformbooks.co> ■

Mark Dawson



Akshara
BOOKSTORE

10% off Sale

We are happy to announce a 10% off Sale of all titles (except new releases) during the month of December. For a Member of E-Vam Institute, that is 20% off! Supporting Akshara Bookstore also supports E-Vam Institute, helping to provide the education, practice, and support to the diversity of people's practice and understanding.

News From Shogam Publications



Shogam Publications introduced eBooks in 2019, we plan to introduce audio books in the coming year. These are exciting developments. What is arguably even more exciting is that we have ventured into a new world, and we are calling it Shogam Multimedia in line with Rinpoche's wishes, as an arm of Shogam Publications. For our first project we will be releasing a documentary on the life of Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche the 9th in 2021.

I don't want to share any spoilers so it's just a matter of waiting and then viewing, and I hope you will all do that. This project has been made possible by many many people. All the financial donors – thank you thank you thank you. To cinematographer Leigh Tilson, whose talent appears unending and our Director Editor Jocelyn Meli whose creativity has been boundless. What a delight it has been to work with you both. I look forward to announcing the online Premier in the new year.

The core of Shogam Publications activities is the books. The book team at Traleg Rinpoche's publishing business were excited to release two new books in 2020 by Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche: *Vajrayana: An Essential Guide to Practice* and *Actuality of Being: Dzogchen and Tantric Perspectives*. *Vajrayana*, provides details and some practices not often

shared with sufficient detail that the practices can be incorporated into one's home meditations. It provides new insights, and demystifies many aspects of Tantra creating a far more relatable relationship with the ritualised processes designed to help us all understand the mind better. *Actuality of Being* is a profound journey into the essential Dzogchen practices of the Nyingma tradition. It not only elucidates the view and path of Dzogchen, it also gives astounding meditational practices to give glimpses of a purer state of mind untainted by our constant and excessive conceptualisation.

We were also able to announce translations completed in 2020 by our friends and overseas Dharma publishers: German translation of *Luminous Bliss* is now available and the Chinese translations of *Karma: What It Is, What It Isn't and Why It Matters* is also now available. Thanks to some very talented translators we have an ever growing selection of Rinpoche's books through Shogam Publications and Shambhala Publications in a variety of languages.

Next year we are planning to produce two more books of Traleg Rinpoche's teachings, as well as introducing a new author to our esteemed community of authors. We will be able to announce our new author in the coming year.

I want to take this opportunity to thank this year's wonderful Shogam team for their commitment to sharing Rinpoche's teachings and their commitment to producing quality books. Thanks to Claire Blaxell, David Bennett, Salvatore Celiento, Jhampa Dhadak, and our newest editor Sue Howes. Also, importantly I want to thank the many transcribers and the many people who over the years recorded Rinpoche's teachings, digitised those that needed it and stored the teachings safely. This has enabled us to review and study Rinpoche's teachings and continue to share them more and more with others. While Traleg Rinpoche the 10th is growing we can continue to educate ourselves in the many aspects of the Dharma that Traleg Rinpoche presented. We look forward deeply and joyously for the time when Traleg Rinpoche the 10th has grown and is ready to return to his Centres. It is a great honour for all of us at Shogam to prepare books of Rinpoche's teachings and the documentary of Traleg Rinpoche's life to share globally. May all beings benefit. Wishing you all the very best for the new year. ■

Traleg Khandro



E-Vam Institute 2021 Summer Teaching Program

9-11 January 2021

Buddhist Summer School – Online

The 38th Annual Buddhist Summer School is online! Start your New Year by immersing yourself in teachings from Theravada, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism. The Summer School offers courses on Buddhist philosophy and meditation, as well as psychology and comparative philosophy. Teachers in 2021 include: Ekai Korematsu Roshi, Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel, Ajahn Dr Buddharakkhita, Sam Bercholz, Dr Ruth Gamble, Dr Kathleen Gregory and Dechen Davies. Reserve your place now: <http://www.buddhistsummerschool.org/>

29-30 January

An Evening and Day of Teachings and Practice

Traleq Kyabgon Rinpoche IX Teachings on “View, Meditation and Action”

“We cannot separate Buddhist meditation from Buddhist teachings. I think sometimes we may try to do that in modern times but from the Buddhist point of view, the teachings guide us with our meditation”.

Traleq Kyabgon Rinpoche IX

Many Tibetan Buddhist teachings are organised within the framework of View, Meditation and Action, providing guidance to the practitioner on the interrelationship between our perception of reality, subjective experience and how we interact with others. We welcome you to join with us for a Friday evening and Saturday of meditation practice and teachings where Rinpoche explains how these notions fit together and their relevance not only to our meditation practice, but to our interactions with our world. These teachings were presented at the Buddhist Summer School in 2007. Details TBA.



1-5 February

A Week of Daily Meditation Practice

“As it is said, meditation itself is a practice in habituation”

Traleq Kyabgon Rinpoche IX (BSS 2007)

Please join us for our summer series of meditation practice in the evenings from 1-5 February. These sessions are open to everyone – from beginners to experienced meditators – offering an opportunity to encourage and consolidate daily practice. The daily meditation practice series provides a welcoming and supportive environment, guided by the meditation instructions as taught by Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche IX. Details TBA.

16 February-9 March

8-9.30 pm Online

Special Event:

Do Tulku Rinpoche on the Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra:

The Way of the Bodhisattva – Part One



The Way of the Bodhisattva is known as the path of the awakened beings, it is synonymous with the Mahayana or Great Vehicle. In this series Do Tulku Rinpoche will introduce the teachings of the Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra which provide both the inspiration and guidance we need to bring compassion and wisdom together on the path. This is part one of a two-part series. Details TBA.

Born in South India in 1985, Do Tulku Rinpoche was recognized by H.H. Sakya Trizin as the 6th Raktrul Rinpoche at the age of 17. He completed eleven years of training in Buddhist philosophy, practice and concluded his studies in debate with the title of Acharya at the Dzongsar Khyentse Chokyi Lodro Institute. He is a lay practitioner with family. Do Tulku Rinpoche is a translator in the 84000 project; and is appreciated for his learned, interactive and often unconventional and humorous way of teaching Buddhist teachings.

13 March 2021

Urban One-Day Retreat for Under 35s

As part of E-Vam Institute’s ongoing Under 35s Program, we welcome newcomers and those with an interest in Buddhism to participate in the Urban One-Day Retreat. This full Saturday program includes Indo-Tibetan yoga, meditation, Buddhist philosophy and ritual practice. As well as incorporating aspects of retreat such as noble silence and adopting a mindful and positive attitude, the program offers an opportunity to experience the fullness of retreat in a day of practice. Details TBA.

PLAN AHEAD

E-Vam Institute 2021 Autumn Teaching Program

1-5 April

The Annual Easter Retreat

We look forward to sharing details with you soon.

22 April-13 May

Special Event:

Do Tulku Rinpoche on the Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra: The Way of the Bodhisattva – Part Two

Do Tulku Rinpoche will continue his teachings on the Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra which provides both the inspiration and guidance we need to bring compassion and wisdom together on the path. Please note that completion of part one is not a prerequisite for enrolling in part two. Details TBA.





E-VAM INSTITUTE

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