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# *Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness*

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As usual we sit in a comfortable position and adopt a positive motivation, which in this case means generating the bodhicitta attitude, a state of mind based on compassion. If you already have an attitude of love and compassion or bodhicitta, then maintain that and increase its intensity.

Checking one's motivation and cultivating a positive motivation makes sure that the motivation is not based on doing a practice, such as receiving the teaching, merely for some temporary benefit in this life. That would not be a suitable motivation. Nor is a motivation that is tainted with an attitude of achieving a good future life a suitable motivation. Furthermore a motivation tainted with an attitude of gaining self-liberation, i.e. freeing oneself from suffering and samsara just for one's own benefit, is also not a suitable motivation. The suitable and appropriate motivation for receiving the Mahayana teachings is to have an attitude of wishing to benefit all living beings, and creating the causes to achieve enlightenment in order to do so.

A statement in the teachings says that just as a teaching is a Mahayana teaching, so too the listener also has to have the Mahayana attitude. Even though the teaching may be a Mahayana teaching taught by a teacher with the proper Mahayana motivation, it will not be a full Mahayana teaching if the listeners don't also generate the proper Mahayana motivation. So it is important to generate the necessary motivation to secure the intended result.

As I normally stress when we talk about motivation and practice, the main point is that we make sure that our mind is imbued with a loving and compassionate attitude, and that we keep that in mind for whatever practice we do. The purpose of our practice is to increase the loving compassionate attitude within one's own mind.

As mentioned regularly in the teachings it is good to try to overcome any wrong attitudes about doing Dharma practice, in particular Mahayana practices. The wrong attitudes we need to overcome include grasping at one's own liberation and peace, and to overcome that one generates the bodhicitta attitude based on love and compassion. The bodhicitta attitude then secures us against clinging to one's own peace and liberation.

To overcome clinging to the pleasures of this life, the teachings recommend that we think of the transitory nature of phenomena, which is impermanence. So meditating on impermanence is the antidote for overcoming clinging to the mere pleasures of this life. Meditation on developing renunciation, which is seeing the faults of samsara, opposes clinging to a good rebirth in the future. If we are not mindful we could very easily fall into the grip of any of these attitudes, so we must really be diligent and mindful to ensure that our practice is an authentic, unique practice of the Mahayana. This means that we must check our mind continuously.

We can also relate generating a proper motivation to the essence of the lam rim teachings. Those who are familiar with the lam rim, or graduated path to enlightenment, teachings would know that it is divided into three main

points: the practices that are common to the small scope, the practices that are common to the medium scope and the practices common to the great scope. Techniques and methods for overcoming clinging to this life, as well as clinging to a good rebirth in the next life, are mentioned in the practices of the small scope. The practices presented in the medium scope are practices that overcome clinging to the pleasures of a good rebirth i.e. seeking a higher state for oneself, in the next lifetime; and the practices presented in the great scope are the practices that help to overcome clinging to personal liberation.

We can use the three scopes of the lam rim teachings to set our motivation, check our mind and remind ourselves. When we read the teachings of the lam rim or the graduated path to enlightenment, it will become very clear what our own level of practice is, and the appropriate practices that we need to adopt. That is something we should be able to detect.

Those of us who are familiar with the teachings, and those who are not too familiar with them, may have heard that the Buddhist teachings are divided into the Hinayana teachings and the Mahayana teachings, and it is good to know the differences between these two. What is the main difference between the Hinayana practitioner and the Mahayana practitioner? The practices are said to differ in respect of their goals, as well as the purpose of attaining those goals. The goal of the Mahayana practitioner is to attain great enlightenment, the omniscient mind, and the purpose for attaining that goal is in order to liberate all beings from all suffering.

In the Mahayana teachings the goal includes removing all obscuration and delusions as well as the very imprints of the delusions, in short every aspect of the negative states of mind. This is done with the practice of cultivating bodhicitta and engaging in practising the six perfections with the purpose of liberating all living beings from every type of suffering, and leading them to the ultimate state of peace, which is enlightenment. Whereas in the Hinayana teachings the ultimate goal is to merely seek personal peace, which is a state of being free from the sufferings by removing the delusions from the mind, and the purpose is solely to liberate oneself from suffering. Thus we can see the difference between the Hinayana and Mahayana in terms of the goals and the purpose. It is good to remember this and understand how they differ in practice.

This explanation is in order to make sure one has a proper motivation for receiving the Mahayana teachings. The main point that most of you will be familiar with is that it is necessary to cultivate bodhicitta (which is translated in English as the altruistic intention to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings) for one's practice to be pure Mahayana. We need to familiarise ourselves with that bodhicitta state of mind and try to cultivate it. For as long as we strive to adopt and cultivate that attitude, to that extent our practice becomes a meaningful, worthwhile practice.

The actual topic of the teaching is The Great Seal of the Mahamudra Teachings from the Gelug tradition.

As I have mentioned previously, in attempting to explain the teachings on this topic I am here to serve merely as a mediator for you to generate a virtuous state of mind, and to encourage you to gain more understanding for yourselves. By no means can I give an exhaustive and extensive explanation on this very profound topic. Even though you consider this a special occasion by offering an extensive mandala, that doesn't mean that I will be able to provide an

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extensive explanation. So, even though you may take this as a special occasion, it doesn't ensure that I can provide you with something extraordinary from my side.

As I normally stress, the main important thing is to be mindful of the proper attitude within oneself, and at the very least to try to maintain the proper attitude when dealing with others, which is love, compassion and kindness. That attitude will be of assistance and benefit to oneself in whatever one does, in practice, study, at work or in relationships. Thus it is something that one needs to cultivate, nourish and protect.

The effort and diligence needed to generate a proper and positive attitude has to come from one's own side. If one waits around thinking that someone else will offer some kind of assistance to have a positive mind, then it will never occur. If someone could assist us to generate positive attitudes to gain realisations, then the buddhas of the past would have already done so and we would all be enlightened by now!

I stress the importance of protecting and securing one's own positive state of mind and attitude and what one has learned, because of the comments made to me by some who had gone to other teachings and searched around; they have said, 'Somehow I ended up doubting and losing what I had previously gained'. So, if one is not careful in securing what one has already learned and practised, then shopping around will not necessarily help our mind to progress.

The text that we are using to explain the Gelug tradition of Mahamudra was composed by Panchen Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltzen. Not only did he compose the root text, which is in verse form, but he also composed an auto-commentary to the root text. We will use these two texts as the basis for our explanation of Mahamudra.

NAMO MAHAMUDRAYA

I prostrate to Mahamudra, the Great Seal of Voidness,

The Sanskrit salutation NAMO MAHAMUDRAYA is translated into English as, 'I prostrate to Mahamudra, the Great Seal of Voidness'.

As is the case of the root text, the commentary also has a verse of salutation to the guru who is endowed with the three kindnesses. The opening verse of the auto-commentary reads:

The primordial wisdom of all buddhas in the entire universe  
Manifests in the guise of one who wears saffron robes,  
To you the venerable guru who is kind in the three ways,  
With great respect I prostrate at your lotus feet.

The 'primordial wisdom of all buddhas in the entire universe' refers to the wisdom of all of the enlightened beings in the entire universe, which manifests itself in the guise of a human wearing saffron robes (meaning an ordained person). So the lama is in that aspect.

The lama, to whom the author specifically refers to in his salutation, is his own guru Khedrub Sangye Yeshe. Being kind in the three ways refers particularly to a lama in the Tantric tradition: one who bestows Tantric initiations, gives explanations of the texts and who imparts personal practice instruction. The lama, who benefits the disciple in these three ways, is known as a lama who is kind in the three ways.

The next verse in the auto-commentary reads:

Henceforth I will explain the lamp re-clarifying  
Mahamudra,

That which is the innermost elixir of the buddhas of the three times,  
The essential meaning of the oceans of the sutras and tantras  
And the roadway traversed by all great masters of the past.'

The author first refers to the title of the auto-commentary, which is *The Lamp That Re-Clarifies Mahamudra*.

Then he explains Mahamudra as having these features:

- It is the 'innermost elixir', or the essential nourishment of all the buddhas of the three times.
- It explains 'the essential meaning of the oceans of sutras and tantras'. Here 'oceans' is analogous to the vast number of teachings on sutra and tantra. So the Mahamudra serves as the essential meaning of all these teachings.
- It serves as 'a roadway traversed by all great masters of the past'. This indicates that without the realisation of Mahamudra—voidness—one cannot gain the higher realisations to achieve the ultimate states. So therefore it is like the roadway traversed by all great masters of the past.

The auto-commentary further reads:

The explanation of Mahamudra, the unique tradition of the great scholars and meditators, is presented in three main categories:

1. The deeds done in order to engage in the composition
2. Presenting the actual material of the composition
3. Dedicating the merits derived from the composition.

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1. The deeds done in order to engage in the composition
2. Presenting the actual material of the composition
3. Dedicating the merits derived from the composition of Mahamudra.

## 1. THE DEEDS DONE IN ORDER TO ENGAGE IN THE COMPOSITION

The author begins by saying:

In accordance with the tradition of past great masters, I first pay homage to the supreme object. Then in order to have success for completing the composition, I make the composition-pledge in the following verses:

When the author says, 'In accordance with the tradition of the great past masters', he is also being modest. He is saying 'before I go into the actual explanation I comply with the tradition of the past masters, in first paying homage to the supreme object'. Then in order to have success in completing the composition he makes a pledge about that composition.

Paying homage to the supreme object is paying homage to the guru as well as the three supreme objects, which are the Three Jewels. Doing this is, as the author explains, in accordance with the tradition of the past great masters.

Likewise whenever we engage in the practice we also keep the tradition of first taking refuge and then generating bodhicitta. Whatever our practice, the first thing we do is to take refuge and generate bodhicitta. That is our way of practising in accordance with the great tradition of the great masters of the past.

As the commentary will explain further on, the reason for taking refuge and generating bodhicitta in our tradition can be summarised into two points: taking refuge secures our practice as a Buddhist practice, and generating bodhicitta secures it as a practice of the Mahayana tradition.

It is good to understand this explanation, as it explains the method of securing the proper attitude. Taking refuge is indicated as a way to secure one's practice against becoming a faulty or non-Buddhist practice, and generating bodhicitta secures one's practice against the practice of the lower vehicle, the Hinayana practice.

Now we come into the actual root text, and in accordance with the outline that the author has presented in his auto-commentary, the prostration comes first.

*I prostrate to Mahamudra, the Great Seal of Voidness.*

1. *I prostrate to my peerless guru, lord of great and extensive attainments, who teaches in all its stark details the diamond-hard voidness of the mind, beyond all words—Mahamudra, the Great Seal of Voidness, the all-pervasive nature of all things, the indistinguishable single nature of both objects of voidness and voidness itself.*
2. *Combining the essence of ocean-like oral teachings of both the sutra and tantra traditions of Mahamudra with the well-explained teachings of the Gelug and Kagyu traditions transmitted orally from successive guru to disciple, I shall write here specifically about the Mahamudra oral tradition teachings of the spiritual father and his son of highest attainment, Dharmavajra.*

In the first verse the author pays homage, prostrating to the supreme objects, and in the second verse he pledges to 'write specifically about the Mahamudra oral tradition teachings'.

The auto-commentary says, 'as the meaning of these two verses are not difficult to comprehend I have omitted elaborate explanations'. However even though the author says that, I think we ought to go into a bit of explanation in order to understand the meaning of the verses.

The opening line in the text is NAMO MAHAMUDRAYA. 'Namo' is the Sanskrit word for homage or prostration. Mahamudra is 'Great Seal' (of Voidness) and the syllable 'ya' has the connotation of 'to'. Thus, the translation is 'To the Great Seal of Voidness, Mahamudra, I pay homage, or make prostrations.

As this is a Tibetan translation, one may wonder why the opening line is in Sanskrit. Why does the author write that? There are three reasons:

1. As other masters have explained, Sanskrit is considered to be a very holy and noble language. So having the opening line in Sanskrit leaves an imprint for those who study the text to be able to become familiar with this holy language.
2. Using Sanskrit also has the purpose of indicating that this teaching is an authentic teaching coming from an authentic source — the great Indian masters of the past.
3. And finally it has the purpose of leaving a blessing on the mental continuum.

We believe that Sanskrit is not just a mundane language, but that it is actually the sacred language of the gods. Regardless of that belief, it seems that on a factual level, Sanskrit is indeed a unique language. It is said that even if one understands the literal meaning of a word in Sanskrit, one may not know its implicit hidden meaning. This indicates that each word of Sanskrit has very subtle meanings.

Having paid homage to Mahamudra, the first verse in the root text offers prostrations to one's root guru. The purpose of making prostrations to the guru can be understood from the manner in which the prostration is offered:

*I prostrate to my peerless guru, lord of great and extensive attainments, who teaches in all its stark details the diamond-hard voidness of the mind,*

This salutation to the guru also explains the actual meaning of **subject Mahamudra**, as 'the diamond-hard voidness of the mind'.

The first line of the Tibetan verse, which doesn't correspond with the order of the English translation, is the line that includes *Mahamudra, the Great Seal of Voidness, the all-pervasive nature of all things*. This line presents the **object Mahamudra**, which is voidness or emptiness itself—the pervasive nature of all things. As presented here, emptiness pervades all existence, and so it is the nature of all things. This is the same way that it is presented in other teachings. For those of you who remember, within the four categories of *Prajnaparamita* or perfections, one is the natural perfection, which is emptiness. It is presented here in the same way: the nature of all things is voidness or emptiness.

The all-pervasive nature of all things is Mahamudra, literally translated as the great seal of voidness. The connotation of 'seal' is that phenomena cannot exist other than in the nature of voidness, and therefore voidness is ingrained in all existence. The word 'great' has the connotation that by seeing or understanding the nature of all phenomena, which is the voidness or emptiness that is prevalent in all phenomena, one achieves great realisations, and great states. That is why it is called 'great'. So the literal translation of Mahamudra is *maha* meaning great, and *mudra* meaning seal.

The second line in the Tibetan verse relates to *indistinguishable*, and *beyond all words*, which is the *diamond-hard voidness of the mind*. This line presents **subject Mahamudra**. Of the two, subject Mahamudra and object Mahamudra, the primary is subject Mahamudra, which is the wisdom realising emptiness, which is presented in the second line as 'the diamond hard voidness of the mind'.

Using 'indistinguishable' in the second line indicates that both the object and the subject are indistinguishable in single-pointed concentration on emptiness. The diamond hard voidness of the mind is the direct perception or realisation of emptiness within the mental continuum of an arya being who is in meditative equipoise. In the state of meditative equipoise, the object (emptiness) and subject (wisdom realising emptiness) is said to become indistinguishable, just like pouring water into water. The wisdom realising emptiness within an arya being in meditative equipoise is further referred to as 'diamond hard' as it is indestructible. That state, is also *beyond all words*, meaning that that the bliss of realising emptiness is beyond all words, or inexpressible.

A mundane analogy to illustrate how it is inexpressible is the sensual, pleasurable taste of the sweetness of sugar or molasses. We can say that molasses or sugar is sweet, but it is hard to describe that sweetness. We cannot really comprehend the experience of sweetness unless we actually taste something sweet ourselves, nor can we impart that experience to someone else unless they also taste it. Likewise the immaculate bliss experienced by an arya being in meditative equipoise focusing on emptiness is beyond all words, or inexpressible.

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To summarise the main point, diamond-hard voidness of the mind refers to the direct realisation of emptiness within an arya being in meditative equipoise. That wisdom is diamond-hard and thus indestructible, and its experience of bliss is beyond all words.

The word *voidness* in the second line of the Tibetan verse, corresponds to the meaning of third line, *lord of the great extensive attainments teaches in all its stark details*, and it refers to the qualities of the guru, who not only has the understanding of voidness, but is able to teach it to others in its finest detail.

The last line, the words *I prostrate at the feet of my peerless Guru*, are paying homage. The Tibetan word *da me*, means incomparable. Thus the lama is referred to as the 'incomparable lord'; in the translation here the word *peerless* is used, which has the same meaning. The lama is peerless or incomparable because he has the qualities of having the wisdom realising emptiness or voidness, and the ability to teaching it to others in great detail. Illustrating the qualities of the guru in this way also shows the reason why the guru is worthy of homage.

Another commentary, it explains that the indistinguishable single nature of both the subject of voidness and voidness itself is a further illustration of what Mahamudra is. That indistinguishable nature of voidness—the diamond-hard voidness of the mind, or the subject Mahamudra, is categorised into three: the **basis** indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind, the **path** indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind, and the **result** indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind.

#### **Basis**

The basis diamond-hard voidness of the mind is the nature of mind at an ordinary level, which has the potential to separate itself from the defilements or the delusions. Even an ordinary being with an ordinary state of mind has the nature of mind that carries the potential of a mind that is separable from the delusions.

The potential that the mind has of being separable from the delusions or defilements is the **basis** diamond-hard voidness of the mind. It is of course, essential for us to understand that we have this potential, even though it is hard for us to really identify, understand or experience it right now. However we always carry that potential in our mind, which will become indistinguishable with subject and object voidness. The teachings also refer to that potential, as the subtle mind and wind that is within us at all times. Although it may be hard for us identify it right now, it is nevertheless part of our nature.

#### **Path**

It is essential for us to comprehend that the basis indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind is a potential that we already have. Then as we further devote our time and energy to develop and transform our mind to the point where we actually enter the path, we first gain the conceptual realisation of emptiness. As we further develop our conceptual realisation of emptiness and gain the direct perception of emptiness, then we have attained the path of seeing; both the conceptual realisation and the direct realisation of emptiness, are **path** diamond-hard voidness of mind.

#### **Result**

The **result** indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind is the Dharmakaya, or the truth body of the Buddha.

Developing an understanding of the basis indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind is really essential, because it gives us the reason to study and practice. Buddha nature is another term that is used in the teachings to identify the basis indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind. Having buddha nature, means that our mind has the capacity to completely separate itself from the defilements or delusions, and we always carry that potential within ourselves. When we utilise that potential and actually put an effort into engaging in further practice, that initial potential matures into an actual realisation of emptiness. That is what is referred to as the path indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind. When that path further matures and develops then it eventually transforms into the Buddha's omniscient mind, the Dharmakaya, which is the resultant indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind.

The explanation of buddha nature is presented in the Buddha's own teaching. In the *Eight Thousand Verses sutra*, the Buddha explicitly mentioned that 'the nature of mind is clear light; the defilements are adventitious', which means that the defilements can be overcome.

**In summary** the first verse of the root text is a salutation or homage to the lama. In presenting the qualities of the lama the verse also presents the two categories of Mahamudra, which are the object Mahamudra and the subject Mahamudra. The object Mahamudra is explained as the all-pervasive nature of all things, which is emptiness. It is mudra or seal, because there is nothing that exists, any compounded or un-compounded phenomena, which does not comply with the nature of voidness. The realisation of that emptiness is what makes the mudra great (maha).

The subject Mahamudra is the indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind. As specifically presented here, the subject Mahamudra relates to the wisdom realising emptiness within the mental continuum of an arya being who is in meditative equipoise. The guru is endowed with that direct perception of emptiness (the subject Mahamudra) and who is able to explain emptiness (the object Mahamudra). The guru is called lord, because of being the holder of all the secret instructions and attainments. Not only does he have extensive attainments, but he is able to teach them in stark (meaning the finest) detail. So the author pays homage or makes prostrations to the lama who embodies these qualities.

What we can derive from these explanations to use on a personal level is that having understood that there are three levels of Mahamudra, we can identify with the basis diamond-hard voidness of the mind that we already have within us. We may not possess the realisation of the indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind yet, but we do possess the potential for realising that. In understanding that we have the basis indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of mind within ourselves, our work is to develop it further so that we reach the level of the path indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of mind, which is the actual realisation of emptiness. That is something that we need to exert ourselves to achieve it.

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