
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

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As is normal we generate a positive motivation for receiving the teachings such as, 'In order to benefit all sentient beings, and liberate them from all suffering, I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

It is important to ensure that our mind is imbued with that motivation, and that we remind ourselves of it before engaging in whatever practice we do, and also during our practice. Finally we make sure that at the end of our practice we dedicate it with that motivation. Even though we may not actually have a proper motivation at all times, if we secure our practice with a proper motivation at the beginning and cultivate it periodically, then our mental continuum will be imbued with that motivation. Then, indirectly, whatever activity we engage in will be consistent with our motivation.

The technique of engaging in the practice of listening to Dharma, and so forth, is presented along with the importance of generating a motivation, so it is good to take note of the significance of this motivation. The mere fact of generating a motivation also helps to calm down and settle the mind, which would otherwise be very agitated. If we don't make sure that our mind is settled when we engage in an activity or practice, then our mind will be constantly familiar with a busy, agitated, troubled mind. Thus generating a motivation is significant, even for the mere fact of initially settling down the mind.

As I mentioned in the first session, all I can do is help to motivate you to engage in study and practice—that is as much as I can do. The combination of a proper motivation developed from both the teacher's side and listeners' side will actually make our time together worthwhile. When you set the proper motivation for listening to the teaching, your act of receiving the teaching will be in a more subdued manner. Likewise, when I try to generate a positive motivation from my side, it seems to make the teaching become more effective. So, beginning with a proper motivation seems to be really significant in every aspect.

One's motivation, as I usually stress, is not only significant for engaging in practices such as listening to the teaching, or meditation and so forth, but it is also important on a practical level, for example, for good communication with others. If one ensures a motivation based on a proper attitude before one engages in communication, then the outcome of that communication will also be fruitful. Whatever communication you have with others will be much more fruitful with a proper motivation; it will be easier to communicate, easier to settle things, and easier to come to agreements and so forth. In that way we can see that even on a practical level one's motivation is really useful and beneficial. So to that extent I stress the importance of generating a proper motivation.

In our previous session we covered the meaning of the verse that includes the salutation first to mahamudra, then specifically, prostration to the guru, including the reasons why one prostrates to the lama.

Pledge in composing the treatise

The author's pledge in composing the material is found in the following verse:

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.*

The pledge for composing this treatise is made in accordance with the traditions of the masters and scholars of the past. When a treatise was composed in ancient India it had to be initially submitted to a gathering of learned scholars, who would thoroughly check the treatise to make sure that there were no flaws or errors. Only when it passed the scholars' scrutiny and found to be free from flaws, was it accepted as an authentic worthwhile treatise. It would then be placed on a high seat and prostrations made to it, and then the king would present a gift to the author. In that way, both the author and his work were honoured. If there were any mistakes or flaws in a treatise, they would mark it and send it back, dismissing it as a treatise worthy of study and debate. Thus, following that tradition, it was considered to be very inauspicious to mark the texts that we studied in the monasteries.

In this verse the author pledges to compose the treatise by 'combining the essence of ocean-like oral teachings of both the sutra and tantra'. This means that he combines the essence of the entire teachings of sutra and tantra, including specific instructions in relation to those teachings. In explaining the essence of the mahamudra in accordance with the Gelug and Kagyu tradition, he says, 'I shall write here' in accordance with the 'oral tradition teachings of the spiritual father and his son of highest attainment, Dharmavajra'.

Here 'sutra' refers to the small, medium and extensive versions of the *Prajnaparamita*, or the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, while the tantric teachings refer specifically to the teachings from the deity Guhyasamaja, which is regarded as the king of the tantric teachings. As explained in a commentary, this also includes the root text as well as the commentaries on the Guhyasamaja tantra.

In the [first line](#) *combining the essence* refers to the treatises that combine the essence of the sutra teachings, which as mentioned previously relates to the small, medium and extensive *Perfection of Wisdom* teachings of the Buddha. The treatise that explains the essence of these teachings, is Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realisations*; it gives a very clear and concise explanation of the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, and is a highly reputed treatise that is studied in all four traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. The treatise that explains the essence of the tantra, particularly in relation to the Guhyasamaja tantra is a commentary by the Indian master Chandrakirti, which is translated into English as *Clear Explanation of Guhyasamaja Tantra*. So the author combines the essence of these two treatises which is mahamudra, and explains it in his text.

The [second line](#) of the Tibetan verse, *the well-explained teachings of the Gelug and Kagyu traditions*, refers to those treatises studied and practised in the Gelug and Kagyu tradition that combine the essence of sutra and tantra. In the Gelug tradition, all the monasteries commonly use *The Ornament of Clear Realisations*, which combines the essence of all the sutras in a very concise and meaningful way. So it is

the main treatise for studying the explanations of sutra. Tibetan masters have also composed many commentaries on this text. The Tibetan commentaries from the Gelug tradition on the Guhyasamaja tantra are based on a commentary composed by Chandrakirti, which elucidates the meaning of Guhyasamaja tantra very precisely. In the Gelug tradition the commentaries based on these treatises are treatises and specific oral instructions that combine the essence of both sutra and tantra. Thus 'Combining the essence' means presenting these vast teachings in a comprehensible way that makes it easy for an individual to study and practise them. That is what comprises 'the well-explained teachings of the Gelug and Kagyu traditions'.

What one also derives from this explanation is the fact that these teachings and instructions that combine both sutra and tantra are the treatise that are studied and practised in the Gelug and Kagyu traditions. Thus studying mahamudra, which combines the essence of the entire range of the Buddha's teachings on sutra and tantra, is the unique tradition of the Gelug and Kagyu. As mentioned previously, sutra refers to the small, medium and extensive *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, which are teachings by the Buddha himself, and the most renowned commentary on this is Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realisations*. Of course that's not the only commentary, but it is the main one, and many other commentaries have been composed based on the explanations found in *The Ornament of Clear Realisations*.

The tantric side of the Buddha's teachings are based on the specific tantric teachings on Guhyasamaja tantra, the main one of which is Chandrakirti's commentary, and there are many other commentaries based on that. Guhyasamaja tantra is specifically referred to here because it extensively explains the unique grounds and paths of tantra, which are the basis for understanding all other tantric teachings. When one has a good understanding of the grounds and the paths of the Guhyasamaja tantra, one can use that as reference and relate that understanding to all of the other tantric teachings.

In the third and fourth lines the author says *I shall write here specifically about the Mahamudra oral tradition teachings of the spiritual father and his son of highest attainment, Dharmavajra*. Here 'son' specifically refers to the heart disciple of Dharmavajra, Gyalwa Losang Dondrup who is renowned for having obtained enlightenment in one lifetime. The treatises by Gyalwa Losang Dondrup are considered to be very explicit and clear in explaining the meaning of mahamudra. Thus the author states that he will write here specifically the oral traditions of the spiritual father and son' referring to these two great masters. In relation to the oral teachings of the spiritual father and his son, another commentary explains this to be the general teachings on mahamudra in both the Gelug and Kagyu traditions, as well as the specific instructions that are gained by an understanding of the relationship between interdependentness and emptiness. The unique teaching of these masters is that emptiness and interdependentness are explained in such a way by gaining an understanding of one enhances the understanding of the other. So, it is this unique tradition that the author proposes to write about.

2. PRESENTING THE ACTUAL MATERIAL OF THE COMPOSITION

Presenting the actual material of the composition is presented in three categories:

- 2.1. Preparation
- 2.2. Actual
- 2.3. Conclusion

2.1. PREPARATION

This material is presented in the following three verses from the root text. Actually there is one line that seems to be missing from translation we are using, but we can adopt it from the other translation of the root text

For this there are preparatory practices, actual techniques and concluding procedures.

3. *First is the preparation. In order to enter the gateway and framework of Buddha's teachings in general, and specifically those of the Mahayana, it is essential for you to take refuge and develop an enlightened attitude of bodhicitta sincerely from your heart, not merely from your mouth.*
4. *As the realisation of the void nature of the mind is completely dependent upon your collection of merit and elimination of obstacles, you should despatch ahead of you as many prostrations as possible, made while reciting The Declaration Before the Thirty-five Buddhas, as well as hundreds of thousands of repetitions of the one hundred syllable mantra of Vajrasattva.*
5. *Then you must make repeated heartfelt requests to your root guru, whom you recognise as inseparable from the buddhas of the past, present and future, to be able to realise voidness.*

The four instructions on preliminary practices

Even though these verses explicitly mention only three instructions, what is actually being presented here are the four instructions on preliminary practices.

1. **Taking refuge and generating bodhicitta** is the first of these instructions. It is referred to as being the 'gateway' and the very central pillar of the Mahayana. What confirms one as a Buddhist is taking refuge. Generating bodhicitta serves as a gateway and central pillar for the Mahayana practices, as without it one cannot practise the Mahayana tradition. All the different schools in Tibetan Buddhism accept these and combine taking refuge and bodhicitta into one specific preparatory practice.

2. Verse four of the root text refers to 'your collection of merit'. From that one derives the second preliminary instruction, which is that a way of **accumulating extensive merit** is the practice of offering mandalas. Thus offering a world mandala is the second preliminary practice.

3. As mentioned specifically in verse four the third preliminary practice is to engage in **extensive purification** practices by receiving instructions, and meditating on and reciting the Vajrasattva mantra.

4. In order to receive extensive blessings, and to engage in the successful practice, the most effective way to receive extensive blessings is to **rely on one's guru**. Thus engaging in guru yoga practice, is the fourth preliminary instruction.

To summarise, the four preliminary instructions, they are taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, offering mandalas, engaging in the purification practice of Vajrasattva, and engaging in guru yoga practice.

TAKING REFUGE

In his auto-commentary the author explains the meaning of these verses as:

Many great scholars and realised masters of India such as the great pandit Shantipa, Lama Suvarna-dvipa and the great master Atisha and so forth, have confirmed that the demarcation between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist, is whether one has developed genuine refuge

or not. Likewise the Venerable Sakya Pandita has said, 'without refuge, one is not a Dharma practitioner'.

In this explanation, the author is clearly stating that the demarcation between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist is having developed refuge in one's mind. Other explanations state that the demarcation between Buddhists and non-Buddhists is whether one adheres to the four seals. However, it clearly mentions here that the actual demarcation is whether one has developed refuge in one's mind or not.

As the author further explains:

Just as these masters have proclaimed, one must be sure to develop a sound refuge in one's mental continuum. Furthermore the great master Padampa Sangye has said, 'people of Dingri, blessings will flow naturally, when you have entrusted your mind, heart and chest to the Three Jewels'.

When he said 'people of Dingri', Padampa Sangye was referring to the area he came from in Nepal, which is near the border of Tibet and Solo Kumbu (where the Sherpas live). As mentioned here, taking refuge is the foremost of all the Buddhist practices. Thus taking refuge is the first thing that one needs to do. As specifically mentioned here, to take refuge wholeheartedly one must entrust one's 'mind, heart and chest to the Three Jewels'. This is a way of emphasising how much trust or reliance one must place in the object of refuge. Entrusting one's heart, mind and chest to the refuge will allow the blessings of the object of refuge to flow naturally into one's mind.

When we have a strong sense of reliance upon a deity such as Tara, then during our practice we seem to actually feel some sort of shift, or positive experience in our mind. This indicates that the stronger our sense of reliance on the deity, the easier it is for our mind to transform and develop, which is an indication of receiving the blessings. In the auto-commentary, this reliance subsumes the importance of taking refuge.

This is a brief explanation is on the importance of taking refuge, so it is good to rely on other teachings, such as the Lam Rim teachings, where Lama Tsongkhapa explained the topic of refuge under four headings:

1. The cause for taking refuge
2. The objects of where one takes refuge upon; identifying the object
3. Identifying the manner of how to take refuge
4. Instructions to be followed after having taken refuge.

With these four categories one gets a broader and more complete understanding of the need to take refuge.

Our translation of the root text says 'not merely from your mouth', but the literal translation is 'not merely relying on the words from your mouth'. There are two implications here. Relying merely on the words means that one may have some understanding of the words, and even if the refuge formula is recited very well that does not actually develop the actual feeling in one's heart, and so it does not suffice as a genuine act of refuge. In order to gain a sound broad understanding of taking refuge, it is good to rely on the explanations given in texts, such as in the Lam Rim teachings.

TAKING REFUGE IN THE GURU/BUDDHA

The manner of taking refuge is to visualise the object of refuge in the space before oneself in accordance with the explanations given in the Lam Rim teachings. There is also a

version in the *Guru Puja*, which is appropriate for those of us who can relate to it.

One visualises the object of refuge in the aspect of the guru. As explained in the guru yoga practice, the *Guru Puja*, the aspect of the guru is Lama Tsongkhapa. In the centre of Lama Tsongkhapa's heart, one visualises Buddha Shakyamuni, and at the centre of Buddha Shakyamuni's heart, one visualises the ultimate tantra deity, Vajradara. At the centre of Vajradara's heart one visualises the seed syllable HUNG, which is blue in colour. That visualisation becomes the focus point for the visualisation of the object of refuge.

Then one can engage in the practices of the six preparatory rites, which include the seven limb practice. These preparatory rites are done in order to accumulate extensive merit and purify negative karma, and they can be done in accordance to those explanations. Envisioning the object of refuge as Lama Tsongkhapa, with Shakyamuni at his heart and then Vajradara at his heart is a part of many of the practices that we do, including the extensive mandala offering. It is good to relate the lines 'I offer the mandala offering to the guru' (lama lozang t'up-wang-dorje chang to the above-mentioned visualisation).

1. Causes for taking refuge

This section explains why one needs to take refuge. Before seeking refuge or protection from any source, one first has to see the need for taking refuge, or seeking protection from that object.

As presented in the teachings, the causes for taking refuge are fear of the sufferings of the lower realms, and of cyclic existence in general. When one genuinely thinks about how one could very possibly experience the sufferings of the lower realms, the more one thinks about the details of these sufferings, the stronger the desire not to experience them. The stronger that sense of wishing to avoid the sufferings of the lower realms and the sufferings of cyclic existence, the stronger the wish to be free from them will become. Then one seeks a way of being free from the suffering of the lower realms and of cyclic existence. When one sees the qualities of the refuge, and that the refuge has the ability to protect oneself, then the strong feeling of seeking refuge or protection in the Three Jewels develops in one's mind.

2. The objects of refuge

With a strong sense of fear and the wish to be free from the sufferings of the lower realms and of cyclic existence, one investigates who or what has the ability to provide refuge. One comes to realise that the objects of refuge are the only objects that have the full potential and ability to free oneself from the sufferings of cyclic existence and the lower realms. One then develops a strong conviction that protection and guidance is to be found in the Three Jewels. This conviction that the objects of refuge have the ability to protect and free oneself needs to be based on reason rather than blind faith.

The Buddha

The Buddha, or an enlightened being, has four qualities:

1. The Buddha is free from all fears himself. If the Buddha were not free from all fears of the sufferings of the lower realms and cyclic existence, then clearly he would not be in a position to help free us from all those fears. So the first point one reflects upon is how the Buddha himself is free from all fears
2. The Buddha has the skilful means to free all other beings from all fears. If the Buddha didn't have the ability to

free others, then he would not be in a position to help us. Thus, he not only has the quality of being free from all fears, but he has the complete ability to help others to be free from fears.

The Buddha has great love and compassion for all beings without discrimination. If the Buddha didn't have love and compassion for all equally he might help only some while neglecting others. But because he has great love and compassion for all without discrimination, he is a suitable object of refuge.

3. The Buddha benefits all sentient beings, whether they have helped him or not. This quality of impartiality towards all is the fourth reason why one seeks refuge in the Buddha.
4. When we reflect on why the Buddha can free us from all sufferings then we naturally generate a strong sense of reliance upon his advice, i.e. the Buddha's teachings.

The Dharma

The Buddha himself is a supreme being, full of love and compassion and his speech, which is clear and sound advice, instructs on how we can free ourselves. Thus one naturally develops refuge in the Dharma, which is the Buddha's teachings.

The Sangha

Having seen the value of the Buddha himself and his teaching, one will then naturally take refuge in those who have gained insight and realisations from the Buddha's teachings—the Sangha.

3. The manner of taking refuge

In the Lam Rim teachings there are extensive explanations regarding the manner of taking refuge, such as taking refuge by having received the lineage from a master, and taking refuge by not uttering it to others and so forth. We don't need to go into these details right now, but an important point is to actually check whether one has refuge in one's mind. What is the measure of having taken refuge? That is important to understand. As explained in the teachings, taking refuge is not just by merely reciting the refuge formula. The indication of having taken genuine refuge is when one develops a state of mind based on understanding the causes of taking refuge, i.e. developing the fear of the sufferings of the lower realms and of samsara in general, plus a keen wish to be free from suffering. On top of that one needs to have the understanding of the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. When one has a strong determination to entrust oneself solely to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha because they have the ability to free oneself, then one has developed genuine refuge.

4. The instructions to follow after having taken refuge

The real benefit of taking refuge lies in following the instructions and engaging in the practices associated with taking refuge. These instructions or practices are explained quite extensively, and we won't go into detail right now. But it is necessary to understand that if one does not follow the instructions, then there will be no benefit.

Of course, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, are all equally essential objects of refuge. However, the actual refuge that protects oneself is explained as the Dharma refuge because, it is said, that is what gives us the actual protection. When we really think about it, the way one is protected from the sufferings and so forth is by following the guidelines and engaging in the practices as presented in the teachings.

That's why the Dharma refuge is referred to as the actual refuge that protects oneself.

The real Dharma refuge is the path and the cessation within arya beings. However we can possess an actual Dharma refuge within us right now, which is something that we need to relate to for our personal practice.

At our level the actual Dharma refuge would be, for example, the morality of observing the ten virtues. That ethical basis of observing the ten virtues becomes the basis, or the cause that frees us from the lower realms. As the teachings explain, if, as a result of having taken refuge, we promise not to engage in the ten non-virtuous deeds, and observe the ten virtues, then that very observance of the ethical code becomes the way to free ourselves from the lower realms. We can thus relate to something that is within us, which is within our capacity, and understand how that serves as the actual refuge at our level.

The teachings on refuge are, as mentioned previously, explained in great detail in the Lam Rim and when we refer to those teachings, we can see how refuge is common to all levels of the path. In relation to the three scopes of the Lam Rim teachings, there is the refuge of the small scope, the refuge of the medium scope and the refuge of the great scope. In this way we can see that everything is subsumed into taking refuge.

At our level, as mentioned previously, it is good to identify the Dharma refuge within our mind, which is our decision to follow a moral and ethical code, such as adopting all or some of the ten virtues and make sure that we abide by this moral code. Due to past habituation we might still have the tendency to engage in some non-virtuous deeds, but once we recognise them, see their faults and disadvantages, and identify them as non-virtues, we can then try to overcome that negative state of mind. Even if we do engage in negative deeds, we can slowly increase the intensity of the Dharma refuge within our mind by engaging in a purification practice, and slowly and gradually perfect ourselves.

It is essential that we understand how the Dharma refuge that we have now serves as the basis, and the source, of obtaining the actual Dharma refuge within the mental continuum of a higher beings, and the ultimate Dharma refuge that is in the Buddha's mind. It all starts at the level that we are at now. It is good to remind ourselves again and again that it is not as though the enlightened beings and noble beings just suddenly materialised out of nowhere! These great beings were once ordinary beings like us, with all the faults and negativities that we are battling and challenged with right now.

However the gradual process of cultivating a virtuous state of mind, living by a moral and ethical code, and then slowly perfecting their mind allowed them to reach the level of noble beings and enlightened beings. Likewise, if we continuously put effort into practising even one virtuous state of mind, and try to cultivate and perfect it further, we will build up our stock of merit and realisations within ourselves, which will lead to the ultimate states. It is good to know that at our level, we can use the actual refuge that is within ourselves now as a basis to transform ourselves.

You may now have an inkling of how refuge serves as the gateway to entering the Buddhist path.

According to the root text the next point is the benefits of bodhicitta, which will be explained in our next session.