
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

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As usual, it is good to set the proper motivation for receiving the teachings, a motivation that is free from a self-cherishing mind, and which focuses on the welfare of all sentient beings. So generate the motivation that 'for the purpose of liberating all sentient beings from all suffering I need to achieve enlightenment, and for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put it into practice'.

The text is divided into three main sections: preparation, actual and dedication. Within the preparation section, in our last session we had covered the part on taking refuge.

As the text explains, we should take refuge not merely with words from our mouth, but rather with a deep sense of commitment from our heart. If we make some effort in generating the right attitudes within our mind then it is possible for our practice to become a genuine practice. Whereas leaving it as a mere recitation, or mere wishful thinking, does not make the practice really authentic.

Relating refuge to the lam rim

Neither the root text nor the auto-commentary explains refuge in detail, so in the last session I gave some extra explanations to complement the basics covered in the commentary. However it is important that we do some further research in order to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of refuge. In our last session refuge was explained as having two causes and, in order to gain a broader understanding of refuge, it is good to relate these two causes to practitioners of each of the three scopes of the Lam Rim teachings.

Refuge and the small scope

The first cause for taking refuge for the practitioner of the small scope is fear of the sufferings of the lower realms. When, as a result of contemplating on the sufferings of those realms, that fear of the lower realms becomes strong, one seeks the means of protecting oneself from that. Thus relying on the three Jewels to protect one from those sufferings is the second cause for taking refuge. One will then understand that the Buddha jewel serves as the supreme guide—he who presents the unmistakable means of freeing oneself and others from the sufferings of the lower realms. The Sangha jewels are those who assist us on the path that frees ourselves from the lower realms.

The Dharma jewel is the actual refuge, as practising the advice given in the teachings, such as engaging in the ten virtuous deeds and observing morality, is the actual cause for freeing one from the sufferings of the lower realms. Thus, entrusting oneself in the Three Jewels with that understanding is the refuge that is generated within the practitioner of the small scope.

Refuge and the intermediate scope

For the practitioner of the medium scope, refuge is generated through developing the fear, not merely of the sufferings of the lower realms, but every type of suffering from the entire cyclic existence. The second cause for taking refuge is to understand that the objects of refuge, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha have the full ability to free oneself from the suffering of cyclic existence. As a result of this conviction, one entrusts oneself to the Three Jewels.

This conviction arises when one develops a genuine understanding that the objects of refuge have the ability to protect one from all suffering. That protection comes as a result of practising the Four Noble truths. Thus gaining a genuine understanding of the Four Noble truths and practising accordingly is the means to free oneself from the suffering of cyclic existence. That is how the practitioner of the medium scope goes for refuge in the Three Jewels.

Refuge and the great scope

There are two ways of explaining the refuge of the great scope practitioner. One way is by developing a fear of the suffering of both cyclic existence and personal peace, i.e. liberation. With a fear of both these states, one develops the conviction that the objects of refuge, the Three Jewels, have the full ability to free oneself from both of these extreme states, and then one strives to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all living beings.

Another way of presenting the refuge of the great scope is by developing a keen wish to free not only oneself, but all living beings. Then one develops the conviction that the objects of refuge, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, have the full potential to lead oneself as well as all other sentient beings to the ultimate perfection of enlightenment. The way to generate refuge for a practitioner of the great scope is to engage in the practices by developing love and compassion and bodhichitta, and in that way taking refuge.

Relating refuge to the four noble truths

To gain further deeper understanding of how refuge works, it is significant to also relate refuge to the teachings of the four noble truths. In fact it is good to relate the four noble truths to every aspect of the teaching, as they serve as the basis for all teachings. To a practitioner of the small scope the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, relates to generating a sound understanding of the suffering of the lower realms. The Buddha taught the truth of suffering in the context of 'that which is to be understood', so one needs to understand the suffering of the lower realms.

When one sees that engaging in the ten non-virtuous deeds is the cause of going to the lower realms and so avoids engaging in those non-virtuous deeds, that is practicing the second noble truth, in accordance with what the Buddha said—'the truth of origination is to be abandoned'.

One practises third noble truth, the truth of cessation by actualise the cessation, which is in accordance with the explanation, 'cessation is to be actualised'. The fourth noble truth is practised by abiding in the ten virtues, and

abandoning the ten non-virtues in accordance with the explanation 'the path is to be cultivated'. Doing that is the cause to free oneself from the lower realms in the future life.

The way the objects of refuge protect us relates to the teachings of the Buddha, who said that adopting virtue and abandoning non-virtue is the means of freeing oneself from the suffering of unfortunate rebirths in the lower realms. The sequence of how one actually develops a conviction in the Three Jewels is that the more one reflects upon the suffering of the lower realms the stronger the fear of the lower realms becomes in one's mind. And the stronger the fear of the lower realms, the stronger the determination to be free of that suffering will become.

By understanding the Buddha's detailed explanation of the method to free oneself from the lower realms, one develops a strong faith in the Buddha's words and the wish to adopt his advice. So in that way, we can see how developing strong faith in the Buddha by understanding his teachings is the method for freeing oneself from the sufferings.

The main point is that one needs to understand how the objects of refuge work to protect one. The actual refuge that protects oneself is the Dharma refuge. Firstly, one identifies the Buddha as being the one who has accomplished both his own purpose as well as the purpose of others, i.e. the Buddha has reached the final stage of perfection that enables him to benefit all living beings.

The actual or true Dharma is the truth of cessation and the truth of the path, and the actual Sangha are the noble beings, who have actualised true cessation and the true path in their own mind. Having identified the objects of refuge in this way, one comes to understand how they actually protect us from suffering.

Even though true paths and true cessation may not have been developed within one's own mental continuum right now, there is a facsimile of them, which are the virtues and the ethical codes that one has already adopted. So that level of Dharma refuge is in one's mind right now. Maintaining and further developing what one has already cultivated will slowly increase to become the actual Dharma Refuge.

In summary, the Buddha is the one who guides us by showing us the correct method for cultivating the actual dharma refuge; the Sangha are the assistants who help us to cultivate the Dharma refuge within ourselves; and the one that actually protects and frees us from all sufferings is the Dharma Refuge within oneself. With that basic understanding, one will develop a deeper understanding of how the objects of refuge actually protect oneself. It is not as if the objects of refuge are external entities that come forth to protect us, rather they are a protection that has to be developed within ourselves.

At our level, we can assert that with the accumulation of each quality, and the elimination of each negativity, we are strengthening the basic Dharma refuge within us right now. Each virtuous mind that we generate is a basic Dharma refuge that protects us. Each time we identify a

negative thought and generate the wish to eliminate that by applying the antidotes, we are strengthening the basic Dharma refuge within ourselves. This provides us with a base on which to acquire more qualities and to eliminate deeper levels of negative states of mind. This very process will eventually lead us to develop the actual Dharma refuge

When one has cultivated the actual Dharma refuge, which is gaining the realisations of the path and obtaining the cessation within one's own mind, then one becomes an actual Sangha. When one further develops oneself on the path, one eventually will become enlightened buddha. The actual Sangha that we are to become, the actual Dharma that is to be achieved within our own mental continuum, and the enlightened being or buddha, that we are to become in the future, are all called the resultant refuge.

When we talk about the Buddha, we generally refer to Buddha Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha. It is not as if we will become Buddha Shakyamuni himself; we cannot become Buddha Shakyamuni as he is a separate entity from ourselves. Nevertheless we will become an enlightened being, a buddha, which is a state of being free from all faults and attaining every possible quality. Each one of us, has the potential and ability to become a buddha, so it is as if each one of us has a resultant refuge, a future buddha, waiting for us. It is good to relate to the objects of refuge in terms of both the causal refuge and the resultant refuge. Seeing how the causal refuges are protecting, and guiding us to the resultant refuge right now, makes it more personal for us. In this way we should understand that the causal refuges are an aid for us to become the resultant refuge.

THE BENEFITS OF BODHICITTA

According to the explanation in both the auto-commentary and the root text, the second aspect of the preliminary practices is developing bodhichitta. Why do we need to develop bodhichitta? The auto-commentary quotes from the great master Shantideva:

Likewise Lord Shantideva has said,

The moment an awakening mind arises,
In those fettered and weak in the jail of cyclic
existence,
They will be named 'a son of the Sugatas',
And will be revered by both human and gods of the
world.

This is verse 9 from the first chapter of *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, which explains the benefits of the awakening, or bodhichitta, mind. This verse is presented as a brief summary of the chapter that explains the benefits of bodhichitta, while the remainder of the chapter is an extensive explanation of the verse.

This verse presents two main points about the benefits of an awakening mind or bodhichitta: from the instant that anyone develops bodhichitta one obtains a great name or status, and secondly one obtains a great purpose.

The first three lines present the first result, great status or name. *The moment an awakening mind arises in those fettered and weak in the jail of cyclic existence* refers to ordinary beings who are gaoled in cyclic existence. From

the moment such a being develops the awakening mind, *they will be 'named a son of the Sugatas'*, meaning a child of the Buddha. That is the name that they obtain when they become a bodhisattva. The fourth line shows that from the moment of having generated that awakened mind *one will be revered by all humans and gods alike*, which is a great achievement.

The term 'a buddha's son' comes from the moment bodhichitta or the awakening mind is developed in one's mind. The word 'Sugata' in Shantideva's text is actually a Sanskrit word that has the connotation of having completely gone to the state of the greatest bliss. The word Tathagata has the same meaning. In brief this verse identifies a bodhisattva, who is named as the son of the buddhas, or enlightened beings from the moment the awakened mind is developed within their mental continuum. It is good to understand that point.

Referring back to earlier studies, I ask the Study Group, can bodhisattvas be the sons of the Buddha?

Students: Buddhas are actually born from bodhisattvas.

As you have pointed out it is normally said that the buddhas are born from bodhisattvas, which is explained in the opening verse of the *Madhyamaka* text. So one has to explain the difference between the meanings in these two texts. Of course a detailed explanation was presented earlier, but briefly, when a bodhisattva is referred to as son or child of the buddhas, then that refers to how the bodhichitta mind is developed within the practitioner. The bodhichitta mind is developed and one becomes a bodhisattva by receiving and practising the teachings of the Buddha. It is in relation to the result of that practice that the bodhisattvas are referred to as the buddhas' children.

If one just insists that a bodhisattva is a buddha's child, without any further explanation then one will be defeated easily in debate with the quote from the *Madhyamaka* text, and be asked 'How could bodhisattvas be children of the buddhas when buddhas are actually born from bodhisattvas?'

As you would recall from your earlier studies of the *Madhyamaka* text (which I encourage you to revise) hearers and solitary realisers are born from buddhas, whereas buddhas are born from bodhisattvas, and bodhisattvas themselves are born from the practices they engage in prior to becoming a bodhisattva. That explanation is given to point out the cause and effect sequence in relation to practices.

The essential point to understand, which is being specifically presented here, is that any individual who develops the awakening, or bodhichitta mind becomes a bodhisattva, and one also enters the Mahayana path at the point when one develops the bodhichitta mind, i.e. bodhichitta is the entry point of the Mahayana path. That is why bodhichitta is also referred to as the gateway to the Mahayana; it is only when bodhichitta has been developed in the mental continuum that one becomes an actual Mahayana practitioner by entering the Mahayana path.

The auto-commentary quotes another great master:

Also the great master (Atisha) has said,

For those who wish to engage in the Mahayana practice,

It is possible to generate, the sun and moon-like bodhichitta,

That dispels the darkness of suffering.

When effort is applied for many eons.

Thus he asserts bodhichitta as the gateway of the Mahayana vehicle.

It is possible to enter the path and actually become a Mahayana practitioner by generating bodhichitta, which is explained here with the analogy of being like the sun and the moon. Just as the sun dispels darkness and the moon brings a cooling effect, so too bodhichitta is like the sun that dispels the darkness of suffering, and brings the coolness of the elimination of suffering. It is implied that it is possible to develop bodhichitta by making an effort over many eons. Even if it takes a long time it is possible to develop bodhichitta, so isn't it worthwhile to engage in the practice of developing bodhichitta now?

Then the auto-commentary quotes another text:

Abhisambodhi of Vairochana says,

Holder of the secret (Vajradara)! The root and cause of omniscient - primordial wisdom, is compassion; it is caused by bodhichitta, and is the perfected state of method.

Holder of the secret indicates the holder of the secret tantra lineage. Both *the root and cause of omniscient-primordial wisdom, is compassion* and furthermore the primordial wisdom *is caused by bodhichitta and is the perfected state of method*.

The auto-commentary does not give an extensive explanation on bodhichitta, so it is good to refer to other teachings to get more detailed explanations, in order to get a deeper understanding of what it is. In accordance with the definition of bodhichitta, it is good to understand that there are two main points. It consists of two aspirations: the aspiration to achieve enlightenment and the aspiration to benefit other sentient beings. The first aspiration is for oneself, and the second aspiration is to benefit other sentient beings.

The way to train in the two aspirations is by first training in the aspiration to benefit others, thus cultivating and developing bodhichitta within one's mind. Then, based on that, the aspiration to achieve enlightenment is developed, in order to benefit other sentient beings.

To develop the bodhichitta attitude one first trains in the aspiration to benefit other sentient beings. This is done by first cultivating the view that all other living beings are appealing. This instruction, by the way, is in accordance with both traditions—developing bodhichitta by the sevenfold cause and effect method, and the technique of developing bodhichitta by exchanging self with others. Both techniques share the need to perceive all beings as appealing. So it is good to understand that if you don't see other beings appealing, you won't develop the wish to help and benefit them. Thus, the first step is to train one's mind in seeing all beings as appealing.

Sevenfold cause and effect technique

With the sevenfold cause and effect technique of developing bodhichitta, one first develops equanimity in relation to all beings, where one goes beyond the perception of others as friends, enemies or strangers.

Equanimity is developed in order to overcome our normal attitude of discriminating between friends, enemies and strangers, and adopting a different attitude in relation to each. With friends you have a sense of wishing to benefit and help them, because they appeal to you; with enemies there is an attitude of wishing to neglect or ignore them, because they do not appeal to you, and thus you don't wish to benefit them; with strangers there is a sense of indifference. For as long as one has that kind of attitude, one will always discriminate between friends and enemies, and be indifferent towards strangers. The best way to develop bodhichitta is to first develop an attitude of equanimity, which to see all beings as being equally appealing to oneself.

1. Based on having developed equanimity, one develops the first cause of bodhichitta, which is to recognise that all living beings have been one's mother. One develops the attitude that all beings have equally been one's mother. At this stage, sentient beings will be even more appealing to oneself. So the sense of equanimity is strengthened when one develops the recognition that all beings have been one's mother.

2. Based on that recognition, the second cause, is to recall and remember the kindness of all beings as ones mother.

3. Having remembered the kindness of your mothers, the third cause is to generate the wish to repay their kindness. When one develops a very strong sense of how all beings have been kind to oneself, the wish to repay their kindness will naturally develop.

4. Then one develops the next cause, which is great love, a love that is imbued with the sense of the appeal of all beings.

5. Based on that great love one develops the fifth cause, which is great compassion.

6. Then one develops the sixth cause, which is called special intention.

5. The result is bodhichitta.

Generating equanimity is the first step, and the next six steps are causes for developing the bodhichitta attitude, which is the result. The six causes are the means of training one's mind to develop the aspiration to benefit other sentient beings.

When you recognise your own mother's kindness, the wish to relieve her of any suffering will be generated naturally. Why does one generate that state of mind? It is because she is your mother. So, you extend your feelings of love for your mother of this life to all living beings, who have been kind to you in the past, just as your mother of this life has been. Then the feeling of wishing to relieve the suffering of all beings can be generated.

In order to develop the state of mind that recognises all beings as having been one's mother, one must first relate

to the fact that there is no beginning to cyclic existence. When one comes to that understanding, then one should further contemplate how there is no beginning to one's own mental continuum. When one comes to accept that, then one will begin to accept the fact that one cannot count one's rebirths in previous lifetimes, as they are beginningless.

Understanding that there is no beginning to cyclic existence will be enhanced with the understanding that there is no beginning to one's mental continuum. In order to establish that there is no beginning to cyclic existence, one needs to first establish that there is no beginning to the mental continuum. In order to establish that, one refers to the present mental continuum, and understands how it is a continuity of the mental continuum of the previous day. The fact that we can remember what we did yesterday proves that our present mind is a continuity of our mind of yesterday.

So we can see that there is a continuity of our awareness, or mind. If the present mind wasn't a continuity of yesterday's mind, then we wouldn't be able to remember what we did yesterday. Thus, we can track our mental continuum back to when we were in our mother's womb, back to the time when the foetus was first created. As the mental continuum at that time is of the same substance that we have now, it must also have a preceding mental continuum.

So we come to the point of accepting that the mental continuum in the foetus would have to have had a preceding moment of mental continuum too, which could only be in a previous lifetime. That is the stage where one accepts that there has been a previous existence, and the immediate previous existence is the intermediate state right after death. And prior to that is the existence in a past life. That is how the existence of past lives is established through reasoning.

Developing the recognition the mental continuum goes back to the moment of conception in this life, and that there has been an intermediate stage, and beyond that a past life, one goes back even further to the past life before the time of conception, and a prior existence to that, and a past life before that. So in that way when one tracks back, there is no point when one can determine 'that is the time when I first began'. In this way one will be able to recognise that one's past lives are beginningless.

When, through mental analysis and meditation, one comes to the point of accepting that one's past lives are beginningless, then one further considers how, in each of one's previous lives, one would have had a mother as well. So in that way one can accept the fact that each and every being must have been one's mother many times over. When one recognises that all beings at one time or another, have been kind just as one's mother has been kind to oneself in this life, then there is a realisation that each and every being has been kind to oneself.

When one contemplates in this way and develops a sound understanding, then the kindness of all beings will become quite strong, and the wish to repay that kindness will also become very strong.

Based on recognising all beings as one's mother, then remembering the kindness of all beings, and wishing to repay that kindness, one develops great love followed by great compassion. When developing love and compassion, one generates the attitude, 'How wonderful it would be if all beings were to be free from all suffering and could obtain all happiness'. At that stage one has a keen wish for beings to be happy and free from suffering, but one has not yet reached the stage of taking the personal responsibility of freeing all beings from suffering. It is as though one is still in the negotiating stage of a business – no contract has been made yet, so the deal has not actually been finalised.

When one meditates further and develops a sense of responsibility within one's heart, then that will lead to the state of mind that is developed just prior to developing bodhichitta, which is called special intention. Here one develops a sense of personal responsibility to bring about happiness for all living beings and free them from all suffering. When one develops that special intention then that is the point where one has fully developed the causes for actually developing bodhichitta within oneself. The stages of developing great love, great compassion and the special intention are called the practice of aspiring to benefit other sentient beings.

Within the six causes the first three, (recognising all beings as having been one's mother, remembering their kindness and wishing to repay that kindness) are the basis for developing the later three causes, which are great love, great compassion and special intention. And developing great love, great compassion and special intention is the way of practising the aspiration to benefit all other sentient beings. When one has reached the stage of special intention, one takes the responsibility of bringing about happiness for all sentient beings and freeing them from all suffering. Using the earlier business analogy it is like signing the contract.

At this stage one takes full responsibility for doing whatever is needed to bring about happiness for all beings, and free them from all suffering. When one actually thinks about the reality of one's present situation, one will come to realise that 'even though that is what I intend to do, I don't have the ability to free all beings from all suffering, and lead them to ultimate happiness right now'. When one further looks at who has that ability, one comes to realise that a being who has achieved self liberation, an arhat, does not have the ability to free all beings from suffering, and neither do the numerous noble bodhisattvas have that ability. When one investigates further one finds that only a fully enlightened being, an omniscient buddha, who has completely fulfilled the two purposes, has the full capacity and ability to do that.

When one sees that achieving the enlightened state of a buddha is the only way to gain the full capacity to help other living beings, one will then develop the keen determination to achieve enlightenment. That is the stage when one develops the second aspiration, the aspiration to achieve enlightenment. Thus, the aspiration to benefit other sentient beings is first cultivated within one's mind, with the cultivation of great love, great compassion and

special intention. Then, based on that one develops the aspiration to achieve enlightenment. So as a sequence, the aspiration to benefit other sentient beings is developed first, and the result, the aspiration to achieve enlightenment, is cultivated later.

The result, enlightenment, is obtained first, and then actually benefiting sentient beings occurs later. As explained in the teachings, leading other beings to enlightenment is the ultimate way to benefit sentient beings. Therefore one needs to achieve enlightenment first in order to gain the full capacity to lead other sentient beings to enlightenment as well. The state of enlightenment, or becoming a buddha, is a state of being completely free of all negativity and obtaining all supreme qualities, thus one gains an omniscient mind. As a buddha one can then actually lead other sentient beings to that state as well. It is good to understand these sequences.

Bodhicitta is a primary mind, whereas the aspirations are secondary minds, which are concomitant with the main mind. This can be explained in more detail later.

Through the practice of developing bodhichitta and engaging in further practices, one will eventually attain enlightenment and become a buddha. So one aspires to obtain the resultant state of enlightenment, or buddhahood, in order to benefit all other living beings.

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