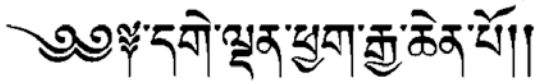

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual we set a good motivation, and the best motivation is encompassed with the bodhichitta motivation. Such a motivation is 'in order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment and for that purpose I shall listen to the teaching and put it into practice'.

The four preliminary practices

ACCUMULATING MERIT AND PURIFICATION (CONT)

The fourth verse from the root text begins:

4. *As the realisation of the void nature of the mind is completely dependent upon your collection of merit and elimination of obstacles,*

We have covered specific explanations as to what it means to gain realisations of the nature of the mind. As explained earlier, the ultimate nature of the mind is said to be its lack of inherent existence, or the mind being void of true existence. Other terms are the emptiness of the mind, or the suchness of the mind. The emptiness of the mind is the lack of inherent existence of the mind. It is referred to as the ultimate nature of the mind because, in the final analysis on the mind, one realises that it is the lack of inherent existence that is the final mode of existence of the mind. As explained in verse four of the root text, in order to realise that ultimate nature of the mind one needs to collect merit.

The main point being made in this verse is that in order to gain the realisation of the ultimate nature of the mind, which is the emptiness of the mind, one needs to (as also explained in many other teachings) first accumulate merit and purify negative karma. Without purification and the accumulation of extensive merit, the conditions conducive to gaining the realisation of the emptiness of the mind will not be present.

The importance of understanding the law of karma

When we realise the importance of needing to accumulate merit and purify negative karma then the next thing is to look into how that is done. What are the prerequisites for accumulating merit and purification? In order to generate a keen interest in accumulating merit and engaging in purification practices one needs to first be familiar with the explanation of karma. The intention of wanting to accumulate merit and engage in purification practice will not come about without some basic understanding of karma.

We can all relate to the fact that we all wish for happiness and do not wish to experience suffering. So we need to know what the causes of happiness are and what the causes of suffering are. What are the circumstances that lead us to experience suffering and what are the circumstances that lead us to experience happiness? This is explained clearly in the teachings on karma. Thus with a good understanding of karma, the need to create the appropriate causes for happiness and eliminate the causes for suffering becomes clear.

If one does not wish to experience suffering then one needs to abandon the causes of suffering. Likewise if one wishes to experience happiness then one needs to create the correct

causes for happiness. Merely wishing to not experience suffering and to experience happiness will not bring about those desired results. If it were that simple we would all be experiencing happiness all the time, because that is what we naturally wish to experience. It is clear that the desired result of happiness does not come about without creating the causes. Even though we wish to experience happiness, we do not experience it and that is clearly because we have not engaged in creating the causes. Likewise even though we do not wish for suffering it seems that is what we experience most of the time. So the experience of happiness and the experience of suffering must be understood as being totally reliant on their causes.

From this we can understand that without an understanding of karma there is no possibility for us to really develop further. The basis of the path is to understand the law of cause and effect, and by understanding karma one also comes to understand the interdependent nature of things. So an understanding of interdependent origination can come from an understanding of karma.

As mentioned earlier, a sound understanding of karma is crucial for a real transformation to take place within oneself. As explained in the teachings if the negative karma one creates is not purified then one will definitely experience the consequence, which is suffering. That is the natural law of cause and effect. The reverse is that if one engages in generating virtue and accumulating merit then it is definite that one will experience the positive results of joy and happiness, but only for as long as it is not destroyed by negative states of mind such as anger. That is the natural cause and effect sequence of negative and positive karmas, and without that understanding one's practice will not bear much fruit.

In effect without a profound understanding of karma we may find that even though we may seemingly engage in practices such as a purification practice, then far from creating the causes for happiness by purifying negative karma, we may actually be creating causes for further suffering.

The reason is not because there is a fault in the practice itself, but rather because one lacks a true understanding of karma. For example, if we engage in the practice of purification with the expectation of some quick result, and lack the understanding that a deeper transformation will take place in the future, then one may actually lose faith in the practice. We may start to develop the state of mind of wrong view, and think 'even though I engage in this practice, it doesn't seem to bring any positive result, so it must not be a valid practice'. Then one may begin to doubt the effects of karma itself. In this manner, if one does not have a profound understanding of how the practice works then it may become a cause for a negative state of mind to develop, rather than a positive one.

As mentioned here specifically, gaining profound realisations as well as temporary realisations is dependent on the accumulation of merit and the purification of negative karma. So one should try to include that understanding in one's daily practice, and through that, understand how the accumulation of merit serves to enhance one's practice.

As mentioned in the commentary one must not take these preliminary practices lightly, and must actually engage in the practices outside of the formal meditation sessions. One must be diligent with the practices of accumulating merit and purification at all times.

How to purify negative karma

As mentioned in the auto-commentary, the main means for purifying negative karma and accumulating merit in our tradition is the practice of Vajrasattva with the recitation of the hundred-syllable mantra, as well as the practice of prostrations to the thirty-five buddhas.

One can do the Vajrasattva practice in accordance with one's individual level. If one has not received any higher tantric initiations, then in our ordinary human form, one can visualise Vajrasattva on the top of one's crown and then do the purification practice.

Those who have received highest yoga tantric initiations can do the practice in relation to whatever deity practice they are engaged in. For example, if one is doing Yamantaka practice or Vajrayogini practice then one visualises oneself as the respective deity and visualises Vajrasattva on top of one's crown and then does the purification practice. Those who have received the highest yoga tantra initiation can also generate themselves as Vajrasattva and do the practice in that way.

In general the most suitable way to practice would be to maintain one's ordinary human aspect and visualise Vajrasattva on top of one's crown, and then do the visualisation of nectar and light coming from Vajrasattva, entering and purifying oneself. Doing this practice as an ordinary person is very effective, because it directly relates to the perception we have of ourselves, and thus with the visualisation, we receive the deity's blessings for purification.

Although the auto-commentary does not go into the details of the practice, it does mention the benefits of doing the Vajrasattva practice. The benefits are explained in these lines:

As mentioned particularly in the text *The Essential Ornaments*:

By engaging in the 100 syllable mantra,
The downfalls will not increase;
This is proclaimed by the supreme practitioners,
Thus, engage in this practice during the breaks.

'By engaging in the one hundred syllable mantra' has the connotation of engaging in the ritual of reciting the one-hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra, which are the specific instructions from the earlier masters on how to engage in the practice. That is what is implied here. So if one does the recitation based on those specific instructions then, through the blessing of the mantra, with each twenty-one recitations the downfalls will not increase.

The specific instructions on how to do the visualisations accompanying the one-hundred-syllable mantra are explained in the sadhanas. To explain it briefly, one visualises the Vajrasattva deity on top of one's crown and then one invokes the wisdom beings in the front, which then merge with the visualised Vajrasattva on top of one's crown. Then one invokes the initiating deities and requests the initiation. After the initiation is bestowed, the initiating deities dissolve into Vajrasattva, and then one does the visualisation of receiving the nectar and light.

When one does the recitation of the mantra with the appropriate visualisation as described in the sadhanas, then through the blessing of the mantra (as mentioned here in the verse), 'the downfalls will not increase'. This means that, as a result of the appropriate visualisation of the blessing of the mantra, whatever downfalls one may have incurred will not increase. The negativity of that downfall will stop increasing.

Here 'downfalls' refers, for example, to any root infraction of either the bodhisattva or tantric vows and commitments. If on a particular day one incurs an infraction of a root bodhisattva or tantric vow and one does not purify it right away, then it is said that by the next day the intensity of that negativity will multiply. The negative consequences of an infraction of a root vow will increase just like we accumulate interest if we borrow money. If we don't pay the money back then the interest on it increases for every day that we don't pay it back. That is the deal we make when we borrow money. Likewise when we take vows and make commitments, we do so with the intention of keeping those vows every day for the rest of our lives, so if we break that commitment then naturally there will be undesirable consequences.

The auto-commentary continues with the quote from *The Essential Ornaments*:

If a hundred thousand are recited,
A complete purification takes place,

The author then explains:

Just as it has been explained, if this mantra is recited twenty one times daily, it stops the increasing of the downfalls. If recited a hundred thousand times, even a root infraction is completely purified. Thus with the four opponent powers intact, engaging in the practice of Vajrasattva through mediation and recitation...

This explains the benefits of the Vajrasattva practice. When one sees these benefits one will develop an interest in doing the practice. I have explained the actual practice according to the sadhana a few times previously, and it is also available in text form, so we will not spend more time going over it now.

As a practitioner, purification is one of our jobs, which means that at our level our practice consists of purifying negative karma and accumulating of merit.

The great Indian master Nagarjuna mentioned clearly that one initially engages in the preliminary practices of purification and accumulating merit, and then in the middle one engages in meditation practices. This is really a very sound advice on how to practice. If we find that right now our meditation is not very clear, and that we are not able to visualise and focus well, then that is due to the negative states of mind prevalent within us. Therefore if we take the initiative to engage in purification practices, we will notice that the focus in our meditation will be much clearer after embarking on the purification practice, and that the mind will be clearer. Those positive effects can definitely be felt. Otherwise it is difficult to gain the positive results from meditation practice.

Even though we will not go into specific details in our explanation now, the text refers to the preliminary practice of making mandala offerings of the universe. The mandala offering also needs to be understood as being a very profound practice.

It is good to understand that whatever practice we engage in, whatever deity it may be in relation to, they all need to be preceded by preliminary practices such as making mandala offerings to accumulate merit, engaging in Vajrasattva practice, and doing prostrations as part of the thirty-five buddha purification practice, as well as taking refuge and generating bodhichitta. These practices are most powerful practices that make our mind suitable for engaging in further meditation practices.

The nun Gelong Palmo is said to have engaged in the meditation practices on Avaloketishvara, the buddha of compassion for some period of time. But no matter how many times she tried, she never had a very clear visualisation of the deity and so she was not able to accomplish her practices. Then she embarked on making a lot of mandala offerings and it is said that after a significant number of mandala offerings, her visualisation became very vivid and she was able to accomplish the Avaloketishvara practice. She actually perceived a clear vision of Avaloketishvara as a result of her practice.

In relation to the earlier explanation the auto-commentary then reads:

...and likewise engaging in the practice of prostrations to the thirty-five buddhas, must be taken to heart.

As mentioned here, prostrations in relation to the thirty-five buddhas are said to be a very powerful means of purification, particularly when combined with all four opponent powers. That is also true for the Vajrasattva practices and any other purification practice. When all four opponent powers are present then the purification practice becomes very powerful indeed.

It is good to remember the specific advice in the text, which is that if one does not purify one's negative karmas then day-by-day it will increase, just like inflation. So in order to prevent that negativity from increasing in one's mind it is good to engage in a purification practices such as Vajrasattva practice or the thirty-five buddha prostration practice, both of which have to be done with all four opponent powers.

THE FOUR OPPONENT POWERS

It is good to have an understanding of what the four opponent powers are. As explained in the teachings, if all four opponent powers are not present then no matter what purification practice is done, it will not be a complete purification. As many of us are already engaging in purification practices, it is good to be aware of how to do it in a complete way.

For instance, in the evening, before we retire for the night, it is good to reflect upon one's day. How many times has one engaged in positive deeds and positive states of mind? If one finds that one has engaged in positive deeds and had positive states of mind then one can rejoice in that, being happy to have had the opportunity to accumulate virtue. Then dedicate that to the welfare of all sentient beings, so that they may be free from all suffering and gain the ultimate state of happiness. If one dedicates one's virtue in this way then that is the greatest way to secure one's merit and increase it further.

If on reflection about one's day one recalls that one has engaged in non-virtue, or a negative state of mind then try to develop strong regret feeling, 'how unfortunate that I was led into committing such negative deeds'. With a sense of regret one can engage in the practice of purification. If one does the purification practice with the all four opponent powers, then that negative karma is definitely purified.

In fact, if one checks one's mind in that way at the end of the day and does the appropriate mental practices (either rejoicing and dedicating, or else purifying one's negative karma), then even if one doesn't wake up the next morning, all would be fine. There is no doubt one would be saved from an unfortunate rebirth in the next life. Since we all have to die, it is said that the best time to die is when one is engaged in virtue, in purifying negative karma, or

accumulating merit. The best time to die would be while engaged in a purification practice.

There was a time when, through some incident, I was bleeding a lot, and I had heard previously that death could occur if one bleeds excessively. So because I was bleeding a lot there came a time when I felt that my death could be approaching. However my mind was quite clear and I felt that if I had to die now, then since my mind was quite clear it would be a good time to die. I didn't mind dying and felt that it was a good opportunity, however after a certain period of time death didn't come. So even though I was prepared mentally, apparently it was not my time to die yet.

It was only later that I recalled that one of my main teachers, Geshe Ngawang Dhargey, had casually advised me (even though normally he didn't give that sort of advice) that it is good to recite one hundred thousand Tara mantras. I had actually done such a recitation, and it was very much later that it occurred to me that having done that practice had actually saved my life by overcoming the major obstacle of bleeding

The four opponent powers are:

1. The power of reliance

Taking refuge and generating bodhichitta is the power of reliance.

2. The power of applying the antidotes

The teachings present a general list of the antidotes for overcoming negative karma, such as meditation on emptiness, reciting mantras, reciting sutras and so forth. There are actually six specific ways of doing those practices, however what we basically need to understand is that all virtue accumulated with the intention of purification can become an antidote for purifying negative karma.

3. The power of regret

This means generating strong regret for the negativities one has engaged in, similar to the regret one would have after consuming a poison. As soon as one realised that one has consumed poison, with strong regret about having consumed it, one would want to get rid of the poison immediately. One should develop a similar attitude with negative karma. The reason why we would feel regret is because we know the consequences of consuming poison. At worst, death could definitely occur, and at the very least one will experience a lot of pain, misery and suffering. So with strong regret one would want to try to remedy that suffering and try to get rid of the poison from one's system in any possible way.

Likewise when one reflects on the consequences of negative karma one will develop a strong sense of urgency: 'If I do not to purify negative karma then the consequences or results of that negative karma are only suffering. In future lifetimes there will be no way for me to experience any happiness, and because of my negative karma there will only be immense suffering'.

The better the understanding, and the more conviction and faith one has in karma, the stronger the sense of regret will become. Actually, the teachings explain that of the four opponent powers the power of regret is one of the most important ones to develop. As the teachings mention, strong regret in itself actually purifies half of the negative karma one has accumulated.

4. The power of resolution

Resolving not to commit negative karma again is very much dependent on the strength of the regret one develops. If one develops strong regret with the understanding that it has been negative and harmful for oneself, then the wish to not commit that deed again will develop quite strongly.

Resolution involves making a commitment to not engage in that negative deed again. In making such a resolution some may worry that 'if I resolve to not commit a negative deed again and happen to engage in that negative deed then would that be a lie? Would I be lying to the objects of refuge?'

Here one should understand that one can resolve to the best of one's capacity to not commit a certain negative deed for a certain period of time. Having made that resolve, if due to some conditions and circumstances one unwillingly and unintentionally happens to engage in negative karma again, then one will not incur the fault of lying, because earlier one did not have the intention to lie. So if one makes a strong commitment and intention to not engage in negative deed, but due to circumstances and conditions one happens to engage in that again, then that is out of one's control, so to speak, and would not be a lie.

It may be difficult to promise not to commit certain negative karmas for the rest of our life. But if one were to commit to not engaging in a negative deed for two or three days, a day, or even for a few minutes, then during that period of time one has kept that commitment of not engaging in that negative deed.

To explain how to do this practice in a formal way, we can do it in the evening, for example, before going to bed. In the space before oneself, one visualise one's own guru in the aspect of Vajradhara or Buddha Shakyamuni. In the presence of the object of refuge, which is the reliance, one then recalls whatever negative deed one has engaged in. Then with a strong sense of regret, one generates refuge and bodhichitta and then recites the one hundred-syllable mantra or any other practice. That, in itself, is the antidote or remedy for overcoming the negative karma.

Then at the end of the practice one makes a resolution. In that way, within a few minutes our practice becomes a complete practice of purification. It takes only a few minutes but the benefit we gain saves us from suffering in numerous lifetimes in the future. When in just a few minutes we can engage in a very powerful practice from which we can gain incredible benefit, isn't it worthwhile then to spend a few minutes in this way?

That completes the explanation of the two preliminary practices of accumulating merit and purification.

THE GURU YOGA PRACTICE

Guru yoga is the fourth preliminary practice, which is described in verse five of the root text:

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.

This refers to the doorway to receiving the blessings, which is making supplications to the guru. As the auto-commentary explains:

Then meditate on the lama by seeing him as inseparable from the buddhas of three times, who is the source of all goodness in this life and all future life times, who exemplifies the deeds of all buddhas and bodhisattvas,

and who is kind in the three ways. Meditate on the lama by seeing him as the essence of the Three Jewels. While meditating on the guru yoga, which is the profound practice of the path, make strong supplications to the guru from the depths of your heart. To do this practice consistently and repeatedly is a vital point of the practice.

The guru yoga practice is done in an elaborate form in the *Guru Puja*. However, in essence, there is one way to understand what guru yoga is. As explained in some teachings the guru yoga practice consists of meditating on the physical aspect of the lama, applying his advice in one's daily life, and making strong supplications to obtain the qualities of the lama's mind within oneself.

When one does the guru yoga meditation, one visualises the lama. As explained in the teachings, there are different areas where you can visualise the lama, either on the palm of your hands, or in your heart, or in every joint of your body, or in the space before you, or on the top of your crown.

Another text explains that the significance of doing the guru yoga practice with visualisations and so forth is that one will actually receive the blessings of the thousand buddhas. This text explains that the main point of the practice is to develop the recognition that the essence of all enlightened beings is presented to us in the aspect of the lama. So the lama serves as the manifestation of all enlightened beings, who manifests in an aspect that we can relate to, in order to guide us and lead us to enlightenment. The lama is thus the essence of all enlightened beings, and with that understanding the guru yoga practice becomes a uniquely powerful practice.

When one does the actual guru yoga practice it is also important to visualise that the lamas who have passed away are also constantly present, blessing and guiding oneself.

When the auto-commentary says 'Then meditate on the lama by seeing him as inseparable from the buddhas of three times', it is quite clear that the buddhas of the past, present and future, and the visualised lama must be seen as inseparable from them, which means that the essence of the lama is the buddhas of the three times.

'He who is the source of all goodness in this life and all future life times' is the lama who guides us, and who is the source of the goodness and well-being of ourselves in this and all future lifetimes. So the lama is the embodiment of the buddhas of the three times, as well as exemplifying 'the deeds of all buddhas and bodhisattvas and who is kind in the three ways'.

'Meditate on the lama by seeing him as the essence of the Three Jewels' points out that the lama is inseparable from the buddhas of the three times. How he is actually the essence of the Three Jewels can be explained in more detail in a future session. However, in brief, the physical aspect of the lama represents the Sangha jewel, the teachings of the lama represent the Dharma jewel, and the mind of the lama represents the Buddha jewel. So one visualises the lama inseparable from all buddhas and bodhisattvas and as the essence of the Three Jewels.

When that visualisation has been done appropriately, then the next piece of advice in the auto-commentary is 'Thus meditating on the guru yoga, which is the profound practice of the path, make strong supplications to the guru from the depths of your heart'. Supplication from the depths of one's heart will come about naturally when one has done the earlier practices appropriately. As the auto-commentary does not go into detail about reliance on the guru it is

necessary to refer back to the lam rim teachings, which explain in great detail how to rely on the lama. This includes how to rely on the lama mentally and through one's actions, and also the benefits of relying on a spiritual teacher or guru, and the disadvantages of not relying on a spiritual teacher. These are explained in great detail in the lam rim and it is good to refer to that in order to gain a proper understanding.

The auto commentary further reads:

Once when someone asked the great master in a loud voice, 'Atisha, please give a personal instruction' he laughed and said, 'Ha, ha. My hearing is quite good, but for me to give personal instructions you need faith, faith - faith!'

As the auto-commentary explains, thinking that Atisha didn't hear him, someone asked Atisha in a loud voice to give a particular instruction. Atisha said, 'I actually have quite good hearing but if you want to have instruction you have to have faith', which he emphasises by repeating 'faith, faith'.

Then the auto-commentary reads:

Lord of the Dharma, Sakya Pandita says:

Thus, once you have received the initiation,
If you make supplications to the lama,
By seeing the lama as the one who encompasses,
The culmination of all Three Jewels;
You will surely receive the blessings.

Sakya Pandita advises that when making a supplication to the guru, it is important to do it in the appropriate way, which is to see the lama as one who encompasses the essence of the Three Jewels. When the guru yoga practice is done in that way then the blessings will flow into one. Just reciting prayers, or verses without the appropriate visualisation and understanding will not, in itself, have much effect.

The main point being made here is that having received an initiation from a lama, doing guru yoga practice in relation to that lama or guru means visualising the lama as the essence of the Three Jewels. That is how the practice of guru yoga needs to be done. You have missed the point if you see the Three Jewels and the guru as being separate entities. If you have received an initiation from a particular lama you must envision the lama as the essence of the Three Jewels, and that the Three Jewels and the lama are inseparable and of one entity. That is how to do the practice of guru yoga if one wishes to receive the blessings.

The auto commentary then reads:

The great lord (Padampa Sangye) also says:

When you allow the lama to guide you,
You will reach your ultimate destination,
Thus, people of Dingri, extract the essential advice,
And offer devotion and respect to the lama.

Padampa Sangye mentions clearly that if you rely on and have trust in the lama then you will reach the desired destination, as the lama will take you there.

Then the auto commentary continues:

The Venerable Milarepa also says:

After the lord dissolves into you,
In order to never forget the lama,
Place him at the centre of your heart.
Periodically meditate on the appearance of the lama.
When you have the appearance of the lama,
Place him at the top of your crown,
And make supplication to become inseparable.

When the lord dissolves into you, have the lama placed always in your heart in order to never forget him. 'When you have the appearance of the lama' implies that the appearance of the lama is to be taken as the object of refuge. This emphasises again that the objects of refuge and the lama are not separate, and that the lama is the essence of all the buddhas, and the essence of the objects of the Three Jewels. So when the lama appears, place him on the top of your crown, and make supplications to be inseparable from the lama who is in essence the Three Jewels and all the buddhas.

The actual practice of guru yoga and guru yoga realisation is said to be a profound realisation that is not easily gained, which is particularly true for us.

My own master, Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey went into retreat for ten years. He would emerge from retreat to give some teachings to his disciples, but most of the time he was in retreat. It was known that he was meditating on the guru yoga practice.

Even to our ordinary perception Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey seems to have had definitely attained the realisation of the guru yoga practice. That was quite apparent. After he completed the retreat it is said that he offered his realisations to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

I happened to be present when Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey was at a teaching session of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and a message was sent for Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey to come and see His Holiness. At their meeting His Holiness praised Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey's practice and said 'I admire the way you have spent ten years in retreat while continuously guiding and teaching other disciples, and I greatly rejoice in your deeds. At this time I have a request to make of you, which I hope you will not refuse'.

His Holiness explained that the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives had been established, and would be completed in about two months, and said 'I would like you to be the teacher there to teach students who are interested in Buddhism'. His Holiness then advised Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey to hand him a summary of the teachings that he conducted at the Library. The first book published on Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey's teachings was *The Tibetan Tradition of Mental Development*. I hear that it encompasses the essential teachings and that many westerners who used that text actually became translators themselves, just by studying that text with its essence of all the teachings.

In Kopan monastery in Nepal there was a man called Karma who was very keen on becoming a translator, and he wanted to learn how to do so. At one point we were having a meal together with Lama Choedak, and Karma praised the translations of Jeffrey Hopkins. Lama Choedak made the comment, 'Well Jeffrey Hopkins may be all well and good, but if you are really keen on becoming a good translator you must read Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey's work. Many who are keen to become translators have studied that text and have actually learned a lot, so I would advise you to do that'.

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