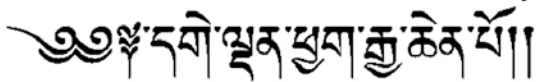

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



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First we generate a positive motivation, a bodhichitta motivation, such as: 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose I will listen to the teachings, and put them into practice as best as I can'.

2. PRESENTING THE ACTUAL MATERIAL OF THE COMPOSITION

2.1. Preparatory practices

2.1.4 GURU YOGA

MAKING SUPPLICATIONS TO THE GURU

In our earlier sessions we went through the guru yoga practice including the visualisation of the guru. Having done that visualisation appropriately, one then makes supplications to receive the blessings from the guru. Such a supplication begins by taking refuge and generating bodhichitta, generating the four immeasurable thoughts, and engaging in the seven limb practice, followed by a mandala offering. When the mandala offering is made in accordance with the ritual practice, the significance in lay man's terms, is basically something like, 'I have made offerings to you guru, now I need to ask for something in return.'

In accordance with the lam rim teachings, one is making supplications to the guru to receive the three great meanings or purposes.

The requesting prayer found in the lam rim teachings is:

I prostrate and go for refuge to the guru and the Three Precious Jewels,

Please bless my mind.

I am requesting you to immediately pacify all the wrong conceptions, from incorrect devotion to the guru, up to the dualistic view of a self that exists in my mind, and in the minds of all mother sentient beings.

I am requesting you to immediately generate all the correct realisations, from guru devotion up to enlightenment in my mind, and in the minds of all mother sentient beings.

I am requesting you to pacify all outer and inner obstacles to actualising the entire graduated path to enlightenment in my mind, and in the minds of all mother sentient beings.

In this prayer, we are requesting the guru to:

1. Assist in eliminating all misconceptions such as not paying proper respect to the guru, and seeing the self with a dualistic view.
2. Please bestow blessings to gain the realisations of properly paying respect to the guru, all the way up to the realisation of being free from the dualistic view of inherent existence.
3. Give the blessings to enable one to eliminate all external and internal obstacles.

Such a supplication is referred to as a supplication to obtain the **common siddhis** or realisations. This supplication is actually explained clearly in the extensive lam rim, as well as in the intermediate lam rim. It would be good to refer to those texts in order to become more familiar with this supplication.

The **uncommon siddhis**, which relate to the tantric realisations, is to make the above supplication with this extra request, 'please pacify all the wrong conceptions to be free from the subtle dual view of the white, red and dark visions'.

In our last session we went over the visualisation where one visualises Manjushri on top of one's crown, with Vajradhara on top of Manjushri's crown, and Lama Tsong Khapa at Manjushri's heart. Another commentary explains in verse form how one makes supplications to this three-fold visualisation of the guru on top of one's crown.

The embodiment of wisdom Manjushri, is crowned by Vajradhara,
At whose heart is Lama Tsong Khapa the wisdom being,
To you the precious guru who encompasses all,
I make this supplication;
Please kindly bestow upon me the realisations of mahamudra, the ultimate unification.

After this supplication, if one has time, then one can do the supplication from The Foundation of all Good Qualities. Then, if one has particular guru mantras, one can recite them in combination with this practice. Otherwise one could do a brief supplication from mahamudra.

The second verse of the supplication to the lineage gurus of mahamudra is the request to quickly bestow the realisations of mahamudra. This is done with a mind that is imbued with bodhichitta.

May I be blessed to completely sever the continuum of clinging to the self-grasping,
To generate loving kindness, compassion and the pure mind of enlightenment,
And quickly attain mahamudra, the path of unification.

This request includes three main points:

1. To sever the dualistic mind of grasping to true existence.
2. For the mind imbued with bodhichitta to be cultivated within one.
3. For mahamudra, the inseparable path of unification, to be spontaneously realised within oneself. Here, 'inseparable' indicates the unification of bliss and wisdom that is to be realised within one's mind.

Having made supplications to the lama in this way, one needs to develop the conviction that the lama accepts the request. The texts explain the request being accepted by the by the lama in the rupakaya aspect, which is the form body of the lama, and acceptance by the lama in the dharmakaya aspect. The acceptance by the rupakaya aspect of the guru is where the guru verbally tells us that he has accepted our request. With the dharmakaya acceptance, one imagines that the guru with his primordial wisdom mentally accepts one's request. That is the difference between the two modes of acceptance.

In making a supplication to the dharmakaya aspect, or the primordial wisdom-mind, of the guru, one is also making a supplication to the guru/Buddha visualised within oneself. Then, having made these supplications, one needs to visualise the guru actually entering into oneself from the top of one's crown to reside in one's heart. Then one can continuously recall the guru at one's heart. Of course there are particular times in deity visualisations, where one has to dissolve oneself completely into voidness, at which moment everything dissolves into voidness. However one needs to understand that while dissolving the guru at one's heart, the ultimate state of the mind of the guru is always inseparable from oneself. In whatever activity one engages, it is good to constantly remember that the guru is at one's heart.

Maintaining mindfulness of the guru at one's heart is of great benefit to our daily life. When consuming food or drink, or when engaged in other pleasant activities, such as strolling in a beautiful garden or visiting a beautiful area, one can offer all this to the guru at one's heart. Making offerings to the guru actually is the same as making offerings to the Three Jewels – the guru is the Buddha the supreme guide, the Dharma the actual liberator, and the Sangha who are the assistants. In addition to the Three Jewels the guru also encompasses all the *yidams* or tutelary deities. So we receive help in gaining realisations from the tutelary deities or *yidams*, as well as the guru.

Through this we receive the blessings to enable us to accomplish our virtuous activities. Maintaining that awareness means that whatever activity we engage in will always be an opportunity to engage in the practices of accumulating merit and so forth. It is very useful to think in this way.

Personally, I always maintain an awareness of my guru in the aspect of Buddha Shakyamuni, with Lama Tsong Khapa at his heart, on the top of my crown. So when I sit, go out for a walk or sleep, the lama is always with me. In that way one is inseparable from the guru and the Buddha at all times. If someone were to ask me if whether I have any company, then my answer can be 'Oh yes, I always have the Three Jewels on top of my crown'.

Maintaining an awareness of the guru as being with oneself at all times really helps in many practical ways. For example it can help to prevent one from engaging in negative deeds. In particular, that awareness can help to develop a conscientious mind that encompasses a sense of shame in relation to oneself and consideration in relation to others. These two states of mind are said to protect us from all misdeeds. Without shame and consideration there is nothing to stop us from engaging in negative deeds.

Thus an awareness and visualisation of the guru encompassing all the buddhas is very helpful in our daily lives. We rely upon the supreme object, the guru, when we have difficulties in life. He is a constant source of inspiration; to whom we direct our supplications to quickly accomplish virtues that we have not yet accomplished, and for the virtues that we have already accomplished to not decline but increase even more. We

have now gone over all four preliminary practices, which are:

- Taking refuge, the doorway for becoming a Buddhist, and generating bodhichitta, the doorway to the Mahayana. It is good that we really try to understand these main points, with an awareness of their significance.
- Making mandala offerings, one of the optimum ways to accumulate merit, which we have covered briefly.
- Visualisation and recitation of Vajrasattva mantras, which is one of the optimum purification practices.
- Guru yoga practice, the optimum way for receiving blessings, which we have just covered.

In this way, we have briefly covered the four preliminary practices. If we are inclined to study and practice mahamudra, then it is essential that we engage in these preliminary practices.

2.2. The Actual

The verse from the root text reads:

6. *There are many different ways of approaching the actual teachings of mahamudra. In general, these can be divided into two basic classifications —the mahamudra teachings of the sutras and those of the tantras.*

In other commentaries and traditions there are more elaborate listings of the different presentations on mahamudra. In the auto-commentary there is a brief explanation of the different mahamudras, and in order to avoid complicated details we will just briefly go over the listings for now.

The auto-commentary states:

As listed in the following there are various different approaches of presenting the actual mahamudra. The lord Drigungpa elucidates the intentions of Drogon Rinpoche...

Lord Drigungpa was one of the followers of Drogon Rinpoche, who was one of the founders of the Kagyu tradition. Although there are many different lineages within the Kagyu tradition, the two main ones are the Shangpa Kagyu and the Dagpo Kagyu, with the Dagpo Kagyu tradition having further sub-divisions. As explained in the auto-commentary, Drigungpa elucidates the main intention of Drogon Rinpoche. After we escaped from Tibet we lived in close proximity to some of the followers of that Kagyu lineage. Amongst other practices they were known to be very skilled in the *powa* practice, which is the practice of transference at the time of death.

The auto-commentary then continues:

The lord Drigungpa elucidates the intentions of Drogon Rinpoche and explains mahamudra in relation to the three vehicles that cover all four types of mudras, including mahamudra.

Drigungpa then states in one of his works:

The profound mudra is of fourfold,
As clearly explained by the elder Drogon;
These are the methods for obtaining the three types
of awakening,
Which are presented as the four mudras of the path.

For instance, the body speech and mind of the hearers,
Never separating from the three vows
Is *action mudra*.
While the realisation of selflessness,
Is said to be the *Dharma mudra*.
The *pledge mudra* is separation from the delusions,
And the liberation of a non-remainder,
From the contaminated aggregates, is *mahamudra*.

Here the 'body, speech and mind of the hearers' never 'being separated from the three vows' refers to the self-liberation vows. This is referred to as *action mudra*. The realisation of selflessness is said to be the *Dharma mudra* and separation from the delusions, is referred to as the *pledge mudra*. And the liberation of a non-remainder from contaminated aggregates is *mahamudra*.

Thus these lines explain one of the views of the four mudras, the action mudra, dharma mudra, pledge mudra and mahamudra.

The quote from lord Drigungpa continues:

The three doors [body, speech, mind] of a bodhisattva,
Never separating from the six perfections,
Is *action mudra*.
Being free from mental fabrications and illusions,
Is the *Dharma mudra*
Unstained by self-interest,
Is the *pledge mudra*,
The equal taste of compassion and emptiness,
This is *mahamudra* itself.

Among the various pledges of a bodhisattva, the ultimate pledge is to not be stained by self-interest. So if at any time a bodhisattva lapses and falls into self-interest, then that is a lapse of the pledge mudra. Here mahamudra is explained as the equal taste, or union, of compassion and emptiness.

Then lord Drigungpa continues with another two interpretations:

According to the secrete tantric paths;
Relying on a consort, is *karma-mudra* [action mudra],
And never parting from the union of subtle mind and wind,
Is the *Dharma mudra*.
Never declining from the commitment is *pledge mudra*.
Simultaneously arising primordial wisdom,
This is *mahamudra*.

According to the personal instructions on *tummo* - a path to liberation
While viewing the body like a machine,
The branches of the winds are *karma-mudra*.
Experiencing the non-dual bliss and wisdom,
Is *Dharma mudra*.
The *pledge mudra* is non-attachment.
And spontaneously-accomplished is *mahamudra*.

Then the auto-commentary further reads:

The great Go Lotsawa Zhonnupel asserts that the non-conceptual exalted wisdom ascertaining emptiness is itself mahamudra.

So without going into much detail now, what we notice is that there are quite a few different interpretations of what the term mahamudra refers to. It is good for you to go

over these explanations, keep them in mind, and investigate the different types of mahamudra further.

The text then quotes Lotsawa Zhonnupel's assertion:

As he says in the introduction of his treatise:

I will henceforth introduce mahamudra, which is the seal of the entirety of the Buddha's doctrine on practices and insights, beginning from the self-liberation vows, which are the bases, all the way up to the practices of the Guhyasamaja.

In these few lines, 'the bases' refers to the self-liberation vows. Adopting and keeping those self-liberation vows are considered as the bases of the Buddhist doctrine, which lead all the way up to the practices of the Guhyasamaja which, as mentioned previously, is renowned as the king of the tantras. Thus, the Guhyasamaja tantra is considered as the pinnacle of the tantric teachings.

The author then further explains in the auto-commentary:

Thus, even though there are many different presentations, in summary mahamudra is classified into two, that of sutra and of tantra.

As explained here, mahamudra is essentially classified into two, that of sutra and that of tantra. We touched on this at the beginning. Why is mahamudra subsumed into only two—sutra and tantra?

Student: Is it objective and subjective?

Of course we did talk about the subjective and objective mahamudra, the subjective mahamudra being the primary one. How would you relate that to the sutra and tantra classifications?

Student: I thought the objective one was the sutra because it is the emptiness of all phenomena, and the tantric one was the emptiness of the mind holding the object.

The objective mahamudra being emptiness, the non-inherent existence of all phenomena, was basically explained earlier. Some question whether there is in fact a sutra mahamudra, but the author of this text explains that there is a sutra mahamudra, and supports this with a quote from the Buddha himself. The sutra says that the non-inherent existence of all internal and external things is the great seal. Within that context, all non-inherent existence of all phenomena is objective mahamudra.

So to be specific, the difference between the sutra and the tantra mahamudra does not lie in the object—emptiness—but rather the subject—the actual wisdom realising emptiness—which according to sutra is a grosser level of mental consciousness compared to the wisdom realising emptiness that is explained according to the tantra. According to the tantric teachings, the exalted wisdom realising emptiness is the clear light mind, which is further sub-divided into *example clear light* and *actual or meaning clear light*. There is no other wisdom realising emptiness, which does not subsume into the sutra and the tantric explanation.

Having mentioned that mahamudra is classified into sutra and tantra the author of the auto-commentary then goes on to say:

In this treatise the first is explained more elaborately [the sutra mahamudra], while the later is presented first to indicate that it takes up fewer words.

So the tantric mahamudra is explained first in the text.

2.2.1. TANTRIC MAHAMUDRA

The auto-commentary then quotes these verses from the root text:

7. *For the later, you must concentrate on the energy channels of your vajra-body, and especially on the central energy channel. From following such methods as this and others, you can come to experience the blissful realisation of the Clear Light of Voidness on the finest level of consciousness*
8. *The explanation of mahamudra as the blissful realisation of voidness attained by channelling your body's energy winds into the central energy channel is attested to by Saraha, Nagarjuna, Naropa and Maitripa. [It is taught specifically in The Seven Texts Of The Mahasiddhas and The Three Core Volumes Of Saraha.] These mahamudra teachings, thus, are the quintessence of the highest classification of tantra, anuttarayoga. This then, in brief is the explanation of mahamudra according to the tantra system.*

The auto-commentary then goes on to explain:

If asked, why is it called mahamudra? To quote from *The Drops of Mahamudra*,

Chak refers to the primordial wisdom realising emptiness,

Gya refers to the state of being free from cyclic existence,

Chenpo refers to the union of these two states,

Thus it is called *chak-gya chenpo*.

The text called *The Drops of Mahamudra*, explains the literal meaning of the Tibetan word for mahamudra, which is *chak-gya chenpo*. As this text explains, each syllable has a particular meaning. *Chak*, which relates to the *mu* in mahamudra, refers to the primordial wisdom realising emptiness. *Gya*, which relates to the *dra* in mahamudra, refers to the state of being free from cyclic existence. *Chenpo*, which relates to the *maha* of mahamudra, refers to the union of these two states. Thus the literal explanation of mahamudra refers to the actual realisation of emptiness.

The auto-commentary further reads:

Just as it has been mentioned, according to tantra, mahamudra is: Having first received the four initiations intact and upholding the vows and commitments well, develop a firm familiarisation with the generation stage, actualising concentration on the vital points of vajra-body and so forth. With external and internal skilful methods, the wind enters, abides and dissolves into the central channel. When the primordial wisdom of great bliss spontaneously arising from that realises emptiness conceptually, it is called *example clear light*. When that primordial wisdom realises emptiness directly, it then becomes the *actual clear light*.

1. Based on having first taken refuge and generated bodhichitta, the first stage is that one receives the four initiations intact. Then having received the four initiations, one needs to uphold the vows and commitments well. These vows and commitments include the root and auxiliary vows of the bodhisattva, as well as the root and auxiliary tantric vows.
2. Having upheld the tantric vows and commitments well, the next step is to develop a firm familiarisation with the generation stage. As clearly presented here, one

needs to first be familiar with the generation stage before one can practice the completion stage. In brief actualising the generation stage means to familiarise oneself on both the gross and subtle levels of the generation stage.

3. On the **gross level** of the **generation stage**, it is said that one gains the ability to focus on the entire external image of the deity as well as the mandala of the deity (while remaining free from the two obscurations of excitement and laxity), and not lapsing from one's concentration for even for a second for the duration of one sixth of a day (in accordance with the day being divided into six parts). When one is able to concentrate unwaveringly for one sixth of a day without distraction for even a second on a vivid, clear image of the physical aspect or image of the deity and the entire mandala, then that would be an indication of mastering the gross level of the practice of the generation stage.

Accomplishing the **subtle generation stage** is where one is able to envision an image of the deity along with the mandala that is as small as an atom, and then focus on that for one sixth of a day, without the mind wavering even for a second while remaining free of the obscurations of excitement and laxity. If I were to go into any further detail, then that would be explaining too many details of the tantric practices, which is not appropriate right now.

However, what one needs to understand is clearly in order to accomplish the practices of the completion stage, one must first master the practices of the generation stage. So, as explained in the teachings, it is quite evident that this is not an easy task. Nevertheless, what we can relate to is that in order to engage in any tantric deity practice, one must first receive the appropriate initiations. Another translation of 'initiation' is empowerment, which carries more of the literal meaning of the Tibetan word *wang*, which has the connotation of getting permission. Thus, through the blessing of receiving the initiation/permission from the lama, one engages in the practices of hearing the teachings on tantra first, thinking about the specific points of tantra, and finally putting them into meditation practice. So initially, one is given permission and empowered to engage in that level of tantric practice.

Through familiarity and persistent practice, one's mind will mature and develop. One then ascends to the different stages of realisations all the way up to the ultimate realisation, where one gains the full capacity to utilise the omniscience and primordial wisdom of the deity. Being able to utilise the actual primordial wisdom of the deity is the ultimate meaning of empowerment or initiation, and by receiving the initiation one is empowered to go to that ultimate level.

4. As presented in the auto-commentary, familiarisation with the generation stage, and then actualising one's concentration on the vital points of vajra-body and so forth, is done with external and internal skilful methods. So, with external and internal methods one actualises the concentration on the vital points of the vajra-body. Then, the wind enters, abides and dissolves into the central channel. So through the practice of actualising the concentration on the vital points within one's body, which is basically focussing on the different channels

within one's body, one is able to bring the wind into the central channel, where it enters, abides and then dissolves.

5. When the wind dissolves into the central channel and the primordial wisdom of spontaneously arising great bliss realises emptiness conceptually, (although not yet directly) then at that point it is called *example clear light*.

To re-emphasise an earlier point, in terms of the actual presentation of emptiness, there is no difference in the subtlety of emptiness explained in the sutras and tantra. The difference is found in the subtlety of the wisdom realising emptiness.

In comparison to the tantric wisdom realising emptiness, the wisdom realising emptiness according to sutras is at a grosser level of consciousness. As explained here, in the tantra the wisdom realising emptiness is much subtler, as the mind that realises emptiness is the mind of clear light. Within the clear light there are grosser and subtler levels, which is the distinction between *example clear light* and *meaning or actual clear light*.

When we come to understand the tantric explanation, we gain a better and deeper understanding of how the ultimate realisation of the body of ultimate unification is obtained. As explained in the tantric teachings when the subtle wind serves as a substantial cause and the subtle mind serves as the co-operative condition for the *example clear light* to be perfected, then that results in obtaining the impure illusory body. When the subtle wind serves as a substantial cause and the subtle mind serves as the co-operative condition for the *actual clear light* to be perfected, then that results in obtaining the pure illusory body, which is the actual vajra body of the deity, an enlightened being.

The main point is that the more one familiarises oneself with this explanation and reflects upon it, the stronger the imprint that is left upon the mind, which will kindle the potential for us to obtain those realisations ourselves. The difference between the impure form of the illusory body and the pure form of the illusory body is obtained through the familiarity with *example clear light* and *meaning clear light*, which is of great importance for those who are inclined to practice tantra. So, it is good to familiarise oneself with that understanding.

For that, it is good to become familiar with the text that you have, and not just rely on the translation. Familiarising yourself means that you actually become familiar with the topic that has been covered. That means that if in our next session I were to quiz you on what was particularly mentioned at a certain point, then you need to be able to recall those points. If you don't have the text then, of course, there is not much you can do. But if you do have access to the text, then it would be good to become familiar with it.

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Edited Version*

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