
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

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As usual it would be good to generate a positive motivation along these lines: 'In order to liberate all sentient beings from suffering and to bring them to ultimate happiness, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So towards that end I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

2.2.2. MAHAMUDRA ACCORDING TO SUTRA

In our last session it was explained that the auto-commentary states that the instructions on how to develop calm abiding will be described under two headings, actual and the preliminaries.

2.2.2.1. THE PRELIMINARIES

There are six prerequisites for developing calm abiding.

1. A suitable place

The auto commentary quotes from the *Sutra of Maitreya*, which states:

The intelligent practice in the place
Which is accessible, is a good place to live,
Offers good ground and good companions,
And has the requisites for good yogic practice.

This indicates the five necessary conditions of an appropriate place to achieve calm abiding. Thus those who are keen to develop calm abiding do not need to ask 'What kind of place do I need? Where do I need to go?' as this is all explained clearly in Lord Maitreya's text. There is nothing more that we need to adopt—these five qualities listed by the Lord Maitreya are sufficient.

a. An accessible place

As explained in the text, living in a place that is accessible refers to having easy access to sufficient clothing and food. The lack of these basic elements of survival is, in itself, a hindrance to the development of calm abiding. Thus a place that has easy access to sufficient clothing and food is considered to be very conducive.

This description refers to the practical requirements needed to sustain someone who wishes to engage in the practice. There is also, however, a saying in the teachings: 'The meditator does not have to roll down the mountain to find food, as food will roll up the mountain to the meditator'. That is, of course, an indication that someone who is really serious about practising meditation need not spend too much time and energy trying to look for food, as the right conditions will come about naturally for an earnest seeker, when they are ready to practice. This phrase is particularly relevant to people who are not very committed, and who have various excuses for not practising meditation. What this saying is indicating is that if one is really determined to engage in the practice of meditation, then one need not worry about basic survival needs as they will come about.

b. A good place

A place that is free from enemies as well as fierce animals and the like, is the right environment for practice. If it is a dangerous place with enemies or wild animals and so forth,

then that can hinder one's concentration, as there will always be a part of one's mind wondering whether or not danger might be present. Thus a place that is free of immediate dangers is conducive to the practice of developing one's concentration.

c. Good grounds

There are some places that may not be conducive to physical health, so the chosen ground should be a place that is free from adverse conditions to maintaining good health.

d. Good companions

Having good companions refers to being near people who are like-minded in both views and conduct. Being in an environment of like-minded people is conducive for one's practice.

e. The requisites for comfortable yogic practice

The last line, a place that 'has the requisites for comfortable yogic practice' refers to a place that is free from distractions. If the environment for the practice of meditation is one where there are a lot of distractions, such as beautiful sights or sounds, then those in themselves would become distractions from practice. Thus a prerequisite for comfortable yogic practice is a place that is free from external distractions.

These are the five qualities of a suitable place. The other five prerequisites for developing calm abiding are:

2. Having little desire, which indicates that the meditator has few desires, and therefore doesn't have many needs.

3. Having contentment, which refers to being content with the bare necessities, such as food and clothing, to sustain oneself, and not wanting more.

4. Abiding by pure ethics

5. Abandoning multiple or excessive activities

6. Abandoning disturbing conceptions

This refers to the disturbing states of mind such as worries and anxiety, or excessive wants or needs. As another commentary indicates, a remedy for overcoming all the different kinds of disturbing conceptions is to meditate on, for example, the impermanence of things, understanding that all possessions will ultimately disintegrate, and thus material things have no real essence. There is no real lasting pleasure in any material gains. By contemplating the impermanent and unsatisfactory nature of samsara in general, one can overcome disturbing conceptions. Basically, as indicated in the commentary, meditating on a sense of renunciation will help to overcome the different disturbing conceptions.

As the other commentary further explains, when the sixth condition for successful practice has been met, it will be conducive to engage in the practice of developing calm abiding. Then this other commentary goes on to quote from the *King of Concentrations sutra*, which indicates that one who is free from the condition of being excessively attached to material gain, fame and so forth, who is free from desire for excessive needs and able to be sustained with meagre supplies, who has moral ethics and is free from fears can definitely achieve single-pointed concentration.

As indicated in the text and clarified in different commentaries, it is important that we pay attention to the prerequisite conditions for developing calm abiding, so that we understand what is needed if one is to actually engage in that practice. As mentioned earlier, one of the main adverse circumstances is having disturbing conceptions. Living a

very worldly life means having to deal with many worldly activities where the mind becomes preoccupied with worldly conceptions, which we call disturbing conceptions.

Attempting to engage in the practice of meditation without having overcome those disturbing conceptions means that the prerequisite conditions are not intact, and therefore it is not possible to develop calm abiding. This text mentions that there are times in one's practice of meditation where it may seem that disturbing conceptions and discursive thoughts actually seem to be increasing, despite having all the conditions intact and engaging in the proper technique.

This is actually an indication that one is becoming more aware of the subtle disturbing conceptions in one's mind. It is not as though the disturbing conceptions are increasing but rather it is that one is actually able to clearly identify them. Initially it may seem as if the disturbing conceptions are increasing, but in fact that is a sign that one has been able to identify the disturbing conceptions. That indication comes on the basis of having all of the prerequisite conditions intact, and actually engaging in the proper calm abiding technique. It is not referring to minds that are already filled with many disturbing worldly conceptions.

If we wish to develop calm abiding then it is important that we take notice of these prerequisite conditions and make sure that first of all we make an attempt to acquire them. As mentioned in the teachings, when all the conditions are met, the sincere practitioner can actually achieve calm abiding even in the short time of six months.

In all too many cases people hear that calm abiding can be developed in six months, and they commence with that expectation. But they do so without having ensured that they have gathered all of the prerequisite conditions before they attempt to develop calm abiding. Then, when they reach a point where there is no progress, the danger arises that they will develop the wrong view that the techniques that are presented do not work, and they then develop a wrong view of the practice itself. So there is that great danger.

As the great masters have emphasised in their commentaries, Lord Maitreya's advice is that a sincere practitioner should make sure they have all the conducive conditions. These can be subsumed into being free from the adverse external physical circumstances (in relation to environment and so forth), as well as being free from the adverse internal circumstances i.e. being free from disturbing conceptions.

Two of the essential conditions are having less desires and so fewer needs, and having contentment. Furthermore having good moral conduct or ethics is essential for developing concentration, as the main hindrance to concentration is a distracted mind. So withdrawing from negativities of body, speech and mind allows the mind to become more settled. It allows the mind to be free from the gross distractions that are related to the sensual pleasures. Thus for someone wishing to develop concentration followed by calm abiding, it is essential to live by a good moral code. That is the most conducive condition for settling down the mind. These are the essential points that Maitreya has made.

In relation to the particular prerequisite conditions of having little desire and contentment, it is important that we don't misinterpret these conditions. Having little desire doesn't mean that we have to get rid of all our belongings and worldly possessions and live in poverty—that is not

indicated at all. The practice of having little desire means to lessen one's attachment to or desire for things that one already owns, and to be content with the things that one has. Having less desire or attachment to the things one already has means not being too obsessed with them, but rather using them as the means to sustain oneself. Being content also means being happy with what one already possesses as a means to sustain oneself.

With excessive attachment or desire for another person, such as a male being excessively obsessed with attractive women and constantly thinking about them, there is no possibility of achieving a really good concentrated meditation. It is the same with a woman who is excessively attached to men; if she is obsessed with and attracted to different men and constantly thinking about that, there is no possibility of developing really stable concentration. One may be able to sit erect in an appropriate posture, but being able to focus and concentrate on the object, even in daily practice, will not occur, because the mind is constantly busy with the objects of desire.

2.2.2.2. THE ACTUAL MEDITATION

2.2.2.1.1. Preparation

The sitting place

According to further instructions in the commentaries, it is appropriate to meditate facing the east. Now of course if that is not possible because of the chosen area, then one need not worry too much about that. However if it is appropriate, then the advice is that it can be more conducive for practice if one faces the east. I'm mentioning this for people who ask 'What direction do I have to face when I meditate?' To overcome any disquiet about not being able to face the east physically, one can imagine that one is facing the east, which can also help to derive that benefit. Actually these are good points to remember.

14. Sitting on a comfortable meditation platform in the sevenfold posture, you should rid yourself of defiled thoughts and extraneous mental activity by first practising the nine breathings.

Comfortable seating

The next piece of advice is to be comfortably seated, which means to have a comfortable cushion to sit on. Of course for ordained Sangha there is a particular seating cover that is required, however in general it refers a comfortable cushion. The technical term used for a comfortable cushion is 'seat of concentration'. Actually the sangha mat is specifically made to resemble a seat of concentration, and has a particular measurement and so forth.

Under the comfortable seat one draws a swastika, to represent stability. The swastika represents the vajra seat, which also signifies that the place where one is sitting is blessed. As mentioned in the teachings, the seating upon where which the Buddha became enlightened was not an ordinary seat made of gross matter, but it was a vajra seat blessed by indestructibility – a diamond seat. The further significance of having a seat that resembles the diamond hard seat, or vajra seat, is to signify the blessed seat of the Buddha.

As indicated in the history of the Buddha's life, while seated upon a vajra or diamond seat in Bodhgaya he vanquished what are called the four demons, at which point he became enlightened. Amongst the four demons the most prominent and significant to overcome is the inner demon of grasping at true existence, grasping at the self. So when one sits upon an appropriate cushion it should be a reminder to develop

the determination to overcome one's inner foes, which are grasping at true existence, and grasping at the self. So think 'I will definitely vanquish the foes and thus achieve the goals of the realisations'.

It is important to develop this determination in order to overcome any doubts or sense of inadequacy, thinking 'I'm not sure of whether I will succeed in this practice of meditation' or 'I'm not sure if I am capable'. To overcome all of these doubts, as emphasised further in this other commentary, it is really important to develop the determination to vanquish the internal foes. And that determination can be developed on the basis of contemplating the conducive factors that one already possesses: one has a precious human re-birth, one has met with the perfect teachers who have given sound instructions about how to engage in the practice. One has also engaged in practices of accumulating merit, and even though one may have engaged in previous negative karmas, one has had the opportunity to engage in practices of purification. Based on these conducive conditions that one already possesses, it is both practical, and important to develop the determination to fulfil the aim of one's practice.

This means not having a relaxed attitude like 'if I achieve my goal then that's fine, and if not that's also okay'. If one begins the practice half-heartedly, then that is not very conducive to success. Rather one must develop the very strong determination at the onset that 'because of all the good conditions I already have there is nothing that will stop me. Thus I will embark on my journey, doing the practice to fulfil my aims'.

Two different grasses are placed on top of the swastika—durva (or long-life) grass, and kusha grass. The significance of the kusha grass is that it represents cleanliness and virtue. Thus having the kusha grass signifies that one will ensure being in a clean environment and increase virtue. You place the tip of the durva grass, which signifies longevity, inwards with each blade of grass placed separately around. Thus placing that particular grass under one's seat signifies that, one will have a stable and long life in order to prolong one's practice. According to the history of the Buddha, when Buddha Shakyamuni sat under the bodhi tree to engage in the practice of meditation, he sat upon durva grass. Thus it is also considered as a blessed grass. For ordained Sangha it also symbolises having less desire and contentment.

The appropriate seating, which as said earlier, is technically referred to as the seat of concentration, also has the back slightly raised, which helps one's meditation posture. Having the back slightly higher apparently helps to prevent the *nadis*, or channels from sinking, which brings on lethargy. When the back of the cushion is raised, the *nadis* are raised up a bit, which helps to keep the mind fresh and the energies flowing well. The cushion itself is square and on top of that an ordained person, places a *dingwa* (a custom made seat cover for ordained monks and nuns). In reference to verse fourteen, we have now covered the first part, which is sitting on a comfortable meditation cushion.

The seven-fold posture

The next point is sitting in the seven-fold posture that is suggested in order to engage in the practice of meditation. The seven-fold posture has a particular significance in relation to the Buddha's advice. What is being explained here is how to adopt the sevenfold seating posture of Buddha Vairochana. Some texts give the list as eight points, which also includes the breathing technique as well. The seven-fold posture is explained in accordance with a tantric

teaching called *dorje tengwa*, and it is also explained clearly in Kamalashila's *Concise* and *Medium Stages of Meditation*. We will now go over the main points.

1. The first point is that one crosses **the legs** in the vajra position. The full vajra posture (also called the full lotus posture) is where one places the left foot on the right thigh and the right foot on the left thigh. You may like to try to sit in that posture now if you are able to do so. It is good to begin with that posture and then if you are not comfortable you can come back to your normal sitting position. The significance of sitting in the full lotus posture is that it enables concentration to become stable. It also has the significance of avoiding harm from adverse circumstances, such as demons and so forth. The Buddha is said to have adopted this posture when engaging in the practice of meditation, and he taught this posture to his disciples. Thus adoption of the seven-fold posture is definitely of great significance.

Another reference to the vajra posture is the posture of Vajrasattva. This is not the full lotus or vajra posture, but has the right foot on the left thigh, with the left foot underneath the right thigh. That is also referred to as a half lotus posture. These postures are the traditional postures for engaging in meditation. However the main point is to develop concentration in one's mind. Thus if either of these traditional postures are not comfortable, then one may adopt any comfortable posture that is conducive for developing concentration.

The teachings mention that there are actually five different benefits arising from adopting the traditional full lotus or half lotus. For example it actually prevents physical hardships; when one is used to that posture it is very conducive for eliminating weariness; it enables one to develop concentration rapidly; it is a posture which has the blessing of the buddhas because it is a posture that was adopted by the Buddha himself and then passed on to his disciples. These are some of the beneficial points mentioned in the teachings. When the lamas of the past gave instructions for meditation, they were very strict and would emphasise that one needs to sit in the appropriate posture. They would relate stories describing how, at the time of the Buddha, there were some monks who would lean and sleep and how they actually created the karma to be re-born as animals, such as cows and so forth. Therefore, strictly speaking, it is advised that in order to not create such negative karmas, one should adopt the appropriate posture.

2. The appropriate gesture for the placing of **the hands** is to place the right hand on top of the left with the thumbs touching to form a triangle. Some texts indicate that for a male the right hand is placed upon the left palm, and for a female the left hand is placed on the right palm. But you can adopt the appropriate hand gesture that feels comfortable for you. I say this because otherwise our discursive minds starts thinking 'I don't want to place my hands in the male way (or in the female way)'. However according to our tradition, the general posture for all is to place the right hand on top of the left. The actual placement of the hands is on one's lap near the navel. It is said that the hands themselves should be about four finger-spans below the belly-button, so the actual belly-button is right in the middle of that triangle.

According to the instructions, one must place one's hands on one's lap, and point the tips of one's thumbs towards the navel. The significance of having the tips of the thumbs touching is that the thumbs are said to have the endings of the bodhichitta channel. By placing the thumbs together at

the navel where the heat is generated, the combination of the bodhichitta channel touching the navel and heat being generated at one's navel, will allow all the channels in our body to become supple, and thus it will be easier to generate love and compassion and bodhichitta within one's mind. It also helps to develop strong concentration and to stabilise one's focus on the object. Actually if you try this gesture according to the instructions, you will definitely get some good feeling.

Placing the hands in this gesture at the navel is said to be significant in inducing the generation stage practices. The heat at the navel is called the *tummo* heat, and when that *tummo* is rising up our channel it melts what we call the white drop at one's crown. The combination of the heat rising and the bodhichitta (the white drop at one's crown) descending induces the example clear light mind. When the meaning clear light becomes apparent, one experiences the non-dual bliss and wisdom, which is when the generation stage of the practice is induced.

Thus the placement of the hands has great significance. If you place your hand posture at the navel you will actually feel the heat generated there. Right now, of course our clothing prevents us from actually touching the navel, but even with our clothing on, we will definitely feel there is some heat being generated. Of course if one were to actually touch the navel, then it would be even more apparent. Even the initial experience of heat being generated at our navel will definitely help to experience the significance. There is some interpretation of how each side of the triangle represents the three doors of emancipation, and the vacant space in the middle of the triangle represents the dharmakaya or truth-wisdom body of an enlightened being.

3. The next instruction is to have a **straight spine**. It is really important to allow the spine to be straight. That means adopting a sitting posture that is free from leaning forward, backward or sideways. The analogy that is given is that the back should be likened to a stack of coins. One reason for having a straight back is that it prevents dullness, stupor, drowsiness, and sleepiness.

The main significance of having a straight back, however, is that it allows the channels within the body to straighten out. When the channels are straightened out then the wind element or energy will flow well within the channels. In turn the wind flowing freely through one's channels leads to the mind being fresh and alert to the point of being able to focus well on the object of concentration. We can use the analogy of pipes here: when pipes are bent, then water in the pipes will not be able to flow freely, and the flow will be slower. The main point of the analogy to be understood here is that there will be obstruction to the free flow of water if the pipes are bent. Likewise when our back is not straight, that in turn affects the channels and the wind element does not flow well through the body, which can affect the concentration and alertness of the mind.

4. The next part of the instruction is to how to place **the lips and teeth**. As explained in the teachings, the instruction is to place the lips and teeth in their natural position. Of course this has been explained many times, however to go over it again, the tip of the tongue needs to touch the palate and is placed behind the front row of the upper teeth. Having the teeth or the lips very tight will prevent the natural flow of air and proper ventilation of the mouth. If the lips are too open then too much air will flow in, thus drying up the mouth and throat, which would be an obstruction. Thus placing the lips in this natural position will regulate a natural airflow.

Placing the tongue behind the front row of the upper teeth helps to prevent excessive saliva from forming, as well as preventing thirst, because the right amount of moisture will be maintained in the mouth.

5. Next is the instruction of how to place **the head**. It is instructed to have the head bend slightly forward. If one has the head raised up too much then it can cause excitement to arise, and if it is lowered too far forward, then that can also cause drowsiness. So the right placement is for the head to be just slightly bent forward, which helps to regulate the two extremes.

6. It is instructed that **the eyes** should not be completely shut, nor too wide open. The gaze of the eyes should be lowered to the tip of the nose. As the Dalai Lama mentioned in his last teachings, there is an advantage there for those who have a big nose, because they can see the tip of their nose quite easily. Those who have a shorter nose will have to strain a bit to try and see the tip of their nose.

The significance of having the eyes slightly open and gazing down towards the tip of the nose also indicates a manner that is free from the two extremes of being wide open or closed shut. There are some who indicate that having one's eyes opened at any level will cause excitement to arise, and so they say that it is better to have the eyes shut so that you don't see anything. However, even though having the eyes completely shut might seem quite conducive initially, it is very easy for that to cause stupor and drowsiness when one goes deeper into the meditation.

If the eyes are wide open then that will cause excitement, because you see things quite vividly. There is no danger with the eyes being slightly open. In the practice of meditation one should not fear the danger of excitement arising because of seeing things, because according to the instructions one focuses on the object primarily with the mental consciousness, and not with the eye consciousness. When one reaches the point of being able to focus on the internal object, then one will not be affected by what one sees externally. However initially, in order to prevent excitement it is advised that one does not have the eyes wide open, but rather just slightly open, thus being free from the two extremes.

7. Next is the instruction on placing **the shoulders**. One should not hunch the shoulders or have **the arms** touching the body. Make sure, however, that the shoulders and arms are not too loose, so that one is stooping over. Rather, broaden the chest with the shoulders in a natural level position, where the arms are not touching the body. Placing the arms in this way also prevents drowsiness as air passes through the armpits.

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