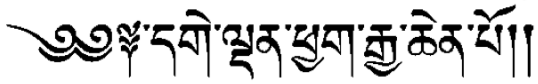

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



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As usual, find a comfortable sitting position and generate a positive state of mind for receiving the teachings. In accordance with the refuge and bodhichitta prayer that we have just recited, we can try to generate the state of mind where we commit ourselves to benefit all sentient beings. We can think along these lines: 'for the purpose of benefiting sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

With regard to the benefit of generating such a positive motivation, which encompasses the welfare of all sentient beings, the great master Shantideva mentioned in his text *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, that if one were to generate such a noble attitude for even a second, the merit accumulated from that moment is incomparable. It is the incredible amounts of merit that one accumulates from such positive attitudes that will serve as the cause to eventually achieve enlightenment.

Of course, due the state of our present condition in samsara where we are afflicted by self-grasping ignorance, even the positive actions that we engage in will create projecting karma, which propels us into cyclic existence in future rebirths. However, due to the positive motivations that we generate prior to engaging in positive activities, the conditions that we will have as a human being will far exceed normal circumstances, and thus they will be conducive for us to further engage in Dharma practice.

Actual method of developing calm abiding¹

1. Attributes of concentration

In explaining calm abiding, there are the two headings of the prerequisites and the actual, we have already covered the prerequisites of calm abiding.

¹ For ease of use, the numbers within this section start again.

The full sequence of headings to date is:

1. Deeds done in order to engage in the composition
2. Presenting the actual material of the composition
 - 2.1. Preparation
 - 2.1.1. Taking refuge and generating bodhichitta
 - 2.1.2. Accumulating extensive merit i.e. offering world mandalas
 - 2.1.3. Engage in extensive purification practices.
 - 2.1.4. Rely on one's guru
 - 2.2. The Actual
 - 2.2.1. Mahamudra according to tantra
 - 2.2.2. Mahamudra according to sutra
 - 2.2.2.1. The preliminaries
 - 2.2.2.2. Actual method of developing calm abiding
 - 2.2.2.2.1. Attributes of concentration
 - 2.2.2.2.1.1. Identifying concentration and calm abiding
 - 2.2.2.2.1.2. The objects of focus for single-pointed concentration.
 - 2.2.2.2.1.2.1. Pervasive objects
 - 2.2.2.2.1.2.2. Objects of analysis
 - 2.2.2.2.1.2.3. Objects for the wise
 - 2.2.2.2.1.2.4. Objects for purifying delusions

1.1. Identifying the object of calm abiding

In explaining how to develop calm abiding, the commentary mainly relies upon describing the methods for developing calm abiding. Last year we described how to identify the object of calm abiding, and how to adopt the actual practice of focussing on the chosen object.

As the auto-commentary explains, there are two attributes to the type of concentration that is indicated here, which we covered last year. I would like to re-emphasise that it is very important to actually be able to specifically identify what concentration is. When you talk about developing single-pointed concentration, what is it? What kind of state of mind is it? As mentioned previously, mindfulness itself is not concentration.

As the teachings explain, mindfulness and introspection are aids for developing concentration, but they are not concentration itself. It is important to be clear that even though mindfulness does have the attribute of keeping the mind focused on the object, we must not confuse mindfulness with concentration itself. Likewise, introspection is not concentration. Nor is the mind, or the consciousness focusing on an object, concentration, as that is a primary mind. As the teachings explain, concentration is a secondary mind, a mental factor that has the ability, by its own power, to remain focused on the object unwaveringly. Within the mental factors, there is a specific mental factor that is identified as concentration, which has its own particular function. So if we are to attempt to develop concentration within ourselves it is important that we clearly identify what concentration is.

1.2. Objects of focus for single-pointed concentration

In our last session we covered the types of objects that one can focus on. As the auto-commentary presents, there are four types of objects: pervasive objects, objects of analysis, objects for the wise and objects that oppose the delusions. Having presented the four different types of objects that can be focused on in general the auto-commentary presents the object to be used here, which in accordance with the tradition of the previous lineage gurus, is the mind itself. That is, the object that is used to develop concentration and calm abiding is the mind itself.

We also went into the explanation of what the mind is. If the mind itself is to be used as an object to focus on, then what is mind? The definition of mind is that it is clear and knowing; those are the two main attributes of mind. 'Clear' has a connotation that it is not physical matter i.e. it does not have colour and shape. So the nature of the mind is clarity, whereas the function of the mind is that it knows the objects of cognition. So 'clear and knowing' encompasses what constitutes the mind.

The analogy used to describe the clarity of the mind is that it is like a clear mirror, or we can think of it as being like a clear crystal ball. Just as a clean mirror or glass will reflect all objects, likewise the mind, having the aspect of clarity allows for every object to be reflected or known within the mind.

What would be an example of a pervasive object?

Student: Would it perhaps be impermanence and emptiness?

Jeremy's answer, 'all existence', is the correct one. There is a saying in the monastery that there are those who assume that they have understood everything, and those who are a little bit doubtful, who might in fact be the ones who have actually got it right! There is a story about the scholar Geshe Losang Choden, who was well known to be very good in

debate. When we were studying in Buxa in North India, at a certain point of the debate you would have to find just one opponent. Geshe Losang Choden commented to me once that there was an occasion where he did not find a partner who he would normally choose. The only one left was Geshe Tengye, who is now at one of the centres in France.

Geshe Losang Choden told me that he assumed that Geshe Tengye would not know the text or the debates very well, because he was a very unassuming and quiet monk. But because he was the only person left as a debate partner, Geshe Losang Choden started debating with him. As he started debating, he noticed that it started to become very difficult to prove his points, because Geshe Tengye was giving *very good answers*. Later Geshe Losang Choden said 'I don't know what it is, maybe I had the wrong motivation in thinking that he is not very good'. Later on there was a time where Geshe Tengye was debating and Geshe Losang Choden was answering, and even then Geshe Losang Choden found it difficult to answer, because the points that Geshe Tengye was debating were very good. 'So the fact that I couldn't make and prove my points while debating, or answer well when questioned, shows there must be something wrong with my motivation', said Geshe Losang Choden.

Pervasive objects

The first object of focus is referred to as 'pervasive objects', which indicates anything that exists can be an object to focus on to develop concentration. The fact that anything that exists can be an object indicates that it is pervasive.

Objects of Analysis

The object of analysis is a very important object to focus on. There are five sub-divisions, which are the delusions of strong attachment, intense anger, excessive pride, deep ignorance and also the discursive mind with conceptual thoughts.

The object of analysis refers to finding out the ways and means of how to apply antidotes for subduing or overcoming these states of mind. As mentioned previously these five are actually very significant objects to reflect upon, as we are attempting to reduce these afflictive emotions in our mind. Actually, the literal meaning of the Tibetan word *chepa-namjong* is 'pacifying through analysis'.

The appropriate object for pacifying attachment, for example, would be to focus on the unattractive attributes of the object. If there is the imprint of attachment from previous lifetimes, attachment will naturally be very strong and prominent. For those types of beings, the object to focus on would be the unattractive attributes of the object of desire, which would help to pacify the specific delusion of attachment.

Even though this has been explained previously, it is worthwhile to reiterate this point. As explained in the teachings, on a deeper level it is very important that we understand this and see how these techniques of meditation, which focus on these particular objects, are very significant for our development and transformation. As explained in the teachings, for those who are very familiar with objects of attachment in previous lifetimes, and who have not applied any antidotes, the consequence in this lifetime would be that, as soon as such a person meets with an object of desire, attachment will arise spontaneously, strongly and without any effort. This is the indication that no attempt to see the fault, or unattractive attributes, of the object of desire and apply antidotes, has been made in previous lifetimes. Thus

in this lifetime, attachment arises spontaneously and very strongly.

There are also those who have acquainted themselves with the antidotes for overcoming attachment in previous lifetimes, seeing the unattractive attributes of an object of desire. Due to that familiarisation, if such a person were to meet with the objects of desire in this lifetime, then even though desire may slightly arise in their mind, it will not be over-powering to the degree of being completely dominated by desire. For those who have applied specific antidotes in past lifetimes and who have been acquainted with them for a longer duration, there will be a lesser intensity of attachment arising in this lifetime. So, the different degrees of attachment experienced in this life are said to be the result of acquaintance with desire in the past.

As mentioned in the teachings, the objects for the wise refers to, for example, contemplating the constituents and the different categories of phenomena. Contemplating the constituents and phenomena is said to be a particular antidote for overcoming the delusion of pride. The specific antidote for overcoming the discursive mind or distracting conceptual thoughts is focusing on the breath.

Applying this knowledge

It is good to be familiar with these descriptions of appropriate objects and try to apply them in our own practice. Then if someone were to ask what kind of Buddhist meditation will to help to settle down a very busy or discursive mind, we would be able to clearly explain from our own experience that focusing on the breath is a very good technique for overcoming the discursive mind. Likewise, if one were to be asked about specific antidotes for overcoming desire or pride, then we would be able to present them correctly to the questioner. If we practice ourselves we can confidently share our understanding with others, who rely upon us. So these points are really worth paying attention to.

Then being acquainted with the various types of meditation techniques will actually serve one very well when one has time to meditate upon them, particularly when one is affected by a particular delusion. At that time, we would be able to tap into our own resources to find the right technique for overcoming that delusion.

It is good to know the specific meditation techniques for specific delusions, otherwise our meditation technique may not work well. For example, meditating on love and compassion might not be the appropriate antidote for someone who is affected by a strong delusion of attachment. When we think about it, strong attachment for someone seems to induce a level of caring and kindness towards that person. Thus focusing on the attractive attributes, and the good and appealing aspects of a person in order to try to overcome attachment would not really serve much purpose. Thus meditating on love and compassion is said to be used specifically to help to overcome anger.

The antidote for overcoming ignorance, is meditating on emptiness. Of course by engaging in meditation on emptiness if one actually gains the realisation of emptiness, then that will definitely overcome all delusions within oneself. But in the mean time, specific antidotes for overcoming specific delusions may be more effective whilst one has not yet realised emptiness. So thus it is important to know the different kinds of antidotes. The instruction from the lineage masters is that dealing with the most prominent delusion in one's mind is the most important task; this is

said to be a really profound instruction for us beginners. So it is good to reflect upon this point when engaging in our practice.

The benefits of using the mind as an object

As another commentary on mahamudra explains, it is really appropriate to use the mind as an object for developing concentration, to achieve calm abiding, as there are many benefits from focusing on the mind.

The mind itself has three main attributes:

1. Its nature is clear and bright.
2. It is empty of all matter and forms and thus by its very nature it lacks any obstruction and rigidity i.e. it is not made of matter.
3. It is the basis for perceiving all phenomena.

Thus focusing on the mind itself helps to gain further realisations such as emptiness.

The three main benefits of focussing on the mind are:

1. Because of its very nature it will be easier to develop calm abiding.
2. It is also easier to gain the realisation of emptiness.
3. It is easier to sever all outer appearances.

Thus as we have done previously it is good that we now spend some time in actual meditation. Recall the earlier instructions and adopt the appropriate sitting posture, then acquaint yourself with the breathing technique. One can use the nine round breathing technique or just focus on the breath itself. Whatever technique one uses, just focus on the breath for a while, and when the mind is relatively settled, we can envision the gurus of the lineage. Visualise one's guru and the lineage gurus in front of oneself with one's own main guru in the centre. Then, as mentioned in the teachings, at a certain point one can dissolve that visualisation into oneself and thus generate the state of mind of being inseparable with the guru's mind, and remain in that state of mind without thinking about anything else, just focusing on that feeling. So now we will spend the next few minutes in meditation. *Pause for meditation*

In our attempt to focus on the mind in our meditation, we may initially, of course, not be able to see the mind as such. However, there is an aspect of the mind that we can relate to. As the teachings explain, after the preliminary practice, when one reaches a point where one is not focusing on an external object and remains focused internally within oneself, then we can conjure up an appearance of the mind, and we can just familiarise ourselves with focusing on that image of the mind. The subtle clear mind is within us at all times, even though we may lack the ability to recognise it. So if we can accept that fact, then even if we are not able to clearly recognise it right now, just focusing on an image, which is similar to the mind will help us to eventually reach the point of recognising the actual nature of the mind itself.

As I have emphasised previously, we really need to understand the point about the fact that when we focus on any object in our meditation, such as an external object, it is not the actual external object that we are focusing on. But rather it is the mental image of the object that we need to be focussing on. Even though we may firstly familiarise ourselves with the external object, when we actually meditate upon the object it is the image or the aspect of the object on which we are focusing to develop concentration. For example, one of the objects that helps to overcome strong attachment is said to be the visualisation of the surrounding area as being filled

with skeletons, and then developing a single-pointed concentration on that. If one were to ask 'Is the surrounding area filled with skeletons?' then clearly that is not the case.

However the fact is that developing concentration on that image is possible because the meditator has conjured the mental image. They then develop concentration by focusing on that mental image. Likewise, one could also focus on one's own body having one side consisting of bones and the other side as consisting of blood and puss. Now if one to ask if that were actually happening, then that would not be the case. Nevertheless, one can actually focus and develop concentration on that conjured mental image. It is important for us to recognise that this is the method to use to focus on an internal object.

1.3. Mindfulness

In explaining the mindfulness as a tool for developing concentration, the text explains developing mindfulness generally and in particular.

Developing mindfulness in general

The root text reads:

17. This does not mean, however, that you should cease all conscious attention as if you were asleep or had fainted. Rather, you should fix your unwavering memory firmly on the task of watching your mind from a distance [to see that it remains focused on its object, an unstructured state of mind].

The verse indicates that although all conscious attention ceases, it should not be as if one is asleep or unconscious. If one were to be asleep or unconscious then of course nothing will come to the mind on a conscious level, and one would not be able to focus on anything specifically. When applying mindfulness in developing concentration, it should be free from the condition of being like falling asleep or being unconsciousness.

Overcoming faults in meditation

One of the five faults of developing calm abiding, as explained previously, is forgetting the object of one's attention. If all conscious attention were to cease, then it would be like being asleep or unconscious and thus one would fall into the fault of **forgetting the object of attention**. So one has to be sure to be free from that state.

As mentioned in another commentary, if one falls into a state of where one's meditative state is similar to sleep or an unconscious state of mind, then that fault of forgetting the instruction will occur, which is a state that one must avoid.

Actually this point shouldn't be taken lightly and must be understood in all its profundity, because the object that is being used here is our own mind. Thus what is being indicated here is that when one uses the mind as an object, one might fall into the state of feeling that there is nothing to focus on, and because of that, a state similar to sleep or an unconscious state of mind can very easily be induced. That's why the specific instruction given here indicates that one must be really mindful of the object to focus on. When using the mind as an object, one must be wary of not falling into the pitfall of thinking that you just remain in the state of oblivion, with nothing coming into your mind, and the mind is blank. That can happen very easily, if you begin to think that there is nothing specific to focus on. Thus there is a warning against falling into that state.

What is specifically being explained in this commentary is that in order to overcome the obstacle of forgetting the

instruction, it is not sufficient to be in a state similar to sleep or being unconscious, where one is blocking out all other thoughts and other conceptions.

As mentioned previously **laziness** is one of the obstacles for developing concentration. Laziness prevents us from actually engaging in the practice of meditation altogether, and it is the initial obstacle to actually engaging in the practice of meditation. Overcoming laziness is something that we have discussed previously. Having then engaged in the practice of meditation, the obstacle that can arise is forgetting the instruction. So what is being indicated here is that when the obstacle of forgetting the object occurs, which in this specific case is the mind itself, then inducing a state that is similar to sleep or unconsciousness will not suffice to overcome that obstacle.

As it further explains in this commentary, when one has initially identified the object clearly, then one must use mindfulness to maintain a continuity of focus on the object. Mindfulness is not just used as a way to remind oneself once in a while when one begins to notice that one's attention on the object has lapsed. Rather, mindfulness is explained here as maintaining a continuous awareness of the object which is the mind. What is then being specifically indicated further in this commentary is that once one maintains a continuous awareness, or mindfulness, of the object of one's attention, then if the obstacle of forgetting the instruction occurs, one must apply the appropriate antidote.

Once one has continuous mindfulness and is able to maintain that continuous mindfulness by focusing on the object, then further obstacles to deal with are **excitement** and **dullness**. If either of these two occurs, then one must apply the appropriate antidote for overcoming those obstacles.

As mentioned previously, laziness is an obstacle preventing one from actually engaging in the practice. But actually laziness is in fact an obstacle that occurs at every stage of the practice. Initially it prevents us from engaging in the practice of meditation. Once we engage in the practice of meditation, if we don't continue with it and allow it to lapse then that would also be due to laziness. Even if we continue for a while and but don't reach a conclusion and then give up towards the end, then that too is because of laziness. So laziness serves as an obstacle in the beginning, in the middle and at the end.

The commentary then further explains that when one is able to maintain a continuous focus on the object with mindfulness, one further analysis to check whether one's focus or attention is being obstructed by either excitement or dullness. Thus one part of the mind works to check on one's focus to make sure that it is not being tainted with either excitement or dullness.

If one's attention is tainted with either excitement or dullness, then that is an obstacle to developing single-pointed concentration. One must use analyse and check whether these obstacles are arising, and if they are, apply the appropriate antidotes. When one is free from all of the immediate obstacles to focusing on the object (which is the mind itself) and one is able to reach a point where the clarity of the mind becomes more vivid, then at that point one holds onto that vivid appearance of the clarity of the mind, and just remains focused on that.

The commentary quotes the lines in the root text, which says '*you should fix your unwavering memory firmly on the task of watching your mind from a distance*'. As explained in the root text, one fixes upon that object, the clarity of the mind, and

just remains focused on that with ever stronger diligence. Although 'memory' is used here, it is actually referring to mindfulness.

As explained previously, it is important that we really identify very clearly what concentration is, and the nature of its specific attributes, which are that it has intensity and clarity and non-discriminative single-pointed concentration. When one develops concentration, the two attributes one has to develop are a very intense clarity and non-discriminative single-pointedness. Thus when the teachings describe dullness or laxity and excitement, one can see how that relates to these two attributes of the mind; specifically, that which prevents the development of intense clarity is called dullness or laxity, and dullness prevents the mind from having intense clarity. Thus dullness is one of the main obstacles to clarity, whereas non-discriminative single-pointedness is obstructed by excitement. When there is excitement it prevents the mind from having single-pointed concentration on the object. Thus the two main obstacles to be overcome in developing concentration are explained as being dullness or laxity and excitement. And the two main tools for developing concentration are explained as being mindfulness and introspection.

If one attempts to meditate on developing concentration without properly identifying the two main tools for developing concentration (which are mindfulness and introspection) and the two main obstacles to be overcome (which are laxity and excitement), and then claim to have developed concentration, then that claim would be merely based on one's words. Such a claim is based on not really having understood or achieved the main goal. Whereas someone who completely understands the main conducive factors, the tools for developing concentration and the obstacles, and who then attempts to meditate on developing single-pointed concentration, will be successful.

Making use of this knowledge

As explained in the *Prayer for the Flourishing of Lama Tsong Khapa's Teachings*², which is a praise to Lama Tsong Khapa's teachings, one verse indicates that the ultimate view is that which is free from the two extremes - nihilism and eternalism - and that the ultimate meditation is that which is free from laxity and stupor. Meditation that is free from the faults of laxity and stupor is said to be the ultimate meditation.

This is a prayer for one to meet with Lama Tsong Khapa's teachings, which incorporate all the instructions of the Buddha's teachings, showing that the supreme view is that which is free from both extremes; and supreme meditation is that which is free from laxity and stupor. The teachings endowed with these qualities are Lama Tsong Khapa's teachings, which one prays to be able to come into contact with.

So when one actually recites these prayers, it is of course important that we remind ourselves to engage in the actual practice of acquiring the knowledge for obtaining the ultimate view. We have of course gone through a lot of teachings explaining what that ultimate view is, so in our practice we need to work towards achieving that ultimate view with the aid of the ultimate meditation. Even making a prayer of wishful thinking along these lines is said to be really meritorious and very significant, and therefore really worthwhile.

² See page 61 in the prayer folder.

What one can also understand from these verses is that in striving to obtain the ultimate view, it overcomes the extreme views within oneself. When one has the proper technique of meditation and strives to achieve one's goal in meditation, then that helps to reduce and overcome laxity and stupor in one's mind. We can really see the benefit of the teachings if we can apply them in this way.

We should try to apply whatever we learn to our practice and our daily activities. The benefit of incorporating every aspect of the teaching into our daily life is that the mind starts to become less and less agitated in its dualistic views. Also through being more acquainted with developing a meditation technique to develop concentration, the mind will start to become clearer and clearer, and the positive energy in the mind will become more prominent. In turn that will also help to generate more faith in one's mind. With that faith then the aspiration to further engage in the practice, and to deepen one's understanding will naturally follow. From that, the mind will naturally become more subdued, and as the mind becomes more subdued, the qualities of loving and kindness towards other beings will naturally become stronger and stronger. So this is how we can connect with every aspect of the teaching and thus incorporate it in our life, seeing how it actually brings about a positive transformation within ourselves.

An example of being free from the extreme views is when we recite the *Heart Sutra*. The literal words say there is no tactile form, no sound and so forth, and if we were to take that literally and assume that there is no form, or no sound, then that would indicate that one is falling into the extreme view of nihilism. Whereas if one can immediately relate to that passage as indicating that there is no inherently existent form and no inherently existent sound and so forth, then that understanding will help to prevent one from having the extreme view of nihilism. When one has a complete understanding that form, for example, lacks inherent existence, but nevertheless does exist nominally or conventionally, then it helps one to be free from both of the extreme views of nihilism and eternalism.

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