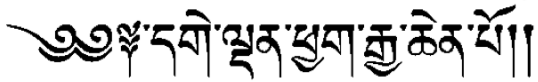

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



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24 March 2009

As we had decided earlier, we can do some meditation, and so for that purpose let us sit in a relaxed position.

As explained in the Mahamudra teachings, the object of our focus is our mind. Even though there is an explanation of how to engage in the practice of meditation in the root text (parts of which we have already covered), the explanation that I will use now is from the *Lam Rim* or the *Graduated Path to Enlightenment* teachings. The essence, of course, comes to the same thing, even though it's a slightly different presentation. As we are going to do a few minutes of meditation, you need not look at me, but rather just follow the instructions while maintaining the meditative posture.

Having found a comfortable physical posture for meditation, first we mentally withdraw ourselves from all distractions; so try to spend some time in bringing your attention and focus inward. Initially we try to adopt a state of mind where we discard any hope for positive results and discard any sense of fear that something unpleasant may happen. Simply put, we discard any hope for good results and any fear of bad ones, and try to reach a point where we don't have any discursive thoughts arising in our mind.

We try to reach a point where there is just a general quietness of the mind itself; a still awareness that is not mixed with any discursive thoughts. When that awareness is apparent to some degree, then we try to maintain the vividness of that awareness within ourselves. Don't try to apply an analytical mindfulness right now; try not to focus on any attributes of the mind, but rather just focus on the vividness of that awareness or mindfulness.

If at any point discursive thoughts arise, then reinforce the commitment to maintain a focus on the mere appearance of the mind. By not allowing the mind to follow discursive thoughts, instead replace it with mindfulness. It's like applying a state of mindfulness to another state of mindfulness within our own mind: having initially applied mindfulness to our own mind, when discursive thoughts arise, re-apply another state of mindfulness to be aware of that initial mindfulness. *(Pause for meditation)*

Laxity

In explaining the two obstacles for developing concentration, we covered the obstacle of excitement in our last session, and now we come to the obstacle of laxity.

As laxity involves a certain amount of placement on the object it is not really noticed by beginner meditators. The Tibetan word for laxity, *jing-wa* has the connotation of sinking, like something sinking into water or into the

ground. That same connotation applies to the state of mind of laxity - while focused on the object a sort of mental sinking occurs.

While the mind remains focused on the object, there is a certain aspect of the mind that becomes dull, which sinks down. That is the implication of laxity - the mind losing its intensity on the focus. However the most apparent obstacle for beginners to meditation is the distraction where the mind wanders off. Every time we try to maintain some focus on the object the mind keeps scattering and wandering off. Of course, it is not the case that laxity doesn't occur for beginners, it is just that we are not able to identify and detect it at the beginning.

The lam rim commentary explains, that when laxity occurs, the intensity of apprehension is diminished, even though the brightness and clarity are still intact. Thus laxity has an aspect of slackness. It is also referred to as being an internal distraction.

Gross and subtle distractions

The teachings refer to gross distractions and subtle distractions. It may be useful to relate overcoming the grosser and subtler levels of distractions to the understanding of how the three higher trainings are a means to subdue the mind.

The three trainings

The first training, observing **moral ethics**, is a means of avoiding very gross distractions, which are mainly related to external distractions such as coming into contact with pleasurable sensory objects. The very training of observing ethics is a means for us to distance ourselves from sensory pleasurable objects, which then allows us to overcome the gross external distractions.

Excitement and laxity are internal distractions, and there are also grosser and subtler levels of laxity. These internal distractions are overcome by the second training, which is the training in **concentration**. When one develops concentration, one overcomes the internal obstacles of both gross and subtle excitement and laxity.

The most subtle level of internal distraction however is overcome by the training in developing **wisdom**. The subtlest internal distraction is the ignorance grasping at true existence, which is overcome by developing higher wisdom, particularly the wisdom realising emptiness. When one gains the direct realisation of emptiness, then that serves as an antidote to overcome the subtlest internal distractions.

It is both very meaningful and practical to understand how the three higher trainings serve as a means to actually subdue the mind. Some of the older students may remember that I have explained this before, however it's good to go over it again. We would have heard passages from the teachings about how the three higher trainings are a means for subduing the mind, so it is quite important for us to understand how it actually works as a technique. To summarise, the training of moral ethics is a means to overcome very gross distractions in relation to the external sensual objects. So, observing moral ethics will prevent us from being distracted in that way.

As we become free from the external distractions, the internal distractions become more apparent. So the

question is how to deal with internal distractions. As mentioned previously, there is both gross and subtle excitement and laxity. In particular, it is the gross and subtle laxity that needs to be overcome, which is done through the practice of concentration. Having overcome both gross and subtle levels of laxity, we still have the deep ignorance of grasping at true existence. So how do we overcome that obstacle? The means to overcome grasping at true existence, which is the subtlest level of internal distraction, is by developing the wisdom realizing emptiness.

Gross and subtle laxity

As the teaching explains, **gross laxity** causes the mind to slightly lose its clarity and brightness even though it is still focused on the object. It is as if some darkness has occurred in the mind, which affects the clarity and brightness of the object, and there is a slight decline of mindfulness. So, when both the clarity and the brightness of focus on the object are weakened, gross laxity has occurred. It is really important that we clearly identify gross and subtle laxity because, as we are still focused on the object, we could very easily mistake laxity for actual meditation,

With **subtle laxity**, the mind is of course focused on the object, and its brightness and clarity are also still intact, however the mind slightly loses its intensity of focus on the object. Brightness and clarity are there, but there is a very slight lapse in the intensity, which is identified as being the subtle laxity. Because the mind is focused on the object with brightness and clarity, it is a concentration. Thus subtle laxity is identified as a concentration and a virtuous state of mind. Within laxity there are the two categories of laxity, that which is virtuous and that which is neutral. Subtle laxity is referred to as being virtuous because it is a concentration, and concentration by its very nature is said to be virtuous, thus subtle laxity is a virtuous state of mind.

It is important that we clearly understand the difference between gross laxity and subtle laxity. As subtle laxity is a concentration, it is much harder for us to recognize it as an obscuration. Even though at a certain level we may be developing concentration, when subtle laxity occurs it will hinder the development of the sublime unmistakable concentration. To describe this in lay terms: when we attempt to meditate, it is good that we understand the obstacles that will arise during the practice of meditation. So with respect to laxity, when we reach a point in our meditation where we are able to maintain our focus, but where we lack the brightness and clarity of the object, then we should identify that as gross laxity and apply the appropriate antidotes to overcome that obstacle.

As we develop the practice of concentration further, we reach the point where our mind is single-pointedly focused on the object with clarity and brightness. However as part of the meditation technique and training, we need to check periodically whether we are applying a correct single-pointed focus on the object or not. If we detect that the intensity of our focus begins to slacken a bit, then at that point we need to identify that as being subtle laxity. If we are not able to clearly identify that as subtle laxity, then as mentioned in the teachings, a very relaxed state could easily be mistaken as being a

very good meditation state. Thus when Lama Tsong Khapa instructs us to be wary of a good relaxed state, and not mistake it for a good meditative state, he is actually giving us a very profound instruction.

Another obstacle to developing concentration in meditation is identified as **lethargy**. As explained in the teachings, lethargy is a derivative of ignorance that functions to make the mind and body become heavy and unserviceable. Thus when lethargy occurs, it makes the body and mind feel heavy and results in the onset of sleepiness. It is important for us to distinguish between laxity and lethargy, as they are not one and the same.

How to prevent laxity and excitement

In explaining the two main obstacles of excitement and laxity, it is good to get a really clear understanding of these obstacles. The specific instructions of how to help prevent them from occurring in one's meditation practice also include instructions as to how to visualise the object. It is explained that it would be good to imagine the object having brightness to it, and also to imagine that the object has a certain amount of weight in it. These two attributes of the object are actually ways of helping to prevent laxity and excitement from arising. The brightness in the object is to help prevent laxity from occurring in the mind, whereas the attribute of having some weight helps to prevent excitement from occurring in the mind.

Also in the instructions on how to develop concentration, there is an explanation of how to prevent the mind from becoming shaky. Sometimes there is an element of nervousness where the mind feels shaky. When that element is present, then the specific instruction is to imagine the meditation-object to be like a cap and one's own mind focusing on the object as being like the head that wears the cap. This visualisation is said to be a useful technique to prevent the mind from being shaky.

As the commentary further explains, it is extremely important that we clearly understand these obstacles, however having understood them, we should not leave it at just a mere intellectual understanding, but actually become familiar in detecting them prior to the actual meditation practice. The way to overcome the obstacles is to try to apply that understanding to one's own experiences. That is done by consistently familiarising ourselves with the details of the gross and subtle levels of the obstacles. Such a familiarisation means that we will be wary at the very outset, and so we will be fully prepared when they occur in our meditation.

If we familiarise ourselves in identifying the obstacles prior to our actual meditation sessions, then when we set ourselves to the meditation practice, we will be already equipped with the tools to be able to overcome those obstacles when they occur, particularly gross and subtle laxity. Otherwise we may not even be able to recognise or identify the obstacles when they occur. This is particularly true for subtle laxity, where we might fall into the state of subtle laxity and mistaking it for concentration, we might be in that state for a long time.

The particular antidote for overcoming laxity is introspection. Within a mindful state, adopting the wisdom that serves to always be on guard, checking whether the obstacles are occurring or not, is identified as

introspection. The commentary explains that one needs to apply the state of mind that acts like a watchful guard, so this explains why we need to have that watchfulness or vigilance, even in a deep meditative state. There may be those who claim that in a deep meditative state one should not be aware of anything, that one should not have a watchful or investigative mind and so forth. The explanation here relates particularly to being watchful of subtle laxity occurring, as without that state of alertness or watchfulness there would be nothing to prevent the obscuration of subtle laxity.

As explained previously, the particular description of introspection is that while the mind is focused on the object, being completely mindful of the object, another part of the mind is serving as a guard or a watchman. That element of being on guard is what is called introspection. Thus, as the commentary explains, the particular and unique instruction for developing the sublime unmistakable concentration is achieved through applying the watchfulness of the mind that is called introspection.

As the commentary further explains, even when one is able to identify obstacles at both the gross and subtle levels, if we don't exert ourselves to immediately overcome the obstacles, then the fault of **non-application** occurs.

The five faults

The five faults are laziness, forgetting the instruction, laxity and excitement, non-application and over-application. If laxity and excitement are listed as one fault then there are five faults, whereas if laxity and excitement were to be listed separately, then there would be six faults. We have already covered some of these faults before.

1. **Laziness:** In our earlier sessions we described what laziness is, and how to overcome laziness and so forth.
2. **Forgetting the instruction** or forgetting the precept: We also explained this fault earlier.
3. **Laxity and excitement**, which we have just been explaining
4. **Non-application** is not applying the antidote to laxity or excitement when they occur.
5. **Over-application** refers to the fault that occurs when one applies antidotes for overcoming laxity and excitement when in fact laxity and excitement have not occurred. If when developing concentration, laxity and excitement do not occur then to apply the antidotes is a fault in itself.

The antidote to laxity

The fault of non-application occurs when, say, either laxity or excitement occur and the antidotes to these obstructions are not applied. To overcome the fault, one has to apply the antidotes. As an analogy, when a magnet is placed near a metallic object, it naturally draws that object towards it without any effort. Likewise, the mental factor called application serves as a means to naturally bring the distracted mind away from the distractions, to naturally bring it inward again to focus on the object. But the mental factor called application clearly does not serve as an actual antidote for overcoming either laxity or

excitement. Thus one must understand that there are specific antidotes for overcoming laxity and excitement.

As mentioned previously, laxity is the element where the mind slightly loses its clarity and brightness and thus has an element of sinking. Then the appropriate antidote, which serves as a strengthening agent, has to be applied. Laxity induces an element of discouragement and if we allow the mind to just remain in that state, it could just become heavier and heavier and result in even more discouragement. So first of all, as mentioned previously, one tries to strengthen the mind, to try to prop up the mind so to speak. If those strengthening measures don't work, one can start to contemplate the virtues such as generating faith or joy in one's mind. These positive states of mind will then perhaps help the mind not to feel discouraged and to rise up again. If, after applying such methods, the mind is still in a state of feeling discouraged and is in a sinking state, it is advised in the teachings that one should stop one's session for the time being, and go out and look at bright areas such as looking up to the sky, or if there is a high place, to go on top of the hill and just look out so the mind can expand again, as having that expansive view will help to uplift the mind again. Of course these techniques have been explained many times previously in other sessions, so the older students will be familiar with them. When the mind has been uplifted to a certain degree, then one can come back to the meditation session and continue with one's meditation practice.

The antidote to excitement

Next the commentary goes into explaining the ways to overcome excitement. Excitement has an element of the mind scattering out and being a bit 'hyper' so to speak. When one first notices the obstacle of excitement occurring, one applies the initial techniques of trying to bring the mind inward again and trying to maintain focus on the object. If repeated attempts to bring the mind inward don't work, then in order to try to calm it down a bit, but without coming out of the meditation session, one can start thinking about the other virtuous points in the teaching, particularly impermanence and the pitfalls of the cyclic existence. Thinking about these topics may help the mind to settle down. Of course if, after a few attempts that doesn't work, then one may come out of the meditation session and try other means to try to overcome excitement. Then, when the mind is settled down to a certain point, one can return to the meditation session again.

Achieving a balance

As the commentary further explains, in brief one must be wary of distractions and excitement, and bring the mind inward. Having overcome the obstacle of excitement, and brought the mind inward so that it is focused on the object, one must be wary of laxity occurring and thus develop the intensity of the clarity and the brightness of the object. Always be wary of these two obstacles occurring – when there is no danger of laxity occurring then making sure that excitement isn't occurring, and when one is sure that there is no danger of excitement occurring, then be wary of laxity.

If the mind is too tight, then the danger of excitement will occur, and at that point loosen the mind a bit. However, if

the mind is too loose, then the danger of laxity may occur, thus one must tighten the mind a bit. So the idea is to achieve the balance of not being too tight or too loose.

Therefore as explained in the commentary, and also in other instructions given in teachings on developing concentration, it is specifically explained that when one masters the appropriate balance of tightness and looseness when focusing on the object, then concentration will be developed. Achieving that balance only comes about through experience. It is through practice that one comes to a point of being able to recognise 'if it mind is any tighter than this, then it will cause excitement to arise and if the mind becomes any looser than this, then laxity will occur'. Being able to detect that state is something that we really need to be aware of.

The measure of our progress would be a session where we are able to maintain our focus without it being too tight or too loose. If we have been able to maintain such a focus then, at an appropriate time we end the session; that will then prevent the danger of falling into the pitfall of excitement or subtle laxity. Otherwise, as mentioned previously, if one just arrives at a relaxed state and feels satisfied with that being a meditative state, then the fault of mistaking a very relaxed state for being a meditative state will definitely occur. So one need to be very wary of that.

The commentary further explains that initially avoiding the non-virtuous activities of the three doors of body, speech and mind is of primary importance for a beginner practitioner. Following that advice will help to avoid creating the causes for excitement or laxity. By continuing to follow that advice one will be able to eventually identify even the subtle levels of excitement and laxity, and thus definitely develop concentration.

The commentary further explains, the fault of over-application occurs when antidotes are applied even when the mind maintains a focus on the object; being free from either obstacles of excitement and laxity. If at that point the antidotes for overcoming either excitement or laxity are applied, then that will be an obstacle for maintaining our focus on the object. If one notices that one is applying the antidotes unnecessarily, then at that point one must recognise that as being the fault of over-application and bring the mind to a state of equilibrium or equanimity, where it's just remaining focussed on the mind in its own state, without applying the antidotes.

The commentary then further goes on to explain that the equilibrium or equanimity that is developed at this stage is still at a level where some effort is required to maintain that equanimity. Effortless equanimity is however developed only on the ninth stage of concentration. At that stage the real equilibrium or equanimity is developed, where the mind is naturally settled. Whereas, the equanimity that is an antidote to the fault of over-application still requires some effort. This can be explained in more detail later on.

The commentary has introduced the five faults and how to overcome these faults with the eight antidotes. At the point where one is able to overcome the five faults with the eight antidotes, one has reached a point of being able to maintain one's concentration on the object.

Next the text introduces how many levels of concentration there are prior to developing the actual state of calm abiding. Thus the text presents the nine stages of concentration. The nine stages of concentration are developed with the assistance of the six powers and four mental engagements. We will deal with this in our future sessions.

The next session, as people are aware, is the discussion session. As I have mentioned previously, which I don't need to emphasise again, you will be all aware of the fact that discussion is important, so please do attend and engage in the discussions well. Following the discussion session, the following Tuesday will be the test, and it would also be good for people to come to the test as well.

I cautioned in our last session that I would be quizzing you this time. What are the five ascertaining mental factors?

Students: The five ascertaining mental factors are aspiration, faith, mindfulness, wisdom, and concentration

What are the omnipresent mental factors?

Students: The omnipresent mental factors are feeling, discrimination, intention, contact, and attention

What are the five concomitant mental factors?

Students: The five concomitant mental factors are same object, same aspect, same time, same substance, and same basis

That is good!

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