
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

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We will spend a few minutes in meditation. If possible, find an appropriate posture that is in accordance with the seven-point posture of Buddha Vairochana. You will already be aware of the instructions concerning that posture. Likewise, as indicated in the teachings, one must have a most virtuous motivation, in line with the bodhichitta motivation. (*Pause for meditation*)

In our last sessions we have covered quite a bit on generating mindfulness and introspection in general. Then we covered how to use mindfulness and introspection in particular to focus on the object.

The manner of focussing on a chosen object

Now we come to how one actually focuses on the chosen object in order to develop concentration. As you would remember from an earlier session, the auto commentary on mahamudra presented the five faults by referring to Maitreya's *Distinguishing the Middle and the Extremes*, and explained that one must first overcome the five faults by applying the eight antidotes. Then, in reference to Maitreya's *Ornament of Mahayana Discourses*, the nine stages of concentration were presented. Thus, having overcome the five faults by applying the eight antidotes, one comes to the actual technique of developing concentration with the nine stages. According to Asanga's explanation in his commentary on Maitreya's *Ornament of Mahayana Discourses*, the sequential development of the nine stages is aided by the six powers and the four mental engagements.

The Five Faults

Even though we have already covered the five faults briefly earlier, we can go over them again:

1. **Laziness** is what initially prevents one from even having the aspiration to engage in the practice of developing concentration.
2. **Forgetting the instruction:** once one overcomes laziness and actually engages in meditation by focusing on the object, the next fault that arises is forgetting the instructions, which specifically means forgetting the particular object that one has chose to focus on.
3. Once one is able to maintain some degree of focus on the object, the next fault or obstacle that would arise is **laxity and excitement**, which are combined into the one fault. Laxity and excitement lure us away from the object.
4. The fourth fault is **not applying the antidotes** to laxity and excitement.
5. The fifth fault is **applying the antidotes** unnecessarily. There is no need to apply the antidotes when one is actually able to focus on the object adequately without any other obstacles occurring. If one actually applies the

antidotes at this point, then that would be an obstacle or fault in itself. What one should do at this stage is to apply equanimity, in other words maintaining the focus just as it is.

These explanations were given by Maitreya, who derived the essence of the Buddha's words from the sutras, and presented it in a clear way. Since we hold Maitreya in high esteem as an enlightened being with incredible love and compassion, becoming familiar with these instructions and relying upon them would be highly meaningful for us. Relying upon the words of such a great enlightened being is really worthwhile, thus we should take advantage of his clear instructions.

The antidote to laziness

If one is not so inclined to engage in the meditation of focusing single-pointedly on the object, then that would be the fault of laziness. Even after one does engage in the meditation practice of focusing on the object, that which prevents one from completing or continuing the practice is again the fault of laziness. So, the main point is that laziness prevents one from initially engaging in the practice, and then once one has engaged in the practice laziness also prevents one from maintaining the continuity of that practice.

It is also the fault of laziness when, even though continuity has been maintained for a while, one does not see one's practice through to the end result. Thus, if one wishes to obtain the end result of developing single-pointed concentration, one must definitely apply the antidotes for overcoming laziness.

Even though these instructions are mentioned in the Lam Rim teachings this particular passage to which I am referring is from the first chapter of Jetsun Chokyi Gyaltsen's commentary on the *Abhisamayalamkara* or *Ornament of Clear Realisation*. What is mentioned specifically on this point is that because of the grave fault of laziness, which prevents one from initially engaging in the practice of developing concentration, continuing and then completing the practice, one must definitely apply the antidotes to overcome laziness.

The measure of overcoming laziness completely is when one attains the state of physical and mental pliancy combined with the bliss and serviceability of both body and mind. As explained here, when one attains that serviceability and pliancy of the body and mind, and attains the ability to focus on the object for as long as one wishes without wavering at all, then that is when laziness has been completely overcome.

That stage is attained by applying continuous effort to developing the technique of developing concentration. When one develops concentration one actually achieves that stage. The antidote for overcoming laziness is applying joyous effort. What is being indicated is that one needs to apply continuous effort, and in order to apply that effort one must develop a strong wish and joy in applying that effort. That combination of joy and effort is the antidote to laziness.

What allows us to apply that joyous effort is the strong aspiration that one needs to develop concentration, which is one of the eight antidotes. The next one is aspiration. In

order to develop the aspiration for developing concentration one must have strong faith in the positive qualities of concentration. So faith is presented as an antidote.

Benefits of developing calm abiding

One will be able to generate faith in concentration by contemplating again and again the great benefits and qualities of concentration. The Lam Rim explains the many qualities that are obtained when one attains concentration. So what is being explained here is to think about the benefits of concentration again and again.

If one were to ask 'What are the benefits and qualities of concentration?' then, as the text explains, the actual qualities of single-pointed concentration are the same as the qualities of calm abiding. So, the qualities of calm abiding are explained next.

The qualities and benefits of achieving the state of calm abiding, is to obtain physical and mental pliancy, which induces great bliss and allows one to engage in all virtuous activities.

The criterion of having developed calm abiding

The criterion of having developed calm abiding is that when one's attention is applied to an object it can remain focused on that particular object as firmly as Mount Meru, and that one is able to apply that concentration to any virtuous object that one wishes to focus on. So, when the ability to that is obtained, then one has developed calm abiding.

Having developed calm abiding one furthers one's practice to analyse the object one is focusing on. One will then obtain special insight, or penetrative insight, which is the ability to analyse the object while maintaining single-pointed concentration.

Penetrative insight is specifically the insight that focuses upon ultimate reality - suchness or emptiness. When one attains the union of calm abiding and special insight focusing on emptiness, then through the process of having gained that special insight, the delusions and the seeds of the delusions are overcome. When one further applies that penetrative insight one is then able to overcome the very subtle imprints of duality, thus overcoming every imprint of every delusion in one's mind. In this way one attains the ultimate state of enlightenment, which is the ultimate goal that anyone can possibly achieve. So, all of these realisations are obtained based on having first obtained calm abiding, as one cannot achieve the further realisations on the path without first achieving calm abiding.

The eight antidotes

Having covered the five faults, the text then explains how the eight antidotes are applied to overcome the five faults. The eight antidotes are:

1. **Faith**
2. **Aspiration**
3. **Effort**
4. **Pliancy**

The first four antidotes, faith, aspiration, effort and pliancy are the antidotes to the first fault, which is

laziness. The actual bliss of physical and mental pliancy is obtained at the ninth stage, when one attains calm abiding. When one attains physical and mental pliancy one has totally overcome laziness.

Even though the actual pliancy is not attained until one attains calm abiding itself, one does experience some level of pliancy prior to obtaining the ninth stage of concentration. One may not, however, be able to detect it because it is a very subtle feeling.

5. Mindfulness

Mindfulness, as mentioned previously, is the antidote for overcoming the second fault, **forgetting the instruction.**

6. Introspection

Introspection is the antidote for overcoming **laxity and excitement.** If one has been following the earlier explanations, then one can see how they relate to each other. When either laxity or excitement occurs, it is mindfulness and introspection that enables us to detect them.

7. Application

Application overcomes the fault of **not applying the antidote.** Even though application is listed as an antidote, it should be understood that application does not serve as the actual antidote for overcoming the fault of non-application. What is specifically explained here is that while mindfulness and introspection serve as the actual antidote to overcome the mind wavering from the focus on the object, application is the particular mental factor of attention that keeps the mind focusing on the object.

When the mind is distracted by excitement or if it falls into the fault of laxity, then mindfulness and introspection serve as the actual antidote. Specifically, mindfulness and introspection detect when the mind wanders off and so that is the antidote to distraction. Application, which is the mental state of attention, is the factor that brings the focus back onto the object, thus maintaining that attention on the object. The factor of actually bringing the focus back on to the object is what is translated here as application. Then having placed the focus on the object again, that focus is maintained by continuous mindfulness and introspection.

8. Equanimity

The five faults and how the eight antidotes serve to overcome these five faults are really crucial instructions if we were inclined to actually meditate and develop concentration. Then, when we attempt to meditate, we can relate to these specific instructions.

The nine stages of developing calm abiding

Next the text explains the nine mental stages of developing calm abiding. The explanation of these nine stages is quite clear in the Lam Rim teachings. To present the nine stages, they are:

1. Setting the mind
2. Continuous setting
3. Patch like setting
4. Close setting
5. Subduing
6. Pacifying

7. Fully pacifying
8. Single pointed application
9. Setting in equipoise

Explanation according to Maitreya's *Ornament of Mahayana Discourses*

1. According to this text withdrawing the mind from all external distractions, bringing the mind inward and then actually placing one's focus on an internal object is the first stage, called setting the mind.
2. Having placed the mind on a internal object, the second stage, continuous setting, is maintaining the continuity of that focus.
3. The third stage, patch-like setting, can be understood from the literal meaning of patch-like, or like patches. A patch is placed on top of something to repair the gaps or holes. The implication of that, as the commentary explains, is that when due to forgetfulness and distraction the mind wanders away from the object, and it is brought back to focus again on the internal object. This is the third stage, patch-like setting.
4. There are different explanations given for the fourth stage, close setting. The Lam Rim text cites other sutras to explain the different presentations. However according to the commentary used here, close setting is explained as increasing whatever focus one has already developed. So, the ability to increase the focus further is close setting.
5. More specific details of these stages will be explained further in the commentary, however the general explanation of the fifth level, which is called subduing, is a genuine intense faith in concentration, and by seeing its qualities being totally immersed in the development of concentration.
6. Pacifying, the sixth level, is where one develops recognition of the fault of distractions specifically, and further develops an intense faith in concentration.
7. Reaching the stage of fully pacifying means that with the understanding of their nature one has completely overcome the faults of sleep, laziness, attachment and the like.
8. The eighth stage, single-pointed application, is where one develops a spontaneous, effortless focus on the object.
9. The ninth stage is setting in equipoise.

Explanation according to *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*

The explanation given in the Lam Rim text called *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* might make things clearer.

1. Just being able to place the mind on an internal object is the first stage of setting the mind. Because of the strong familiarity with the faults of excitement and laxity, it may seem at this initial stage, as if the mind is particularly disturbed by the faults of excitement and laxity. However what is actually happening is that one is more able to identify those faults. As I have explained before, others have mentioned that when they try to meditate their mind seems to become more agitated and more distracted. In fact, as explained in the teachings, the mind

does not become more distracted as the result of meditation, rather one is more able to detect the distracted mind. So although it may seem as if one is becoming more agitated or distracted, that is not actually the case.

2. The second stage is continuous setting. The indication that one is reaching the second stage of continuous setting would be where one is able to maintain one's focus on the internal object for a significant span of time, such as the duration of reciting a mala of OM MANI PADME HUM. If one does not waver from one's internal object for the duration of a whole mala of OM MANI PADME HUM then that would be an indication that one has reached the second stage.

Prior to the first stage of setting the mind, we would not have an inkling of what concentration is. Reaching the second stage means that one has an inkling of what developing concentration implies. By this second stage, as explained in the commentary, there would be periods of time when one seems to be free from the faults of distraction or excitement. Then at other times it seems that they manifest quite strongly. So there are certain periods of time when everything seems quite settled, but there are still periods of time when the faults such as distractions of excitement occur.

3. The term patch-like setting is used because while maintaining a continuous focus on the internal object there are periodic distractions that may occur. When those distractions occur it is not as if the mind is completely off the object, as it maintains some level of focus, but there is a part of the mind that becomes distracted. Thus reinforcing one's focus upon the focus one has already developed is the stage that is called patch-like setting.

in the analogy, we add patches to a cloth that is already there. Similarly with this mental stage there is a resetting on top of the setting one has already obtained. Thus it is called a patch-like setting.

As the teaching explains, there is definitely a difference in maturity from the first and the second stages, through to the third stage, as the mind is increasingly able to maintain its focus for a longer duration without being distracted. And if distraction does occur the mind is able to detect that distraction right away.

If we were to use duration of how long one is able to focus as a measure, in the first stage if we were to meditate for ten minutes then within that ten minutes there might be only one or two minutes where the mind is actually able to focus on the object, because the rest of the time it is continuously being distracted. Whereas in the second stage the mind progresses to the point of being able to focus for four, five or six minutes. At the third stage one is able to focus for even longer, and the distractions become less and less.

It is good to use these measurements of our progress in our meditation to actually check whether one has made any progress in developing one's focus. If one just sits blankly and tries to focus but does not pay attention to check if one is really progressing, then one will not really be able to advance much in developing concentration.

4. The fourth stage, which is close setting, is where the mind is able to actually keep the focus on the object, whereas in the earlier stage even though it is momentary there are still lapses of one's focus, where the mind can still get distracted. In the close setting stage, it is as if the internal object that one is focusing on is dominating the mind. However, as explained in the teaching, even at this stage one must still apply the antidotes to excitement and laxity. Even though one is focused very well on the object, there is still one part of the mind where the likelihood of being prone to excitement and laxity still occur, albeit slightly.

As further explained in the teaching, mindfulness is fully developed at the fourth stage. The teaching uses the analogy of a child becoming a youth, which is when they are fully developed physically into manhood or womanhood. So reaching the fourth stage is when one attains the full development of mindfulness.

5. Because of the fact that the mind has a more acute focus on the internal object, one is free from the immediate danger of gross distractions. However there is the danger of subtle laxity occurring. Thus at the fifth stage one applies an even more acute introspection to overcome the danger of the fault of subtle laxity. Thus alertness has to be heightened so as to detect subtle laxity.

6. Following the fourth stage when the mind has been withdrawn internally and focused inwardly, the danger of subtle laxity had to be dealt with in the fifth stage. This is done through heightening one's vigilance, and checking the mind to see whether subtle laxity is occurring, having heightened alertness in the mind. Due to having to apply heightened alertness at the fifth stage the danger of subtle excitement occurs. So at the sixth stage one has to apply the antidote to overcome subtle excitement, due to the mind becoming too alert.

7. At the seventh stage, called the fully pacifying stage, one has fully developed the power of mindfulness and introspection, so the danger of subtle laxity and excitement occurring is very slim. However there is still some slim chance because one has not completely mastered concentration. Here the concentration is at a much more advanced stage than the fifth and sixth stage, in terms of having fully developed powers.

On the seventh stage one obtains the fully developed power of joyous effort. As explained in the teachings, while there is the danger of subtle laxity and subtle excitement occurring on the fifth and sixth stage, at the seventh stage there is no danger of subtle laxity and excitement hindering one's actual concentration. That is because in the event that subtle laxity and excitement were to occur it would be immediately overcome with the power of joyous effort. So although there is just a slight chance that subtle laxity and excitement may occur, they would not be able to hinder the actual concentration at all.

8. On the eighth stage there is a continuous application of introspection and mindfulness, which is mastered to the point where there is not even the slightest chance for subtle laxity and excitement to occur at all.

9. The particular qualities of the ninth stage are that in addition to there being no danger at all that subtle laxity or excitement occurring, one is able to effortlessly focus on the object for as long as one wishes.

Next there is the mention of how the six powers are applied. However we will be able to go over these in our next sessions. I have been referring here to *Lam Rim Chenmo* or the *Great Treatise*, and *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, but I have not however been able to give you a full detailed explanation as presented in those teachings. Thus, it would be good for those of you who have access to those texts to familiarise yourselves more with these explanations, from either the *Great Treatise* or *Liberation in the Palm of your Hand* to try to gain a better understanding.

Those of us who have an interest in understanding how calm abiding is developed need to begin by first gaining a good understanding, which comes by familiarising ourselves with the explanations in the text. So that is why it is very useful and important for us to familiarise ourselves with the explanations again and again.

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