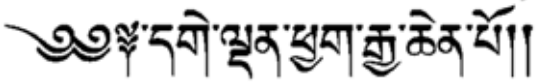

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

21 April 2009

Sitting in an appropriate and relaxed posture, we set the mind with a good motivation, which can be along the lines 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, and so for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

3.1. HOW TO DEVELOP MINDFULNESS IN GENERAL (CONT.)¹

In our previous session, we covered the nine stages of concentration. As explained in Asanga's *Shravaka* (or Hearer) *Levels*, the development of nine levels of concentration is aided by the six powers in conjunction with the four mental engagements.

The six powers

The six powers are:

1. The power of hearing
2. The power of thinking
3. The power of mindfulness
4. The power of introspection
5. The power of joyous effort
6. The power of complete familiarity

With categories it is usually sufficient just to know what they are, but here the particular sequence is significant as well. So it is good to remember them in their particular sequence.

For example we can relate the sequence of the first three powers to the procedure of engaging in the practice of meditation in general. Those of you who are familiar with the explanation given in the teachings will know that hearing and thinking have to precede the actual practice of meditation. It is the combination of hearing and thinking about the teaching that enables one to engage in the practice of meditation. That's also why mindfulness follows hearing and thinking in the sequence of the six powers.

You cannot put into practice something about which you have not received instructions. Also it is not as if one hears one set of instructions and puts something else into practice. It is the specific instructions that we receive in the teachings that we put into practice.

With respect to faith, there are two kinds of faith: that which comes about from external factors, such as faith generated merely based on what one has heard; and the faith that is generated from internal factors as a result of analysing and contemplating what one has heard. Internally developed faith is said to be a firm type of faith, whereas the other is less stable. Even though one develops some level of aspiration with the faith developed as a result of hearing the teachings, it is not as strong as the faith developed through the process of one's own thinking. Nevertheless the process of developing faith comes both from the external factor of hearing the teachings and the internal factor of thinking about the teachings. I may have side tracked a bit from the

immediate topic, but I mention this as it is useful for your general practice.

1. The power of hearing

The power of hearing aids the development of the first of the nine stages of concentration, **setting the mind**. As the commentary explains, one develops the first stage of concentration due to the power of accurately hearing unmistakable instructions, and then applying them in one's practice. The first level of concentration is not attained through the power of familiarity, for example, because one has not yet mastered maintaining focus on the object. It is good to actually relate this to our personal practice as well. Without having heard any teachings, we won't be able to actually think about them, because can thinking is based upon what one has heard earlier. So we understand why hearing precedes thinking about the teachings.

2. The power of thinking

The power of thinking is an aid to the second stage of concentration, which is **continuous setting**. Thinking about the instructions enables the mind to remain continuously set on the object. As explained last week, at the first level of concentration one basically practises setting the mind upon the object. Having attained the stage of being able to place the mind on the object, the next stage is when one is able to achieve some level of continuity of placing the mind on the object, and this is aided by the power of thinking.

3. The power of mindfulness

The power of mindfulness is an aid to the third and fourth concentrations, **patch-like setting** and **close setting**. Having reached the stage where one has some continuity of focus on the object, which is the second stage, mindfulness then enables the prolonged focus on the object. When the mind is distracted it is mindfulness that allows one to immediately bring the focus back to the object. Thus mindfulness is a tool to maintain the focus on the object for a longer duration. That is how mindfulness aids the third and fourth stages of concentration.

4. The power of introspection

The power of introspection is a particular aid for developing the next two stages of concentration **subduing** and **pacifying**. As the commentary explains, in the event that the mind is distracted by specific discursive thoughts, the power of introspection enables one to detect the faults of the distractions, and then bring the mind back to the focus. That is how introspection is the aid to developing the next two stages.

5. The power of joyous effort

The power of joyous effort is the aid to developing the seventh and eighth stages of concentration, **fully pacifying** and **single-pointed application**. Joyous effort enables one to persistently overcome the subtle faults that still occur at these levels, thus allowing the concentration to develop even further. Again, this can be understood more specifically by relating it to the earlier presentation of the nine concentrations.

6. The power of complete familiarity

The power of complete familiarity is the aid for developing the ninth stage, **setting in equipoise**. As the commentary explains, passing through all the eight levels of concentration makes the practitioner extremely familiar with concentration. So due to that power of familiarity, one obtains the ninth stage of concentration, which is setting in equipoise.

¹ This heading was introduced on 17 March 2009. The actual heading number in terms of the outline is 2.2.2.2.2.3. Unformatted headings used between March 17 and this week have been added for easy reference.

We can gain good advice for our practice by understanding this very practical presentation of the six powers. What is indicated here is that due to familiarity, one attains the ultimate result. So, we can understand that the more we become familiar with a practice, the more likely we are to achieve a result.

We may feel 'Why am I not able to meditate like I used to in the past?'. Initially we may have followed a proper meditation technique. But if we haven't really developed familiarity through continuous practice, then even though we may have been seemingly engaged in the practice of meditation for many years, we may find that we have not really progressed much. That is because we lack the power of familiarity with the real practice.

If we are keen to actually progress in our practice of meditation, it is important that we understand how to engage in the practice. Otherwise we may be seemingly engaged in some practice of meditation, but we don't really get any tangible good results. Thus it is important to become acquainted with the explanations given here and try to apply them to our daily practice.

Not gaining any substantial result from our practice of meditation could also be due to the fault of keeping the mind completely blank, or in a semi-conscious or sleep-like state. As explained in the auto-commentary, one should be very diligent in making sure that one is not in a state of semi-consciousness or sleep, with a blank mind.

This instruction is actually a refutation of some earlier wrong views, in particular from the Chinese master called Ha-Shang. His view was that meditation meant having no conceptual thoughts at all, keeping the mind completely blank. That sort of meditative state however doesn't bring any concrete results. Thus it is important that we rely upon the specific instruction as given in the auto-commentary.

The other methods of the practice of meditation that are refuted will be explained further on. However the reasoning the others give as to why one should keep the mind blank, free from every type of thoughts is because, they say, that even a virtuous thought is a discursive thought. They use the analogy of someone who has been bitten by a dog. It doesn't really matter, they reason, if it is a white dog or a black dog, the fact is that someone has been bitten. Likewise, they reason, whether it is a virtuous thought or a non-virtuous thought, both are conceptual or discursive thoughts that hinder the practice of meditation. Thus, they say, one must be free from all thoughts. These presentations will be refuted more specifically later. Actually, Kamalashila composed his treatise called *The Stages of Meditation* – the first level, the medium level and the last stages of meditation – to refute these presentations.

The ninth stage of concentration, setting in equipoise, is also referred to as being the stage where one's focus on the object is effortless. As Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains, initially there will be some effort, however as one progresses along the stages, one is able to maintain one's focus on the object continuously with less and less effort. The analogy given here is that when someone has memorised the Tara Praises for example, and recited them many times, they will reach a level where they are able to recite the full 21 Praises without any interruption, because of their familiarity. Even though there is some effort initially, the recitation becomes effortless with time. Likewise when one reaches the ninth stage, there is no effort involved. Besides the concentration not being distracted by any of the faults, a continuous mindfulness and introspection is present without any effort

being needed. Thus the ninth stage is attained when one reaches the quality of being able to effortlessly focus on the object for as long as one wishes.

What is to be understood from this analogy is that effort is needed initially in applying mindfulness and introspection. However having used effort to apply them again and again one reaches the point where no effort is needed and is continuously able to maintain the focus on the object. In relation to the analogy of the recitation of the Tara Praises, those who have memorised the Tara Praise well and who can recite it without any hesitation, can actually recite the Tara Praises while they are engaged in other household activities. It is very much a Tibetan tradition that fathers or mothers recite a prayer such as the Tara Praises while they are sweeping around the house.

What is being specifically explained here is that although the ninth stage is effortless, that doesn't indicate that one reaches that stage without any effort. So at the ninth stage 'effortless' means that due to the familiarity with having applied effort earlier one will reach the stage where one is able to maintain one's focus without applying any effort. That is the connotation of 'effortless' that is implied at the ninth stage.

The four mental engagements

Next, Kyiwo Tsang's commentary, presents the four mental engagements. As mentioned previously, the five faults, the eight antidotes, and the nine mental stages are specifically presented in Maitreya's *Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*. Asanga's *Shravaka Levels* explains the six powers and the four mental engagements in conjunction to developing the nine mental stages.

The four mental engagements are:

1. Forcible engagement
2. Interrupted engagement
3. Uninterrupted engagement
4. Effortless or spontaneous engagement.

1. Forcible engagement

Forcible engagement applies to the first and second stages of concentration, **setting the mind** and **continuous setting**, both of which require a forceful effort in order to achieve that state. So the mental engagement on these two levels is called forcible engagement.

2. Interrupted engagement

Interrupted engagement is applied to the next five stages of developing concentration, **patch-like setting**, **close-setting**, **subduing**, **pacifying**, and **fully pacifying**. At these five levels of concentration, one's focus on the object has reached a stage where there is a certain level of continuity, which is periodically interrupted by the two specific faults of excitement and laxity. Thus, as there are periodic interruptions, the mental engagement at these levels is referred to as interrupted engagement.

3. Uninterrupted engagement

Then on the eighth stage, **single-pointed application**, uninterrupted engagement is applied. As also mentioned in our previous session, even though there is still subtle laxity and excitement at the eighth level of concentration, it cannot disturb or interrupt one's focus on the object. Thus the mental engagement at this stage is called uninterrupted engagement.

4. Effortless or spontaneous engagement

On the ninth stage of concentration, **setting in equipoise**, spontaneous engagement is applied. The ninth stage is when

one is able to maintain spontaneous or effortless focus on the object without any interruptions. Thus it is called effortless or spontaneous engagement.

Mental Engagement, laxity and excitement

With the first two levels of concentration, one may have this doubt: don't the faults of laxity and excitement occur on the first two levels as well? If they do then, why isn't the mental engagement on these levels also referred to as interrupted engagement?

We also touched on this in our earlier sessions. At the lower levels the span of concentration is very short, and one does not have the ability to focus on the object for a long period of time. Thus, it is quite irrelevant to talk about the faults of laxity and excitement occurring on the first two stages, because one is not really able to maintain a significant continuous focus on the object. So laxity and excitement are not relevant as faults at the first two stages. Whereas on the next five levels, when one has the ability to continuously focus on the object for a significant length of time, laxity and excitement become specific faults to be overcome. Thus, the engagement that occurs on those levels is specifically referred to as interrupted engagement.

Likewise, there is the doubt as to whether one needs to apply some force or effort in maintaining focus at the third to seventh levels of concentrations. The answer is yes, as one needs to apply some effort in these five stages of the concentration. However, the mental engagement is not referred specifically as forcible engagement, because even though there is some effort applied, the effort is not a significant enough to be called forcible engagement. Thus during the first two stages there are interruptions, but the mental engagement is not referred to as interrupted mental engagement. Likewise with the next five levels, there is some effort applied, however the mental engagement is not referred to as forcible mental engagement.

In relation to the outline that we are covering now 'How to apply mindfulness in general', the auto-commentary reads:

While maintaining that frame of mind, one must be careful not to fall into a state of complete absence of mental engagement, like being unconsciousness or falling asleep. Rather one should maintain the stability of the mind that is free of distractions and safeguard that state of mind by deploying the guard of mindfulness.

Even when the object has been secured with the rope of mindfulness, if that mindfulness lacks intensity, the mind will begin to waver and will be prone to the dangers of becoming distracted with disturbing conceptual thoughts. Thus one must divert the strength of mindfulness towards introspection, just like a guard, always watching out to see if the mind is becoming distracted elsewhere.

Thus it has been mentioned in *The Essence of the Madhyamaka*:

When the elephant-like mind has been tamed,
It must be secured to the pillar-like object,
Bound by rope-like mindfulness,
And periodically apply the hook-like introspection.

Here the analogy used to describe the way the mind is trained is how wild elephants are tamed. It is actually quite good for us to gain a good understanding this analogy. Just as a trainer goes through different stages of taming the elephant, so too one needs to develop the different levels of concentration, in order to tame the mind.

- As specifically mentioned here, first of all the elephant has to be secured to a pillar or a strong post, and the post

is analogous to the object that we focus on, when we subdue our mind.

- Just as the elephant must be secured to the pillar, so too the mind must be tethered to the object, likewise mindfulness acts as the rope that ties our mind to the object.
- In order to fully tame the elephant, the trainer uses a hook to the elephant's ear to ensure that it is submissive and obedient. Thus the hook is an analogy for introspection. As it mentions in the quote we must periodically apply introspection in order for our mind to remain focused on the object.

This analogy is also a very significant analogy in that it illustrates the possibility of taming our mind. Initially a wild elephant may seem difficult to tame. However with the appropriate measures the wild elephant becomes submissive to the master's commands, and the master will then be able to put it to tasks such as carrying wood, and lead it anywhere he wants. Likewise, our mind might seem quite out of control right now, and we may wonder if it can ever be subdued and controlled. However the analogy of taming the wild elephant can encourage us – if a wild beast can become completely controlled and submissive, then our minds can also definitely be subdued.

The auto-commentary further reads:

In brief, there is no other way of developing faultless concentration without applying mindfulness and introspection. Within the two, mindfulness is the principal. As introspection has been explained to be the effect of mindfulness, it will come about naturally once mindfulness is developed. Whilst in meditation, you must stop all discursive thoughts and when you come to clearly identify the mind, just remain focused on that. By applying intense mindfulness, focus single-pointedly on the bare object...

Up until this point the auto-commentary has been referring to applying mindfulness in general. As explained here in the auto-commentary, one tries to apply mindfulness to one's practice of meditation and when mindfulness is developed, introspection develops naturally as a consequence of that mindfulness. Then as the auto-commentary further explains, when one reaches the state when one does not have any discursive thoughts in the mind, one is able to apply the mind to focus on the chosen object which is the mind. Then one must remain focused just on that, and apply intense mindfulness to focus on the bare nature of one's mind. The general application of mindfulness as explained here is a really sound instruction for beginners, thus we need to take this instruction to heart.

3.2. HOW TO DEVELOP MINDFULNESS IN PARTICULAR

According to Kyiwo Tsang's commentary there are five particular modes of maintaining mindfulness.

1. Maintaining mindfulness with new mindfulness
2. Maintaining mindfulness with old mindfulness
3. Maintaining mindfulness with the appropriate measure
4. Maintaining mindfulness with conventionally renowned techniques
5. Maintaining mindfulness with discursive thoughts subsiding naturally

The last line of verse 18 in the root text reads:

Whatever extraneous thoughts arise, either try to recognise them for what they are...

This is explained in the auto-commentary:

... and when any discursive thoughts or disturbing conceptual thoughts occur, recognise them for what they are. Being able to do this depends on applying introspection.

This is the only explanation of that line in the auto-commentary. What is being clearly explained here is that when discursive thoughts arise maintaining one's focus depends on applying introspection. It is introspection that enables the detection of the discursive thoughts as faults as they occur. That will then enable the mind to re-establish its focus on the object.

To understand the significance of the two outlines of applying mindfulness in general and how to develop mindfulness in particular, when one applies one's focus to the point where there are no discursive thoughts and one is able to identify the nature of the mind, then one applies the mindfulness of just maintaining one's focus on the object. When there is no danger of the faults of either excitement or laxity occurring, then one need do nothing but maintain mindfulness on focusing on the object. That refers to the general application of mindfulness. In the event that the faults of the excitement or laxity occur, then a specific type of mindfulness needs to be applied.

In explaining the line from the root text, 'Whatever extraneous thoughts arise, either try to recognise them for what they are', Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains that when either the inner or external distractions occur, the continuity of focus is maintained with the aid of mindfulness and introspection.

It is very significant that the commentary specifies either mindfulness or introspection, because both mindfulness and introspection are states of mind that can also be categorised as conceptual states of mind. But that does not imply that one needs to eradicate mindfulness and introspection. If one were to eradicate them then one would be getting rid of the two main tools for being able to maintain one's focus. Thus Kyiwo Tsang's commentary specifies that when outer obstacles such as distractions and excitement and the inner obstacle of laxity occur, in brief any conceptual thoughts that are not applicable to the meditation technique, one must be able to unmistakably recognise them for what they are – discursive thoughts - and apply the appropriate means to overcome them. So, having identified those discursive thoughts as being obstacles, one applies a new or fresh mindfulness in order to get rid of them.

To further clarify the explanation given here in the commentary, the object of meditation in this instance is our mind, so we focus on none other than the mind itself. Thus, if when focused on the mind other thoughts, even virtuous thoughts such as thinking about the suffering of other sentient beings and thus developing compassion (which is of course a virtuous and good thought) occur, then that would be a distraction. It is not called excitement because, as we recall from earlier explanations, there is a difference between excitement and distraction. Excitement has a particular element of desire, whereas even virtuous thoughts can be a distraction. What is being explained here is when excitement or distractions occur then one must apply a fresh new mindfulness. Even if virtuous thoughts occur, they are not appropriate at this stage. Although they are thoughts that we should generally encourage to develop, at this present time they are not applicable. That's why the commentary specifies that when distraction, excitement, and all other

non-applicable thoughts occur, they must be overcome by mindfulness.

1. Maintaining mindfulness with new mindfulness

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary then clarifies that the term 'maintaining mindfulness with a new mindfulness' that does not indicate that it is a completely fresh and new mindfulness that had not been developed earlier, because mindfulness has to be concomitant with concentration. One of the characteristics of the mind and mental factors is that they are concomitant, i.e. they are together all times. Thus what is being implied here is not that a new and completely fresh mindfulness that did not exist before is being applied, because mindfulness already existed when one developed that focus on the object. However when specific faults occur, the beginner has to re-affirm that mindfulness, and re-assess it to overcome the specific faults that occur. Thus the term new mindfulness is introduced here.

The commentary then further explains that for beginners it is a big hindrance if their focus on the object lapses for even a short time. To overcome that fault it is essential that mindfulness is re-affirmed when the fault occurs. What is being implied here in the commentary is that, as explained in previous sessions, it is important that we try to maintain our focus on the object even if it is just for a short time, rather than being a bit lax and focusing for a while, and then drifting off, and then coming back to focusing on the object again. If one falls into that habit, it can hinder the development of concentration because the mind gets used to just focusing for a short time, and then lapsing, and focusing for a short time, and then lapsing again. Also what is being implied here is that it is important that one tries to really maintain one's focus for whatever duration one has selected. Basically it means being very mindful of keeping one's attention or focus on the object for whatever time one has set to do the meditation.

Then the commentary quotes from the *Lam Rim* text to explain that when gross laxity occurs, it is an obstacle to maintaining one's focus, and so initially one must apply every measure to overcome laxity. Then one re-affirms one's meditation session by focusing on the object. Likewise with excitement: initially even strong excitement may occur and remain for a long time, so one must become a little bit more relaxed in one's practice of meditation, and think about the nature of samsara and so forth to develop a disenchantment with cyclic existence. Those sorts of measures can be helpful to get rid of the excitement. And then when very strong level of excitement is overcome, one can re-assess one's meditation and focus on the object again. This is how one goes about meditation practice according to the explanation in the *Lam Rim* text.

3.2.2. Maintaining mindfulness with old mindfulness

The beginning of verse 19 of the root text states:

Or, like your opponent in a duel, cut them off immediately as soon as they occur.

In relation to this line the auto-commentary reads:

Otherwise use the technique presented in the Vinaya scriptures with this analogy: 'just like a duel between archers and swordsmen'.

We can leave the details of this explanation for our next session.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
© Tara Institute*