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# Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇམ་དགེ་ལུན་ལྷན་ཀློག་པའི་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ལྟར་གྱི་ཆེན་པོ།

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We will spend the first five minutes in meditation. I have already covered the particulars of how to meditate before. *(Pause for meditation)*

The reason why we apply meditation to our daily life is so that we can gain the opportunity to have a more joyous and happy mind. So it would be good to do some meditation regularly.

Buddha Shakyamuni said, 'a subdued mind is a happy mind'. Thus we have to make an attempt to try to subdue our mind. We derive the greatest benefit from the teachings when we apply them in a practical way. As mentioned previously, the act of hearing the teachings needs to be followed by thinking about the teachings. Whatever understanding we gain from the process of thinking we then use for our practise of meditation. As the great Kadampa masters have said, the more extensive our hearing, the more our ability to do analytical thinking will increase. The more we are able to analyse and think about the teachings, the better we will be able to meditate on their meaning. Thus, we can gain the greatest benefit from the teachings if we follow the process of hearing, thinking and meditating in our daily life.

It is, as mentioned previously, really important that we take care of the state of our mind. It is our own responsibility to check on what is happening there, especially when there is distress or unhappiness in the mind. By looking into what is causing that distress, one can begin to detect the kind of attitudes or events that are causing it. Once we recognise the causes, then we will be able to deal with that situation better.

When we recognise that the causes lie within ourselves, then we will see that there is something that we can do about it. By changing our own attitude or state of mind we can begin to release ourselves from that distress. As the great master Atisha said, 'the best instruction is checking one's mind; the best companion is mindfulness and introspection'. Thus, as Atisha indicated, to secure positive attitudes it is essential in our daily life to check our mind using mindfulness and introspection.

It is essential that we really look within ourselves and find the internal factors that cause us distress. We know that we need to look at the internal factors, because we know that our feelings can change over quite short time spans, even within a day. When this happens, it is not as if the external conditions are changing radically. They may be exactly the same from morning till night, yet one can feel very elated to feeling very depressed and distressed several times during the day. The external conditions have not changed radically so what is it that causes one to feel happy at one moment and then unhappy in the next?

This indicates that the causes are internal. Thus it is worthwhile to check and investigate within ourselves. When we investigate we will find that the causes for our distress and unhappiness are due to the lack of positive attitudes within our mind. The lack of mindfulness is what causes a

negative state of mind to arise, and that in turn causes us to feel unhappy. On the other hand, when we are able to subdue our mind, then the opposite statement is true, 'a subdued mind is a happy mind'.

We can experience for ourselves that our mind is in a happy state when it is supported with positive attitudes, and in a distressed state when it is dominated by negative attitudes. That is quite clear. So it is important that we look into every aspect of our being to detect the causes for happiness and the causes for suffering. It is not sufficient to maintain just one point of view and have a very narrow mind. Rather we have to look within ourselves and be open-minded about finding the more subtle causes and conditions for our well-being.

As I regularly emphasise, it is important that we begin each day in a positive frame of mind. We can assist that by making this affirmation: 'when I wake up in the morning, I will do my best to be in a positive frame of mind'. For those who have already become Buddhist, it is good to remember that the first thing in the morning is to make supplications to the Buddha, one's guru or any aspect of the Three Jewels, such as Tara or any particular deity for whom you feel a strong affinity. The supplication can be, 'Please look upon me and bless my mind to ensure that I have a good day; a day that can be of benefit to myself and others. May the time I spent today be a virtuous and happy one.'

Developing that sort of mindset every morning will definitely bless one's mental continuum and definitely have a positive effect. This is something that should be done on a regular basis, over and over again, as the positive effect can only be experienced after some familiarity has been gained with this practice. If we actually adopt that practice of developing a positive state of mind on a daily basis, eventually we will have such a mind on a more regular or permanent basis. Every time we recall the enlightened beings and make that supplication, we receive a spontaneous blessing. Thus it is a really beneficial practice.

For those who are not yet capable of making a connection with the Buddha or making supplications, another way to ensure that one wakes up with a joyous and happy mind can be to just start the morning with some singing. Rather than maintaining a weighed-down mind and feeling bogged down by everything, you could sing, which will make you feel joyous! It is important to cultivate any method that helps make your mind feel more joyous.

In my own case, the first thing that I do in the morning is to recite the verse of cultivating bodhichitta: wishing the bodhichitta mind that has not risen to arise and grow, and that which has arisen not to diminish but to increase further more. With that state of mind I then make supplications to the Buddha and recite the name mantra; make supplications to Lama Tsong Khapa, to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other gurus. Following that I do my other commitments and so forth.

Starting the day in that frame of mind seems to be really beneficial and useful, as it secures a virtuous mind. Most of us here have been exposed to a lot of the points in the teachings such as bodhichitta, emptiness and renunciation. It is important that we maintain and increase our familiarity with these positive states of mind, and these important points of the teachings. The more we become familiar with them, the more they will naturally start to increase in our mind. The positive imprints of recalling those points will further strengthen their imprint in our mind and thus we

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become more and more acquainted with those positive qualities.

We don't need to make any effort to think about negative things. They come to mind very easily and readily. Our only worry is how to get rid of them. Whereas we definitely need to make the effort to develop the positive states of mind. Nevertheless, it is really worthwhile putting the effort into developing and maintaining these positive states of mind because, as mentioned earlier, the more we familiarise ourselves with them, the stronger they become. It is good not to lose the positive qualities that we already have developed.

Having started the day in a positive frame of mind, then before we retire and go to bed, it is good to spend a few minutes recalling what we have done during the day. If we find that we have engaged in negativities then we need to purify them, along with all the negative karmas that we have accumulated in the past.

As we have been introduced to the purification methods, the four opponent powers come to mind; purifying the negative karma in the presence of the gurus and buddhas and all of the enlightened beings. Having done the purification, you lie in bed with the confirmation that the buddhas who are inseparable from our guru, reside just above our pillow. In that way we are reassured that the enlightened beings are right there beside us when we go to sleep. If we can sleep with that sort of attitude in our mind then it is said that our entire sleep will be virtuous. In that way sleep can become a meaningful practice.

Likewise during the day, in activities such as eating we can offer whatever we eat or drink to the buddhas. These are very significant ways for accumulating virtue on a daily basis. One should not underestimate the value of these practices, because it is these small practices that we do on a daily basis that, when accumulated, become great merit. Thus in our everyday life we have these opportunities to collect great virtue.

Confessing and purifying one's negative karma is, as mentioned previously, extremely important and beneficial. One may however have a doubt such as, 'what use is there in purifying negative karmas when I might actually create even more negative karmas soon?' This is the unfortunate reality for us ordinary beings.

However there is no reason at all for us not to make the attempt to purify our negative karma. Unpurified negative karma just increases in strength. Thus the attitude, 'as I might be creating negative karma again, there is no point in purifying it' is really losing a great opportunity to lessen the negative karmic imprints in our mind. As we are ordinary beings we might find ourselves creating negative karmas again, but it is still essential to purify our negative karmas now. As mentioned in the teachings, 'the one quality a negative karma has is that it can be purified'. This shows the relevance of purification practices.

Having doubts about the value of purifying negative karma, along the lines of 'I'm going to create negative karma again anyway so there's no point in purifying negative karma', indicates that one has not really developed a strong conviction in karma yet. If we have taken the teachings of karma to heart, then we could not leave the negative karma within us as it is. We will definitely feel compelled to purify the negative karma, because we know that every karma, big or small, has a natural consequence. Thus an accumulation of small negative karma, if not purified, is said to become a

negative karma for us to be re-born in the lower realms. When we really consider its grave negative consequences, we will not be able to just casually neglect purifying our negative karma, and we will definitely take purifying negative karma to heart. Thus an understanding of karma is essential for us in our practice. We can see that understanding and abiding by the law of karma in every aspect of our practice is absolutely essential, and we must take this to heart.

Developing a faith and conviction in karma is an impetus for us to really take practising the Dharma seriously. What does 'developing a faith and conviction in karma' mean? It means not leaving what one has heard about karma as mere words. It is easy to say 'if you create positive karma, you will reap positive effects, and if you create negative karma you will experience negative effects'. But leaving it as a mere words, and making no effort to prevent ourselves from creating negative karma, or not purifying the negative karma that we have already created, shows that we have not really developed a strong conviction and faith in karma yet. Even though we are able to repeat those words, they haven't really moved our mind.

Thus it is essential to really think about karma over and over again, contemplating its natural consequences – the cause and effect aspect of karma. The more we deepen our understanding of karma, the more our faith and conviction in karma will begin to increase. Then we will be naturally compelled to create positive karma for no other reason than because we want to experience happiness for ourselves.

When we ask the question, 'Do I want to be happy?', our answer is definitely yes. When we ask the question, 'Do I want to avoid suffering?', the answer will definitely be 'Yes I want to avoid suffering'. 'Do I want to experience suffering?' No. Thus, for the very reason of wanting to experience happiness and avoid any kind of suffering, we need to create the causes for our own happiness. As the Buddha explained, 'the cause for happiness is accumulating virtue; to avoid suffering one needs to abandon creating negative karma'. We also need to purify the negative karma that we have already created by using the methods of purification. It is said that a person naturally becomes a very good and honest person, just by virtue of abiding the law of karma.

Again, the Buddha's words are quite simple, and we might have a general understanding that positive karma or positive actions are the cause for happiness, and negative karma are the cause for suffering. When we really think about it these words are actually very profound. They are so profound that when we really go into the explanation of how negative actions become a cause for suffering and positive actions become a cause for happiness, it actually becomes quite difficult for us to fully comprehend. That is because of the profound nature of karma. Thus accepting it fully might initially be a bit difficult.

However we can rely upon aspects of the Buddha's teachings that we can verify for ourselves, from which we can experience positive results. One of these is the saying 'a subdued mind is a happy mind'. From our limited experience, we know that when we actually sit down and attempt to do a proper meditation, we experience an immediate relief from distress and mental pain, and we get a joyful happy feeling in our mind. We can use that small experience to affirm the Buddha's words, 'a subdued mind brings happiness'; it really becomes true since we can verify it from our own experience.

Likewise with the Buddha's teachings about karma - positive actions bringing positive results and negative actions bringing negative results - must also be true. By relying on the Buddha's words that ring true to us from our experience, we can begin to use inference to see that the other points of the Buddha's teachings, even though quite profound and difficult for us to completely understand right now, must also be true. We reason in that way to validate the Buddha as a valid omniscient being. When we are able to validate the Buddha as an omniscient being, then his teachings can also be taken to heart, even though we cannot completely understand and comprehend them right now. When we accept the Buddha as a valid being, then we can accept his teaching as being valid as well.

We can use reasoning to validate the Buddha's teachings and to understand the more profound levels of his teachings. Using the logic of debate as in 'Take the subject sound: it is not permanent, because it is produced', then when the reasons for sound being impermanent are presented, the wrong conception of sound being permanent is eliminated. When sound is explained as being an entity that is impermanent, then the wrong conception that sound is permanent is definitely eliminated from our mind. When the reasons why the self lacks inherent existence are presented, and we think about those reasons, then the strong conception of the self as existing inherently can be eliminated from our mind. That is something that can come about through reasoning. So with those reasonings we can confirm the Buddha's teachings, and thus develop more faith and conviction in the Buddha himself. This, of course, is the way an intelligent person develops faith.

There is also the type of faith that can be called blind faith, which is the type of faith developed, for example, just from what one has been told. Some say that blind faith in the Buddha and his teachings enables one to gain quicker results, because one doesn't reason about the validity of the Buddha and his teachings. Whereas those who develop the intelligent type of faith through reasoning can take much longer time to achieve their results.

An example of the way blind faith works, is the blind beggar in Sera who contracted leprosy. By reciting OM MANI PADME HUM every day he came to the point of being able to see again. He claimed, 'I couldn't see before, but having recited all these mantras, I can now see again'. His Holiness the Dalai Lama spoke recently in his teachings in India about the value of blind faith. He said that the faith that people have in God, for example, is actually very useful, as it makes their life very meaningful and can bring a lot of solace. Because of that strong faith they are likely to abide by God's commands. That kind of blind faith, His Holiness stressed, is not to be underestimated, as it can be of great value.

However the teachings explain that the faith that is acquired through intelligence or through reasoning is a firmer type of faith, even though it may take longer to generate. As it is developed through reasoning it becomes a personal experience, where one validates it through one's experiences. That type of faith is a really indestructible faith, because it is validated through one's own direct cognition. However do not underestimate the value of the blind faith, which is for many a way to make a strong connection with an entity such as God, and which helps them to shape their life. I've heard of instances of people who strongly believe in God and who as a result, don't have any fear of death. They know that God will take care of them, and they have no

hesitation about dying. This goes to show that blind faith does help the mind.

According to the explanation in the teachings, an example of the faith developed through intelligence is faith in the four noble truths. For example, with respect to the truth of suffering, first of all one contemplates suffering; because it is unwanted, one then goes further into looking into how suffering comes about. Can suffering be eliminated? Can one stop suffering? Then as one looks further and reasons whether or not the suffering has causes, one comes to understand that suffering does have causes. It is the karma, one's own actions, that cause suffering. But where do those actions come from? How do the actions that cause suffering come about? Then one goes further into understanding that even karma has causes, which are the delusions. So the delusions cause negative karma. Where do the delusions come from? One comes to realise that the main root of all the various delusions is grasping at an inherently existent self. It is that grasping at the self that is the main cause for all of our unwanted suffering.

When one develops that sort of conviction and understanding one then asks if grasping at the self can be overcome? At that point one comes to realise that yes, grasping to the self can be overcome when one gains the understanding of the exact opposite, which is selflessness or emptiness. Thus one strives to gain the realisation of emptiness.

In relation to grasping at the self, one first comes to understand that it is actually just a misconception. So because grasping at the self is based on a misconception, it does not have any valid basis to support it, and is therefore unsustainable. Because it is unsustainable it can actually be overcome, as there is no real valid basis to retain that misconception. That which opposes that misconception is the understanding of the reality of the lack of a truly inherently existent self. Thus that understanding of the lack of an inherently existent self becomes the antidote for overcoming that misconception.

When one reaches that point of understanding through logic and reasoning, then it becomes very firm and stable in one's mind. That is because it is no longer a mere conception, but actually based on sound reasoning. Thus, that type of developed faith becomes very firm and stable. This of course is just a brief account of the reasoning to overcome the causes of suffering. I have explained it more elaborately in other sessions, and so it is good for you to become more familiar with those reasonings.

### *The particular modes of maintaining mindfulness (cont.)*

In relation to Kyiwo Tsang's commentary, we are at the second sub-division. In our last session we covered the first mode, which is maintaining mindfulness with new mindfulness.

## **2. Maintaining mindfulness with old mindfulness**

The relevant lines from verse 19 of the root text are:

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

With reference to these two lines the auto-commentary states:

Likewise the Vinaya scriptures have emphasised the technique with the analogy: 'just like a duel between archers and swordsmen'. Just as it has been explained, as soon as the disturbing conceptual thoughts arise, you must apply intense mindfulness and introspection, thus

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by immediately applying the technique, you prevent the mind from becoming distracted.

The root text commences with the word 'or', and Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains why that word is placed there. It is indicating that there is a choice – either this or that. In this case when the root text presents these techniques, it is not as if you have to follow them in a sequence, but rather that you have a choice. You use whatever technique works best at a particular time. Then again, the commentary further clarifies that some might need the techniques that are presented here.

The text then further explains the analogy of a duel between an archer and a swordsman. One of the duellists was a very skilled swordsman who, when attacked by an archer was able to defend himself by blocking all of the arrows that were shot at him, until at last the archer had only one arrow left. The archer was feeling quite distraught by the fact that with only one arrow left, he had to be careful if he was to avoid losing. Then his wife said, 'Don't shoot that arrow yet. Wait until the swordsman can see me, and then shoot'. So the wife dressed in her best and most beautiful clothes and ornaments, and walked towards the swordsman and sat where he could clearly see her. When the swordsman saw the wife and was distracted, the archer took aim and fired off his last arrow. Because of his attachment to the beautiful lady the swordsman's mindfulness lapsed and he was not able to use his sword as well as he normally would, so then the archer released his arrow it hit the swordsman. As he lay dying, the swordsman said, 'I haven't been killed by the arrow but by my lack of mindfulness and introspection. Therefore anyone with some intelligence, you must definitely maintain mindfulness and introspection'.

Not blaming the archer or the arrow for causing his death, but rather the lapse of mindfulness and introspection is a very sound and profound piece of advice. The archer blamed his impending death on internal causes rather than external causes and conditions. Thus the advice that he was giving is that at all costs one must always maintain a sense of mindfulness and introspection.

As the commentary further mentions, when the swordsman was applying his mindfulness and introspection to its maximum capacity, he had the skill to block arrows coming from all ten directions. His life was not in danger for as long as he maintained that mindfulness and introspection. From this analogy, one learns that whenever conceptual thoughts arise from external appearances, we must completely block them out and overcome them without dwelling on them, just as the swordsman blocked the arrows.

As this commentary further explains, one needs to be able to distinguish between concentration and the conceptual thoughts that arise, and then maintain only the concentration, not allowing the conceptual thoughts to distract oneself at any time. That concentration should be maintained with the power of mindfulness from the beginning of the session, all the way through to the end. The mindfulness that is maintained throughout session is called old mindfulness. Thus one applies old mindfulness to overcome all conceptual thoughts.

The commentary further explains that this old mindfulness is similar to the ninth stage of the concentration. This point is made with a quote from the *Great Treatise* or *Lam Rim Chen Mo*. 'When applying mindfulness, one initially applies a firm focus upon the object and maintains that without having to apply a separate mindfulness'. Maintaining that intensity of

focus from the very start is a very profound instruction for developing concentration.

The text that we are studying now will take some time to complete, perhaps a few months. But in order to prepare yourselves, the next text that I intend to teach will be *Precious Garland*, which is a very significant and good text as it encompasses both the view and the practice. I have heard that there is quite a good translation. There are not that many commentaries, just the one Tibetan commentary, and an Indian commentary, which does not have very clear explanations. When we cover that text we will be covering every aspect of the path, as it encompasses a lot of details of the practice and the views contained in the teachings. So it really is a very significant text to study. As a point of comparison, Aryadeva's text has four hundred verses, and *Precious Garland* has five hundred verses.

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