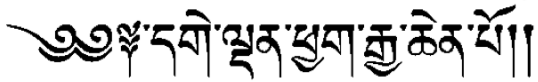

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

26 May 2009

The motivation for our practice would be just as we have recited in the refuge and bodhichitta prayer.

Of course the motivation would not be active in our mind when we are engaged in the practice of meditating single-pointedly on the object. However by setting our motivation prior to our practice it is said that the meditation practice will then be imbued with the motivation that was generated earlier.

The 'refuge' in the taking refuge and generating bodhichitta prayer needs to be understood as a Mahayana refuge, a Great Vehicle refuge. Of course the qualities of the Buddha would be the same whatever the vehicle, however when it comes to the Dharma it has to be understood that the Dharma refers particularly to the Mahayana Dharma, which means the cessation and the path within the mental continuum of a Mahayana arya being, and the Sangha refers to the Mahayana arya being.

Of course we have presented the actual technique of meditation many times previously, so we will try to practise in accordance to the earlier explanations for the next five minutes. *(pause for meditation)*

You can come out of your samadhi now.

Only a buddha is capable of giving teachings while being in meditative equipoise or samadhi. For ordinary beings, giving teachings and engaging in other virtuous deeds are activities that are done in a post-meditative state. However an enlightened being is able to engage in those activities whilst in a meditative state, so for them the states of meditative equipoise and post-meditative equipoise are synonymous.

3.2. MAINTAINING MINDFULNESS IN PARTICULAR (CONT.)

Of the five subdivisions of the particular modes of maintaining mindfulness we covered the third, maintaining mindfulness by applying the appropriate measures, in our last session. We went into an extensive explanation of what the appropriate measure implies, and to recap, when focusing on the object with mindfulness and introspection the appropriate measure is to be found when the focus is neither too tight nor too loose.

One finds that appropriate measure as a result of experience in the practice of meditation, where one comes to the point of recognising, 'If I apply my focus too tightly then that will cause excitement to occur, and if it is too loose then that will cause laxity'. So one should find the right measure, where the focus is not too tight and, at the same time, not too loose. Ideally one should adopt the appropriate measure right at the beginning of the meditation session. Then when one engages in the practice of meditation it will not be the case of being a little bit relaxed in the beginning and then having to tighten the focus later, or where the focus is too tight in the beginning then relaxed later. Rather, whatever the level of

one's ability, the right measure should be maintained throughout the session.

It is said that if the focus is too loose then that will cause laxity to occur. I would posit that subtle laxity is actually a concentration. The reason why one can assume this is because the teachings present laxity as being either ethically neutral, or virtuous. Thus a virtuous laxity would be subtle laxity, because it is a concentration that is actually a virtuous state of mind, whereas we would call a laxity that is influenced by the delusions an ethically neutral laxity. I think we have to posit an ethically neutral laxity as gross laxity.

At more advanced levels of practice in developing single-pointed concentration there is, as mentioned previously, a great danger of mistaking subtle laxity for correct concentration. When one falls into the habit of focussing on the object while in a state of subtle laxity then, because it is a level of concentration, there is the danger of not being able to recognise it as laxity. One might be able to focus quite well on the object to the point where even the breath can cease, however if one fails to recognise the existence of subtle laxity it will be a hindrance to developing actual calm abiding in the long run.

4. Maintaining mindfulness with conventionally renowned techniques

The corresponding lines from the root text are:

21. *In this type of meditation whenever extraneous thoughts arise in your mind, if you observe their nature long enough, you will find that they all pass and disappear. You are then left with an awareness of the clear state of your mind in its stark bareness. Moreover, whenever [you are in this meditational state free of mental wandering and] you examine your mind intensely [asking yourself, 'What is my mind?'], its bare clarity appears vividly, unobstructed by thought-coverings.*
22. *Seeing no basic difference between these two methods of settling the mind is known to the meditators as mixing the two approaches.*

Here 'known' refers to being renowned or known by other meditators.

The auto-commentary explains the meaning of the above verse further:

At that time one must try to overcome the disturbing conceptual thoughts, and whenever a disturbing thought does occur, one observes the very nature of that thought; whereby the disturbing thought will naturally fade away and will be replaced with a vacuity. Likewise when the mind is stable with a focused attention, if examined, the clear state of one's mind will appear in its stark bareness. This state of mind where no distinction is seen between the past and future is referred to as the mixing of the settled and moving mind, which is renowned amongst the great meditators of the past.

As Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains, when one actually looks into the nature of the discursive thoughts that arise in the mind, they will naturally fade away by virtue of the very attempt of looking into their nature, and the stark bareness of the mind will be apparent again.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary points out that both the root text and the auto-commentary refer to these techniques as being renowned or known. Normally referring to something as 'being known' by other meditators has a connotation of

being contradictory to one's own system. Even though the auto-commentary does not really present 'being known' in a negative way, one may still have a doubt. Nevertheless Kyiwo Tsang's commentary says that when looking into it further, it becomes clearer that this is a sound technique. Even though 'renowned by others' can have a negative connotation, in this case when the scholars look into the validity of this technique, it is found in fact to be a sound technique.

The auto-commentary explains that when one focuses on an object and is able to maintain that focus without any disturbance, then that refers to the settled state of mind, and that a moving mind refers to the state when discursive thoughts arise and move the mind away from its focus on the object. However when one recognises and actually examines the discursive thoughts themselves, then the focus on the object is re-established. This technique of examining the nature of the discursive thoughts in order to bring back the focus on the object is called mixing the settled and moving mind. Thus the combination of mixing the settled mind and the moving mind is a technique for re-establishing focus on the object.

Mixing the settled and moving mind may sound contradictory, but the implication of mixing, as the commentary explains, is that the mind was settled before the discursive thoughts arose to disturb the focus of the mind. Then the mind is re-settled after discursive thoughts have been recognised for what they are. So, 'mixing' refers to relating the initial settled and focused mind to the mind that has been re-settled after the discursive thoughts have subsided.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary goes on to further explain the ultimate implication of the mixing of the settled and moving mind. Ultimately the technique of mixing the settled and moving mind refers to the union of calm abiding and special insight. The commentary gives the analogy of the way a small fish moving at the bottom of the pond does not disturb the surface of the water. That unstirred water is an analogy for calm abiding, and the small fish moving in the pond is an analogy for penetrative or special insight. Just as in the analogy, when calm abiding has been obtained and then combined with special insight, the meditator is able to analyse the object of focus without the mind wavering from single-pointed concentration on the object. The commentary goes on to further explain that the past great Indian masters as well as contemporary masters such as Lama Tsong Khapa attest to this. This implies that the great masters did not diverge from the view that the mixing of the settled and moving mind is understood to mean the union of calm abiding and special insight.

The commentary goes on to explain that whenever one looks into the nature of the discursive thoughts that arise, one comes to recognise that these discursive thoughts are not a completely separate entity, but rather that they have arisen from the mind itself. That recognition alone helps to overcome the disturbance of the discursive thoughts.

Because the technique of mixing the settled and moving mind is known to a vast majority of meditators it is referred to here as a 'conventionally renowned technique'.

As mentioned previously, and as will be mentioned more specifically later on, one must understand the type of discursive thoughts that one needs to overcome during single-pointed concentration. As mindfulness and introspection are mental states other than concentration, they are also discursive thoughts, so getting rid of all

discursive thoughts would imply getting rid of mindfulness and introspection as well. However, as mentioned previously, mindfulness and introspection are an aid rather than a hindrance to developing concentration, so they are not the sort of discursive thoughts that one needs to get rid of. It is the discursive thoughts that hinder and obstruct single-pointed concentration that need to be overcome.

By actually trying to understand what the hindering discursive thoughts are, examining them, and seeing their nature, one comes to realise that they are actually a part of the mind and not completely separate from the mind. Thus because they arise from the mind, discursive thoughts can merge back into the mind. The analogy of the sky and the clouds can be used here: even though clouds may temporarily obstruct the clarity of the sky, they can also be absorbed back into the sky because they have arisen from within the sky. No other measure needs to be taken apart from allowing the clouds just dissolve naturally back into the sky. Likewise when one actually recognises discursive thoughts as being a part of the mind then they can be removed by merely recognising that and, without using too much force, or employing additional techniques, just allowing them to subside. Once the thoughts have subsided naturally, we then reapply our focus back onto the object by simply reminding ourselves to do so.

With this technique it is really important to recognise the discursive thoughts as being a part of the mind and not a separate entity. Otherwise we might pay too much attention and be too disturbed by them. We might have all kinds of superstitious ideas believing that we are helpless in overcoming the discursive thoughts. If we pay too much attention to them then our meditation will be compromised, and we will be overwhelmed by the discursive thoughts. Recognising discursive thoughts as being part of our own mind will help us to not be overwhelmed by them.

We can also use this understanding with other negative states of mind such as anger. Some techniques presented in the teachings imply that when one practises patience it is useful at times to actually generate a strong emotion of anger. Then one can actually see anger for what it is. So in order to practise patience one purposely generates strong anger and then examines it. What is this anger? Where does it come from? Is it an entity completely separate from my own mind or does it arise from within my own mind? Even though it arises in my mind is it something useful? Are there advantages in maintaining this state of mind? While investigating in this way the anger will naturally subside. When one begins to recognise it as being an unhealthy or unwanted state of mind it naturally subsides. This is the same technique that we use to get rid of the discursive states of mind when focusing on the object.

A very intense anger is like fire. The technique is to induce anger as intense as fire. When the anger is really intense ask: What does it do? Is it a beneficial state of mind or is it harmful? If the anger seems to subside before one has got the point then make it arise again. If the state of mind being investigated is not generated in one's mind one does not know what one is actually investigating. Thus, generating intense anger, for the purpose of overcoming anger, becomes part of the technique for developing patience.

It is good to periodically refer to the earlier presentations on maintaining mindfulness. As you recall there are the two main categories: maintaining mindfulness in general and the particular modes of maintaining mindfulness. We went into quite a bit of detail about the techniques of maintaining

mindfulness in general, and then under the heading of the particular modes of mindfulness we covered the subdivisions of maintaining mindfulness with a new mindfulness, maintaining mindfulness with old mindfulness, maintaining mindfulness by applying the appropriate measures. Now we have just explained, maintaining mindfulness with conventionally renowned techniques. So, if you can try to get a really sound understanding of these techniques and how they are actually used, that will definitely help us. These techniques are the means for perfecting our practice of meditation and developing concentration.

5. Maintaining mindfulness by allowing the discursive thoughts to subside naturally

22. *...Another method of settling the mind is not to block whatever extraneous thoughts arise, but to concentrate on the nature of the train of thought that has arisen and try to comprehend it.*
23. *What happens is like the example of a caged pigeon released from a ship in mid-ocean. As the scriptural reference states, 'A bird that has flown from a ship in mid-ocean, after flying here and there must inevitably land back on the ship from which it left'.*

The auto-commentary states

Alternatively you may adopt the following method for maintaining a settled mind: Whenever a conceptual thought arises and your mind wavers, do not refrain from it but just observe the distracted thought for what it is. Having placed one's attention on the distraction, when the distracted thought subsides and the mind reasserts its attention on the object, it is likened to releasing a bird from a ship in the ocean that has been long in captive. As the Doha says:

It is like a crow that flies from a ship,
Wandering off in all directions but then settling back
on the ship again.

The analogy used here is the crow that flies from a ship wandering off in all directions before settling back on the ship again. This refers to the ancient practice of taking a caged pigeon on board ships as a means of detecting dangerous creatures such as crocodiles and so forth, and also to detect the presence of nearby land. If, when the pigeon was released it couldn't find land, or if there were dangerous animals there, it would return to the ship. The return of the pigeon indicated to the sailors that there was no land in the vicinity, or that there were dangerous creatures nearby.

Similarly discursive thoughts arise from the mind. But one does not pay attention to them and just absorbs their nature. Since there is nowhere for them to go except back to the mind they will eventually subside. Just as they arise from the mind so they subside back into the mind. This is how the analogy is to be understood - just allow the discursive thoughts to subside back into the mind.

The auto-commentary further reads:

One must practise accordingly as explained with this analogy. Again Gonpo mentions:
By not seeing faults in the conceptual mind,
And not meditating for the sake on non-conceptuality,
By posting the guard [of introspection], place one's mind in its natural state,
One's meditation will then serve its purpose to achieve calm abiding.

In this quote from Geshe Gonpo 'not seeing the faults in the conceptual mind' refers to not paying too much attention to the conceptual thoughts when they arise. In other words, by trying to employ specific methods and techniques to overcome them, you may end up not actually meditating. 'For the sake of non-conceptuality' means that by not employing specific techniques or being too concerned when the conceptual thoughts arise, but rather just maintaining one's focus with introspection, one's mindfulness on the object will be maintained. Just placing one's mind in a natural state of focus on the object will allow the discursive or conceptual thoughts to naturally subside. In that way one's meditation will serve the purpose of achieving calm abiding.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary then summarises the main point of this technique, which is that by applying skilful methods one will be able to overcome the discursive thoughts in a natural way. That skilful technique is similar to the earlier technique of just observing the discursive thoughts, recognising them for what they are, not paying specific attention to them, and not applying specific measures to overcome them. When that skilful method is applied, then that technique is referred to as maintaining mindfulness by allowing the discursive thoughts to subside naturally.

The auto-commentary further explains this in the following lines:

Furthermore the king of instructions for the trainees of this time is to use the six methods of settling the mind. If asked what they are? It is as follows:
Place it like the sun unobstructed by clouds,
Place it like the great garuda who glides effortlessly
through the sky,
Place it like a great ship on the ocean,
Place it like a toddler who looks in awe at a temple,
Place it like the flight of a bird in the sky,
Place it like cotton-wool gently descending,
With these methods of placing the mind,
The yogi will surely achieve great meaning.

Both Kyiwo Tsang's commentary and the auto-commentary make the same points. 'The king of instructions for the trainees of this time' refers to the practitioners at this time who use six methods for settling the mind, which are then described in more detail:

To explain the **first**: for example just as the sun, which is unobstructed by clouds is extremely bright and clear, similarly the clear light nature of mind must be free from conceptual attributes and unobstructed by laxity or excitement.

Just as the sun that is unobstructed by clouds is extremely bright and clear, so too the clear light nature of the mind must be free from conceptual attributes and unobstructed by laxity and excitement. Then the auto-commentary explains the second method:

The **second** is, for example, when a garuda soars through the sky, it glides naturally without having to exert too much effort such as flapping the wings. Similarly, when placing the mind, it must be done so without being too tight or too loose, i.e. tighten the depth with intense clarity, while loosening the surface without lapsing from mindfulness and introspection.

This analogy uses the mythological garuda, but it could refer to any bird that can soar through the sky. When they reach a certain height they can just naturally glide through the air. Even though they are gliding they still have to use a bit of

effort to hold out their wings. So there is a balance between the seemingly effortless gliding and the effort involved in holding out their wings. This analogy refers to focusing on the object, tightening the depth with intense clarity, while loosening the surface without lapsing from mindfulness and introspection. As mentioned previously, in order to develop concentration that intensity and clarity must be maintained, however one actually loosens it to the point where it is not too tight, while at the same time maintaining mindfulness and introspection.

We have covered these points earlier, and this particular method is once again emphasising the point of needing to find that right measure of not being too tight or too relaxed, while never lapsing from the clarity in the focus on the object. Allowing the clarity to lapse is detrimental to developing concentration, so clarity has to be maintained at all times. Thus 'loosening' here must not be understood as loosening or lapsing from the clarity that must be maintained at every level.

To explain the **third** method the commentary then reads

For example just as the surface of the ocean may be slightly affected with a gust of wind, the stability of a ship in the ocean is not affected.

Even though the analogy refers to a ship it is actually referring to the depth of the ocean not being disturbed, even though there may be waves on the surface.

As the auto-commentary further reads

Similarly, when the mind is placed upon the object, it must be placed so that it is not disturbed by gross conceptual thoughts even though it may slightly be disturbed by subtle conceptual thoughts.

In the process of developing concentration one's focus must be such that even though it may be disturbed by subtle conceptual thoughts, no gross conceptual thoughts will be allowed to disturb that focus. Now in a broader sense there is of course a distinction between laxity and subtle laxity in relation to developing concentration. As explained in a previous session, we can subdue our mind with the three higher trainings: the training of morality, the training of concentration and the training of wisdom.

There are external and internal disturbing thoughts, and it is the *external disturbing thoughts* that are overcome by the training of *morality*.

There are gross and subtle internal disturbances. In terms of the subduing the mind with the three higher trainings the gross disturbing states of mind are *gross and subtle laxity*, which are overcome by the training of *concentration*.

'Subtle disturbing thoughts' refers to the *ignorance of grasping at true existence*, which is overcome by the training of higher *wisdom*.

My earlier presentation refers to subduing the mind from external gross conceptual disturbances all the way through to overcoming inner gross and inner subtle disturbances. However in the context here, we can see that it refers specifically to developing concentration, so we need to understand that subtle conceptual thoughts refers to subtle laxity.

We can cover the six methods briefly now, and go into more detail later.

The **fourth** method as presented in the auto-commentary is:

For example when a toddler looks at a temple, though it does not focus on the finer details of the craftsmanship, it is in awe with the general beauty of

the temple. Similarly, when placing the mind, whatever attractive or unattractive objects may appear to the five senses, without analysing or generating attachment or aversion the attention must be placed single pointedly on the object of meditation alone.

Here the analogy is of a toddler who stares at a grand temple in awe of its beauty, but not absorbing the finer details of the craftsmanship. Likewise, when focusing on the object, one just maintains focus on the object, without engaging in analysing the disturbing thoughts and so forth.

This method relates particularly to beginners who are learning to develop concentration, whereas the earlier techniques refer particularly to the first and second stages of the nine stages of concentration.

As this is a technique particularly suited to beginners we can easily relate to it. Rather than being concerned about analysing attachment and the other delusions that arise in the mind, we disregard those distractions and periodically bring our focus back onto the object. That is what we initially attempt to do in order to maintain some stability of focus on the object.

Then the auto-commentary reads:

The **fifth**, is for example, when a bird flies through the sky, there is no trace left behind. Similarly, whatever pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings may be experienced, one must not allow the mind to be influenced by attachment, anger or ignorance and place the mind only on the object.

Here the analogy is quite vivid and clear. When a bird flies in the sky it is obvious to us that it leaves no trace behind it. With respect to the delusions, normally when we meet with a pleasant object attachment immediately follows, and when we encounter an unpleasant object then we are immediately influenced by the anger that arises, and feelings of indifference can cause ignorance to increase in our mind.

What is being explained here is that one must not allow the mind to be influenced by these emotions or negative states of mind. Rather than being concerned with the particular states of mind that arise, one should apply effort to maintain focus on the object.

From this explanation we can also derive an understanding of how we need to be free from the worldly dharmas. When we meet with a pleasant object, or a pleasant situation, we feel joyful and happy; when an unpleasant situation occurs we become upset about that. So the fact that we are joyful and happy when meeting with a pleasant situation, or angry and unhappy when meeting with an unpleasant situation, shows us that it is actually the attitudes that arise in our mind that are the worldly dharmas.

It is important to understand that the joyful or happy situation itself is not a worldly dharma. If that were so then arya beings, who experience very pleasant situations, would be indulging in worldly dharmas. That is of course not the case as arya beings have overcome the worldly dharmas. It is not the pleasant situation that is a worldly dharma, but the attitudes that arise - joy and happiness from pleasant situation and unhappiness in unpleasant situations. It is those emotions or feelings that are referred to as worldly dharmas.

Thus, as explained in the teachings, one must try to overcome those states of mind, which is done by reversing our attitudes to pleasant and unpleasant situations, so that we are unhappy when a pleasant situation occurs, and joyful

and happy when an unpleasant situation arises. As absurd as it may initially sound for an ordinary person, when one actually looks into it from a practice point of view, there is actually great meaning to thinking in this way.

As explained previously, when we actually understand that a pleasant situation uses up good karma, we will of course be unhappy about that. Unpleasant situations on the other hand only occur because of one's previous negative karma. The more unpleasantness one experiences the more negative karma is being used up, which is actually something to be joyful about. The more we experience unpleasant situations the quicker we exhaust our negative karma. So we can be joyful about experiencing unpleasant situations.

Another way of looking at it is that pleasant situations will be a cause for attachment to increase. As attachment is a hindrance to our practices, that is something that we have to overcome. Likewise unpleasant situations could cause anger to arise, so rather than feeling angry, embrace the unpleasant situation and try to feel joyful about it. That prevents anger from arising in the mind. This is how one understands the method of overcoming the worldly dharmas.

We can leave the sixth technique for our next session. This method is more related to the near attainment of calm abiding. It would be good for you to revise these techniques, and refer to the text and try to become more familiar with it. These are quite important techniques.

The prayer to the lineage gurus of the Mahamudra has been distributed. My intention was that we should recite this prayer once in a while. Also it is good to recite it when you are trying to do your practice. It is specifically mentioned that without the blessings of the guru we cannot develop realisations. The analogy used to explain the need for the guru's blessings is that even though the sun may be extremely bright and very strong, the rays by themselves are not sufficient to create fire. For that we need a magnifying glass to concentrate the sun's rays. In this analogy the magnifying glass is like the blessings of the gurus, which are needed in order for us to gain realisations. That's why doing the supplication to the lineage gurus is an important element of our practice.

The extent of reverence for our teachers can be seen in India, where students pay great respect to the teachers sometimes even touching their feet. That is the extent of the respect shown to the gurus. Of course I'm not implying that you need to do that to me. In normal circumstances I prefer not too much respect because it prevents me from being myself whenever I go around. I find that there is more freedom to move and go about naturally if there is not too much respect. In reality, having very high status is not really a pleasant situation to be in. The singer Kylie Minogue once mentioned in an interview that it is not that much fun to be famous, because you can't move around easily and it is not really a very comfortable situation to be in. So we can consider ourselves to be in a good and appropriate position to be happy.

An indication of the way in which high status is not really a pleasant situation is that as soon as somebody is elected as Prime Minister you can see that their hair starts to go white very quickly. That is because there are a lot of worries and concerns with tackling the opposition brings them a lot of worry. It is good for us to prepare ourselves since we never know what status we may rise to.

The main point that I stress regularly is to try to maintain a joyous happy mind. That is what is important in our life. With a happy state of mind, it is quite irrelevant whether one is of high or low status. If one's mind is not happy then high status will not help at all, whereas if one's mind is happy, it doesn't make much difference if one is of lower status, as one's mind is joyous and happy anyway. That seems to be the main thing.

In the ordeal of escaping from Tibet I met the throne holder of the Gelugpa tradition, the Ganden Tipa, which is the highest status in the Gelugpa tradition. He confided in me that on reaching high status even normal food was not really enjoyable any more. He explained that previously, when he was quite a simple monk there were times when he would have to make *tug pa*, a soup with dumplings in it, with the hide that was used to store butter. Traditionally butter is put in a hide, which is later cut up and made into *tug pa*. He commented that even though as the Ganden Tipa he was offered a lot of delicious foods, it was not as tasty as the hide *tug pa* that he had enjoyed before. So he requested others to make hide *tug pa*, but even that didn't taste as nice as he remembered.

*Transcribed from tape by Jenny Brooks
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version*

© **Tara Institute**