
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual let us spend a few minutes in meditation. (*Pause for meditation.*)

Just as we generated the positive motivation while reciting the refuge and bodhichitta prayer earlier, it would be good to generate a good motivation before doing our daily practices. Then our meditation will be very meaningful even it is for only a short time. With a proper motivation one ensures that meditation practice is a genuine practice of Dharma, and specifically a Mahayana practice. With the right motivation, even a short time in meditation will be highly meaningful.

Since we naturally wish for a good and grand result we need to apply a good and grand motivation as a cause, for we will not achieve any results without the appropriate causes.

We cannot underestimate the need to engage in practice, since just wishing for great results, or waiting for them to happen doesn't seem to be sufficient for gaining any realisations. In our daily practice it would be really good for us to pay attention to developing a sense of loving compassion within our heart. Imbuing our practice with love and compassion makes it a highly meaningful practice. In particular it is a means of counteracting the anger that seems to arise so very readily and easily in our everyday life. That is because there are so many opportunities for anger to arise in our daily life. However the teachings present anger as a very destructive energy that destroys our merit. So if we don't pay attention to completing a good sound practice with the right motivation, then all our merits from that practice can be destroyed when anger arises. The more we become familiar with developing love and compassion, the more it will help to reduce the intensity of anger that arises in our daily life.

Paying attention to the essential points of the practice is also the means for us to subdue our own mind, which then serves the purpose of our practice. Having the right motivation that is imbued with love and compassion is not an obscure piece of advice - we have learned about it, and we know the implications. As mentioned in the teachings on developing bodhichitta, love is defined very clearly as a sense of wishing others to have happiness, while compassion is wishing others to be free from all suffering. We can easily develop these attitudes in our daily life if we actually set our mind to it.

Developing love and compassion is also the greatest remedy for overcoming the self-centred and self-cherishing mind. As we look into our lives we find that the stronger that self-centredness the more problems we seem to experience. Actually, if we look into it, the source of all our problems and difficulties really comes down to

having a self-cherishing mind. The self-cherishing mind is the root of all the concerns and problems of this life. Thus developing a sense of love and compassion is the best remedy for overcoming the main source of all our problems.

It is really a matter of actually incorporating the teachings into our practice. They won't come about naturally if we don't really make some attempt to cultivate these attitudes. You are already familiar with the techniques, so what I am trying to do is to remind you to put them into practice. I really encourage you to do this.

To actually incorporate loving kindness and compassion into our practice we can use, for example, these lines from the four immeasurable thoughts, 'May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness', and 'May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering'. We don't need use other extensive formulas, just these two lines. If we can actually spend some time reflecting on their meaning we will notice that they bring a great sense of calmness and joy to the mind. So it is a really effective practice.

In our everyday life we may find that sometimes we are bogged down with worries and frustration. We also find that giving into these worries and frustrations and remaining pre-occupied with them does not help us at all. It is almost an indulgence if we just allow worries to take over our mind. Since they bring so much agony and unrest, we need to try to apply practices to free ourselves from that state of mind, raise our spirits, and gain a little bit more self esteem.

A very simple practice that we can apply in our daily lives is visualising Buddha Shakyamuni, our saviour and protector. Try to focus for a few minutes on visualising Buddha Shakyamuni on top of your crown, generating strong faith and trust in him. You can make a simple prayer by saying, 'You are my saviour. Please bestow me with your blessings to subdue and calm my mind.' With this kind of intention you could settle your mind and recite the mantra of Buddha Shakyamuni a few times. This very simple practice will make a real difference, and the mind will become calmer and more subdued, which is the sign that one's mind has been blessed. Through this simple practice one receives the blessing of the Buddha.

Regularly using the techniques mentioned earlier, such as meditating on the Buddha, is something that as Buddhists we are inclined to do anyway. As Buddhists we are inclined to remember the kindness of the Buddha, make requests and receive his blessings - this is one of our fundamental practices as a Buddhist. Thus as a Buddhist, focusing on and receiving the blessings of the Buddha is a very appropriate practice that we need to do.

Furthermore, when we find ourselves in an unhappy state of mind as we so often do, if we take time to really investigate, we will find that regardless of the circumstances the cause of our unhappy mind is a non-virtuous state of mind. As soon as a non-virtuous state of mind arises it immediately makes us feel unhappy. Then it becomes very clear that the real causes for our unhappy mind is none other than the non-virtuous state of mind that we have generated within ourselves. So how does

one overcome that? By generating the opposite, which is a virtuous state of mind.

Generating a virtuous state of mind is achieved with the various techniques of the meditation practice. The intention to generate a virtuous state of mind is in line with the literal meaning of Dharma, which means to 'protect the mind', and this is done by turning the mind to virtue. Thus, as I regularly emphasise, the meaning of Dharma and meditation come down to the same point. It is not as if meditation is one thing and Dharma is another, as they are actually the same. Thus, replacing the non-virtuous states of mind with virtuous ones through analysis and investigation is both a Dharma practice and a meditation practice.

Furthermore, as Buddhists we need to remind ourselves that our basic intent is to benefit our future lives. That is something that has to be as natural as our practice. When we think in that way then any practice that contributes to preparing for our future life becomes a genuine Dharma practice, unsullied by the stains of the worldly dharmas. That will also secure us in taking the essence of this precious human life.

The fact that we now enjoy a precious human life implies that we have all the perfect conditions to practise the Dharma: we have the teachings, and we have the perfect teachers. So with all of these perfect conditions the main thing is to try to take the essence of this life. As the lam rim teachings indicate, taking the essence of this life means engaging in a practice that brings about one of three results for a future life: at the very least practising Dharma so that we will be free from the lower realms and achieve a better rebirth in the human or higher states; the next best is to strive for liberation, which is the medium state of taking essence of this life; and the greatest state would be to make sure our practice results in a mind that creates the causes for achieving enlightenment. That is how we take the essence of this precious human life.

Another essential point of meditation practice is to contemplate death and impermanence. Although we are already familiar with the technique, we need to be really clear that contemplating death and impermanence is much more meaningful and deeply felt when it is done with a sense of longing to benefit future lives. If we don't really consider the benefits for future lives, just thinking about death and impermanence may not serve a purpose as a practice of Dharma. Just recalling death can generate some sort of fear, but the resulting anxiety will not really prompt us to make our life more meaningful. On the other hand, when the awareness and contemplation of death and impermanence is combined with a longing to benefit future lives, then that awareness is an impetus for us to practise in a manner that is unsullied with the eight worldly concerns.

We can clearly see how that is so. When we only focus on the benefits and achievements of this lifetime then that will lead us naturally into all sorts of non-virtuous states of mind. Because of the mistaken misconception we have of permanence in relation to this life, then attitudes such as attachment to wealth, attachment to status, and attachment to companions, name and so forth arise. Thus, as mentioned in the teachings, when we are really

concerned about a future life then the concerns for this life will naturally subside.

To contemplate the long term benefits of considering future lives we need to reflect upon how all achievements in this life are transitory, and do not last. The Buddha said that all high status will end in decline, all meeting will end in parting, all that is produced will cease and all that is born will have to die. Reflecting on these points should instil a really strong sense of the transitory, impermanent nature of this life, and then the concerns of this life will naturally subside. If we put some energy into practising in this way then we have a real sense of joy and accomplishment in our mind. When we are alone we will not experience the pangs of loneliness as we will be engaged in these practices of meditation and developing positive attitudes, which will naturally make us feel content and happy wherever we are, in whatever we are doing, and in whatever situation we may find ourselves in. Otherwise, being alone and full of negative states of mind, allowing our mind to be bombarded and influenced by the negative attitudes will just bring so much trauma and we will not be joyful and happy when we are by ourselves. So it is important that we have some sense of practice in our daily life, in all situations wherever we may be.

It is essential that we clearly identify one of the main sources of all our worldly concerns, which is the main misconception of holding onto, and grasping at permanence. Such an attitude leads to the notion that we are going to be here forever, and thus put time and energy into establishing the best conditions for ourselves. No matter how much we may have now it seems that it will not be enough, because we feel that it will not last us forever. So the result of grasping at permanence is that no matter how much we accumulate, and how much status we have it is never sufficient.

As you are aware the lam rim presents specific techniques on how to contemplate death and impermanence. There are the three roots, the six reasons and the three conclusions. The first of the three roots is that death is certain, the second is that the time of death is uncertain, and the third is that at the time of death nothing but the Dharma will help us. It is very important to actually apply that personally, reminding ourselves, 'I will definitely die, and I could die at any time'. By speaking to ourselves in this way we remember that it is only the Dharma that will help us at the time of death, as it is clear that nothing else can be of benefit, and no amount of money can help us at the time of death. Reminding ourselves of these points makes the practice of reflecting on death and impermanence much more real, and likewise the implications of this practice also become much more real and genuine. Then ones' practice naturally becomes much more meaningful and pure. When we think in this way we actually find a great source of encouragement and energy for ourselves.

The main point, as mentioned previously, is that since the source of all our problems, particularly with the concerns of this life, is cherishing ourselves, the more we immerse ourselves in these concerns the more problems we will experience. Thus these practices are a means and a direct

remedy for overcoming the concerns for this life. As the concerns for this life are slowly reduced, a real sense of joy arises in our mind and we will not tire ourselves trying to make everything right and perfect as we have to pass on anyway.

The Buddha presented the remedy for overcoming attachment and concern for this life, which is the contemplation of death and impermanence. Of course impermanence is implied in many other ways too, but it is very meaningful when used as a means of overcoming attachment and concern for this life.

We can see this from the Buddha's teachings. It was the first point that he made when he gave the teachings on the four noble truths, the first of which, as you are aware is that suffering has the four attributes of impermanence, suffering, selflessness and emptiness. Of the four attributes, the first one is impermanence, which makes it very clear that in order to understand the nature of suffering, one first has to realise that the nature of one's existence is that it is impermanent. Specifically, the attribute of impermanence refers to one's contaminated aggregates.

The next point is that these contaminated aggregates are in the nature of suffering, which is the second attribute. When we contemplate in this way then we start to gain an understanding that the five aggregates have the nature of being impermanent and the nature of suffering. When that understanding sinks in and permeates us, we can really begin to lose the sense of strong grasping at the five aggregates, and thus loosen the grasp at samsaric existence. In this way we can see how profound the practice really is.

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