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# Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



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Along with the motivation that we have just generated by reciting the refuge and bodhichitta prayer, we will engage in five minutes of meditation. (*pause for meditation*)

Prior to engaging in a teaching session like this, the most important thing is to generate a good motivation on both sides. As you work towards developing a good motivation, from my side I also generate a good motivation for sharing the teachings. The motivation is as, as indicated earlier, along the lines of the prayer of taking refuge and generating bodhichitta that we have just recited. Generating bodhichitta secures the practice as a Great Vehicle or Mahayana practice, which is based on love and compassion. It is that sense of love and compassion that secures our motivation as a unique Mahayana motivation.

Generating a positive motivation at the outset also secures us against falling into despair in the event that we are not able to succeed in the goals that we have set ourselves. We may have encountered occasions where, after setting certain goals for ourselves, we do not actually achieve them. When that happens, it can bring about a lot of despair, making us feel depressed and upset. In a worldly context we know that even if we set out goals for ourselves it is not certain that we will actually achieve them. However when that happens, it can still bring disappointment and despair to our minds.

Generating a positive motivation can help to secure our mind against feeling despair in the event that we don't achieve the goals that we have set out for ourselves. There is definitely a difference in our state of mind when we set out on a good motivation. We will be able to adopt the attitude, 'Well, I've initiated in this activity with the best of intentions, however if I am not able to achieve my goals, then it is probably because it is beyond my capacity'. In this way we do not allow not achieving our goals to affect our mind, leading to despair.

From the teacher's side the significance of setting a good motivation is this: when you embark on giving teachings without the proper motivation then the reactions of others can easily influence your mind. For example, if others praise one it may cause pride to arise, leading to pompous thoughts such as 'I must have done very well'. So the praise becomes the cause for pride.

If one is criticised for not giving a good teaching, then that can cause anger to arise in the mind. Developing a good motivation prior to engaging in the teaching - a motivation that is free from any desire for praise, and which has the intention to really benefit others - will definitely help to prevent negative feelings of pride or anger from arising as a result of the comments that others make. Not generating anger when others make critical

remarks, and rejoicing when others praise us would be a positive reaction.

Personally, I consider this an important point in my own practice. Thus, I encourage you to also follow suit, by adopting a similar motivation - particularly those of you who give teachings to others.

Lacking a good motivation can also cause stage fright. You might come to give teachings and begin to shake because of a lack of confidence. Back in about 1984 when the centre was in St Kilda, not that many people came to the Monday sessions. Owen suggested that maybe we should discontinue having them, but I thought that it would be beneficial to continue offering the meditation sessions. So, I said that I would think about it.

Noticing the relaxed demeanour of one of the students, Hal Young, I thought it would be good for him to lead the Monday session, and on the first evening about 14 people attended. The second time I asked Alison to lead the session because she seemed to have the particular talent of being able to talk softly and gently, so I thought that would be good. About 10 minutes before the session began Alison came to see me, saying, 'There are about 40 people there, and ten minutes to go! What should I do?' She seemed to be very shaky. My immediate advice was, 'Don't be afraid. When you go to the session try not to feel overwhelmed with the number of people in the audience, just contemplate Tara above you, and think that Tara is guiding you in giving the talk. Also try to generate a good positive motivation and you will be fine'. After the session she came back smiling; she seemed to have done well. Of course these days she has no hesitation in giving talks.

## INTRODUCING THE MIND THAT IS THE OBJECT OF FOCUS (CONT.)

This topic is subdivided into two

1. That which is mistaken
2. Accepting that which is unmistakable

In our last session we covered the mistaken technique, which refers to mistaking the recognition of the conventional mind as the ultimate nature of the mind.

### 2. ACCEPTING THAT WHICH IS UNMISTAKABLE

The root text states

*27. This may well be so, but what has been explained here is the best method for merely settling the mind on the initial level. I, Cho-kyi Gyaltsan, say that this is the way merely to introduce yourself to the conventional mind.*

The auto-commentary doesn't give much explanation about this verse. In relation to how to develop calm abiding, Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains that when one comes to the point of recognising the conventional mind then that is the unmistakable identification of the mind itself, and that this is according to the explanation of Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltsan's own lama Sanggye Yeshe. Thus, the verse states, the author will explain the further points in accordance with his own lama's explanation.

### Identification of the conventional mind

What is being introduced here is the identification of the conventional mind. When using the mind as an object of

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focus on which to develop calm abiding, one comes to the point of recognising the conventional nature of the mind, which is that it is clear and free from any obstruction of physical phenomena, and which by nature is empty like space. That is how the conventional mind is identified. Because one of the natural characteristics of the mind is that it is empty like space, there are those who mistake that for the ultimate nature of the mind, thus believing that they have realised the emptiness of the mind. So, the mistaken view is believing that one has seen the ultimate nature of the mind, when in fact one has merely seen the conventional mind.

In relation to recognising the conventional mind, the point that one needs to understand is that in the process of developing calm abiding by using the mind as an object to focus on, one has recognised the conventional mind when one reaches the point of being able to identify the clarity and un-obstructive nature of the mind. However that doesn't mean that one has realised the conventional truth of the mind. The older students may remember that this point was clarified in the Madhyamaka teachings.

In order to realise the conventional truth of any object one has to understand that the phenomenon is false; in order to recognise the phenomenon as being false one has to first negate the phenomenon as being truly existent. Thus, in order to understand the phenomenon as being a conventional truth one has to have the pre-existing understanding of the lack of true or inherent existence of the object. Do you remember those points from earlier classes on Madhyamika?

What is being pointed out here is while identifying the clarity of the mind is recognising the conventional mind that, however, does not mean that one has understood the conventional truth of the mind. To understand the conventional truth of any phenomenon one has to first realise the phenomenon as being false in appearance, and prior to that one has to have negated the phenomenon as being established as truly existent.

For example, in order to establish someone as a liar, the fact they are honest has to be negated first. This means that to recognise someone as a liar or cheat, we already have to know that they don't tell the truth. One cannot recognise someone as a liar if one does not already know that they do not tell the truth. Similarly, in realising the conventional truth of any object, one has to first recognise the object as false, and in order to recognise the object as false, one has to have first negated a truly existent object.

The actual implication of these subtle differences of what is false and what is true were introduced in the Madhyamaka teachings. So it is important to refer to those teachings and revise these points.

### **Conventional and ultimate nature of the mind**

In relation to the mind, the conventional mind has to be posited as being false, whereas the ultimate nature of the mind, the emptiness of the mind, is true. That is because the main consciousness that perceives the ultimate nature or emptiness of the mind is the primordial wisdom of an arya being in meditative equipoise, and as things exist as they appear to this consciousness, they are therefore true. Whereas the consciousness that perceives the

conventional mind is a mind of duality, thus things do not exist as they appear to this consciousness. That is why the objects that appear to a mind of duality are referred to as conventional phenomena, and are false. These are really important points to know in order to get a good understanding.

For example, the main consciousness that sees this clock is the eye consciousness. According to the explanations in the teachings we have to say that the clock does not exist in a way that it appears to the eye consciousness. If one were to ask whether the clock actually exists, then of course the conclusion is that the clock does exist. However it does not exist in the way that it appears to the eye consciousness. What does that actually mean?

*Student: To the eye consciousness, the physical form of the clock appears to exist from its own side, without any appearance of it being merely labelled and dependent on causes and conditions; but it does not exist in that way.*

That is correct. The consciousness that realises the ultimate nature of the clock would be for example, the primordial wisdom realising emptiness of an arya being in meditative equipoise. Thus, the ultimate reality of the clock (which is the emptiness of the clock) exists as it appears to the arya being's meditative consciousness.

When one understands this point then one has also understood one of the assertions of the Prasangika view (the highest Buddhist School), which is that sentient beings' eye consciousnesses are necessarily mistaken consciousnesses. The reason why a sentient being's five sense consciousnesses perceive things mistakenly, is because their consciousnesses are influenced either by the actual grasping at true existence, or the imprints of grasping at true existence.

- Grasping at true existence - either on a manifest level or as an imprint - influences the sense consciousnesses to perceive things in a mistaken way. That is why all sorts of distortions appear to the perception of sentient beings.
- The consciousness of an arya being in meditative equipoise does not have any dualistic appearance. The only thing that appears to the consciousness of an arya being in meditative equipoise, is emptiness, which is ultimate and non-mistaken reality.
- To the consciousness of an enlightened being, or a buddha, everything appears just as it is, without any mistaken views or any dualistic appearances at any time

### **INTRODUCING THE OBJECT, EMPTINESS<sup>1</sup>**

This heading has two subdivisions:

1. The pledge of composition
2. How to engage in the practice after having established it

#### **1. The pledge of composition**

The verse of the root text relating to this heading is

*28. Therefore I shall now explain the methods for introducing yourself to the true nature of the mind in accordance with the oral teachings of*

<sup>1</sup> The sequence of headings is according to Kyiwo Tsang's commentary, which differs from that used in the auto-commentary.

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*my root guru, who eliminates all darkness of the mind, looking like a saffron-robed monk, but being in actuality a manifestation of the wisdom of all the buddhas.*

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains that the word 'therefore' in the verse can have two connotations: it can indicate the connection between the earlier presentation and the following presentations, and also refers to the explanation of the actual mahamudra, which is object mahamudra.

You will recall that earlier in the presentation that mahamudra is divided into subject mahamudra and object mahamudra, and that subject mahamudra is further divided into sutra mahamudra and tantra mahamudra, both of which refer to the wisdom realising emptiness.

Subject mahamudra refers to establishing the view from within the meditative state. You will recall the two different techniques introduced earlier: 1) gaining an understanding of the view first and then meditating on the mind, and 2) meditating on the mind first and then gaining the understanding of the view afterwards. The system followed here is establishing the technique of meditation first, thus the presentation so far has been on how to develop calm abiding using the mind as an object to focus on. Having explained that, what is being presented now is the actual mahamudra or object mahamudra, which is emptiness itself.

In further explaining the meaning of verse 28, Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains that the essence or the wisdom of all the buddhas of the ten directions manifests in the aspect of a fully ordained saffron-robed monk; which is referring to Panchen Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltsan's own guru Sanggye Yeshe. With modesty the author says, 'Although my lama has an ordinary appearance as a saffron robed monk, in essence, in accordance with his name, he is the "wisdom of all buddhas". From my lama I have received the transmission of the Ensapa lineage. This lineage that I have received from my own lama has not previously been established in writing, so I take upon myself the responsibility for formulating it in writing, and thus compose this text'.

In explanation of the verse the auto-commentary says, 'While the meaning of the verse can be understood easily, the pledge made here differs to the earlier pledge thus there is no fault of redundancy'.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary clarifies the reasons why there is no fault of redundancy. He explains that there are three pledges that are made at different times. The first pledge was to present mahamudra in general, the second pledge is to introduce the subject, which is the conventional mind, and the third pledge, being made here, is to introduce the object, which is emptiness itself, the actual mahamudra.

### **The uniqueness of the union of calm abiding and special insight**

According to Kyiwo Tsang the third pledge also has the implication of showing the uniqueness of the union of calm abiding and special insight. His commentary then indicates that as the view of emptiness is the actual path of liberation, thus it is referred to as actual mahamudra.

The technique for developing calm abiding serves as a method for realising the actual view of emptiness. However calm abiding itself cannot be established as being actual mahamudra.

Kyiwo Tsang states that the explanation of the method of achieving calm abiding was presented with a threefold classification: the preliminaries, the actual and the completion<sup>2</sup>. One may wonder whether 'the actual' refers to the actual mahamudra, but there the term 'actual' refers to the actual presentation of calm abiding as a method of realising the actual mahamudra. It is referred to as 'the actual' to encourage and give others faith in developing calm abiding. According to our own system the calm abiding technique that was presented earlier is used to realise the ultimate nature of the mind. The main reason why calm abiding was introduced first is so that it can be combined with special insight.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary further explains that in the auto-commentary there are various different presentations of the actual mahamudra under the heading, 'the general classifications', which are in accordance with the different capacities and mental dispositions of the disciples. The auto-commentary also includes an explanation of its own point of view under the heading, 'Combining the Essence of All'. Kyiwo Tsang's commentary omits the different presentation from different lineages and goes straight to where the auto-commentary relates to combining the essence of all.

The actual presentation according to our own system is the Middle Way presentation, which is the view that is free from both extremes. This was clearly presented by Lama Tsong Khapa, so Kyiwo Tsang quotes this verse from *The Lines Of Experience*, Lama Tsong Khapa's brief lam rim text:

Meditative concentration is the king wielding power over the mind  
If you fix it (on one point), it remains immovable like mighty Mount Meru.  
If you project it, it can permeate any virtuous object (at will).  
It leads to the great exhilarating bliss of having your body and mind be applicable (to any virtuous task).  
Knowing this, the yogis of (mental) control have devoted themselves continuously to single-minded concentration, which overcomes the enemies of mental wandering and dullness.

The commentary explains that the main point to extract from the line 'knowing this the yogis of mental control have devoted themselves continuously to single-minded concentration, which overcomes the enemies of mental wandering and dullness' is that when one attains calm abiding one obtains the ability to keep one's mind single-pointedly focused on an object. That in itself is not such a great achievement; it is a merely a sign of having developed single-pointed concentration on an object. Being able to keep one's mind focused single-pointedly on an object for as long as one wishes does not, in itself, overcome the subtle misconceptions in one's mind.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a good example of the way in which the heading structure of the auto-commentary and Kyiwo Tsang's commentary differ.

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The main point here is that one must be able to use that single-pointed concentration to further terminate subtle obscurations in one's mind. Using this combination of calm abiding and special insight to further investigate and penetrate the ultimate reality of phenomena will completely destroy the very seeds and imprints of the obscurations.

This is really very sound advice. One should not to be content with having developed single-pointed concentration: rather one should use that to further enhance one's wisdom and thus use the special insight to further analyse ultimate reality. In accordance with the above quote from Lama Tsong Khapa's text, when calm abiding is combined with special insight then you can project it and permeate any virtuous object at will.

The connotation here is that while the mere development of calm abiding may allow you to focus single-pointedly on an object, if you do not have the ability to further investigate and analyse all other objects of focus, then the virtue that one gains from that single-pointed concentration is very limited. One does not gain the highest virtues, which are the means to destroy the inner obscurations. However combining calm abiding with special insight develops that ability to further analyse and investigate different objects. That is how one gains the highest virtues.

As the commentary further clarifies, if we have the potential or ability to meditate on emptiness or selflessness, but do not fully understand how special insight is crucial to further enhance our understanding, then it is as if we are intentionally prolonging our existence in samsara. Not only would we not be practising in accordance with the Mahayana vehicle, but we would not even be practising in accordance with the lower vehicle, which is to achieve self liberation. Even that cannot be achieved if we don't develop special insight.

What has been explained so far is in accordance with the system of realising the view after having established the meditative state that is calm abiding. However the calm abiding that is developed has to be on the basis of the view. It is not as if this system uses a different object to meditate on. Rather the object on which calm abiding is developed is the view that one has familiarised oneself with earlier. In both cases the importance of the view realising emptiness or selflessness is emphasised in conjunction with special insight. In order to explain that further the commentary quotes from another of Lama Tsong Khapa's lam rim texts.

The points that are raised here in this commentary are quite significant and quite important for the development of our practice. That is why I have taken some time to go into it. Otherwise we could just use the auto-commentary, which does not have an extensive explanation of these points.

It is quite important for us to gain a good understanding of what it means to seek the view after having first established the meditative state. The implications of this are an important point for us to understand.

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