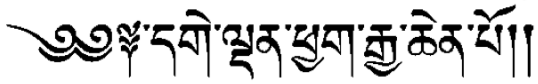


# Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



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As we do normally, we will generate a motivation for receiving the teachings that is combined with the bodhichitta motivation.

## IDENTIFYING THE OBJECT EMPTINESS (CONT.)

In the Kyiwo Tsang commentary there are two sub-divisions to this heading. We are covering the second sub-division.

### How to engage in the practice after having established it<sup>1</sup>

Last week we concluded with this quote from Chandrakirti in the auto-commentary:

For the sake of liberating sentient beings,  
Selflessness is classified into that of persons and  
phenomena

The reason why there is this twofold classification of selflessness is because all existence can be subsumed into either animate living beings or inanimate phenomena.

Thus, focusing on a person as a referent object and perceiving it as being truly existent, is *grasping at the self of a person*. While focusing on the person as a referent object and perceiving it as being empty of true existence is the perception of *selflessness of person*.

And focusing on phenomena as a referent object and perceiving it as truly existent, is *grasping at the self of phenomena*, while the opposite, focusing on phenomena as a referent object and perceiving it as being empty of true existence, is *selflessness of phenomena*.

The auto-commentary then continues:

The manner of how these two are established are explained in various sutras and commentaries as following: first the selflessness of phenomena is established, but when meditating on it, one needs to first meditate on the selflessness of the person.

What is being explained here is the sequence of how the two selflessnesses are established in various treatises: first the selflessness of phenomena is established and after that the selflessness of a person is established. That is because, as explained in various texts, of the two grasplings the grasping at phenomena (the aggregates) arises first, and based on that the grasping at person is developed. Thus, the order in which the two types of selflessness are presented in the texts is the same as the order in which the two types of grasping arise.

However, as the commentary explains, in meditation one first realises the selflessness of person followed by the selflessness of phenomena. Because the basis ('I' or 'me') is relatively easier to recognise, the selflessness of person is realised first. Another way of explaining it is, without realising the person as being empty of inherent existence one cannot realise the aggregates as being empty of inherent

existence, thus when realising selflessness in meditation the selflessness of person is realised first.

Here then, one needs to understand the point that, as explained last week, although there is no difference in the coarseness and subtlety of the selflessness of person and the selflessness of other phenomena, there is however a difference in terms of the realisation of the two. The realisation of the selflessness of person is relatively easier to gain than the realisation of the selflessness of other phenomena, because of the different basis. These points were covered earlier when we studied the Madhyamaka teachings. So it is good to revise the points on selflessness made in the texts, which I have covered great detail.

As explained in the auto-commentary, in treatises such as Chandrakirti's *Madhyamakavatara* and Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, the selflessness of produced phenomena is established first, with the logical reasoning that all products are free from the four extremes<sup>2</sup>. (The selflessness of unproduced phenomena being easier to understand, was not explicitly established in those treatises.) Then later on when selfless of person is established in Chandrakirti's *Madhyamakavatara*, it uses the seven-fold reasoning<sup>3</sup> by adding two extra on top of the five reasonings presented in Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom*. These, of course, were presented in detail in earlier teachings; the reason I bring them up now is so that you can refer to those points and refresh your memory. The five reasonings establishing selflessness also came up in the teachings on Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses*.<sup>4</sup> In fact, they have been covered many times.

The seven-fold reasoning succinctly summarised into the reasoning of 'not being inherently one or inherently separate'. And this is the main reasoning that is used here, and why Lama Tsong Khapa used it in the concise lam rim teaching. Lama Tsong Khapa's presentation of the teachings to Gyaltsab Je is said to contain a unique presentation of how to use the seven-fold reasoning.

Coming back to the point made here, the selflessness of phenomena is established first, but when meditating on it the reverse is the case. To back up these points the auto-commentary quotes from the *King of Concentration sutra*:

When you have distinguished with respect to yourself,  
apply your understanding to all phenomena.

The nature of all phenomena is that they are completely pure, just like space. If you know this on the basis of one thing, you know it on the basis of everything. If you see this on the basis of one thing, you see it on the basis of everything.

This explanation is quite clear and has also been mentioned many times earlier in other teachings. Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses* commented on this point: when you realise the emptiness of one thing, then you use that understanding to establish the emptiness of other phenomena as well<sup>5</sup>.

The heading 'How to engage in the practice after establishing it' from Kyiwo Tsang's commentary is sub-divided into two.

1. How to accumulate the conditions for establishing special insight
2. The manner of meditating on special insight

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, teaching of 15 April 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, teaching of 13 July 2004.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, teaching of 1 July 2008.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, teaching of 26 June 2007.

<sup>1</sup> As this teaching involves several of Kyiwo Tsang's headings they are numbered but not separately formatted.

## 1. How to accumulate the conditions for establishing special insight

Three conditions are presented:

1. Relying on a spiritual teacher
2. Engaging in listening to the teachings from the spiritual teacher
3. Contemplating the received teachings accordingly

In relation to the **third condition**, Kyiwo Tsang explains that having listened to the teachings from the lama or the guru, one needs to contemplate the teachings that one has received over and over again.

As the commentary further explains, in order to obtain the special insight focusing on emptiness, the main condition that one needs is the ultimate understanding of the view itself, based on the attainment of calm abiding. The main point (which should be clear to you) is that in order to gain the special insight focusing on emptiness, one has to first have a sound understanding of the right view. And in order to have the right understanding of the view, one must have first developed calm abiding so as to be able to focus on the view. So the sequence presented should be clear. As you will recall, the system in the Mahamudra is finding the view after having established meditation, which refers to establishing calm abiding first.

In relation to the **first condition**, relying on the spiritual teacher or the guru, the guru is to be seen specifically as being inseparable from the deity Manjushri. This is a specific instruction for relying on a guru in order to obtain an understanding of the right view, which is emptiness. That is because Manjushri is the embodiment of wisdom. When one wishes to meditate to develop compassion and bodhichitta in one's heart, then the main deity one focuses on is Avaloketishvara, or Chenrezig in Tibetan.

As further explained here in the commentary, the **second condition**, the instructions that one needs to gain from one's teacher, are the explanations from the *Great Treatises* - not just any text, but specifically the *Great Treatises*. Having heard the profound explanations on the correct view from the *Great Treatises*, one then must think about their meaning over and over again. Then, based on the understanding that one gains from that, one needs to further accumulate merit, and maintain ethics in accordance with the vows one has received.

The commentary quotes from a text that is also explained in the lam rim teachings: if one does not familiarise oneself with the instructions that one has received, by thinking of them over and over again, then it is similar to 'a drawing of a lamp', which cannot not illuminate anything. If one does not accumulate appropriate merit, then it will be like 'a seed without moisture' - no matter how long that seed is kept, it can never germinate because the lack of moisture. If one does not observe and maintain ethics, in relation to keeping one's vows well, then it is similar to 'great unowned wealth', which means wealth that cannot be put to any good use. So it is extremely important, particularly in these times-of-degeneration, to envisage oneself within the protection wheel of the guru and the deity.

## 2. The manner of meditating on special insight

This is sub-divided into two:

- 2.1. Identifying the object of refutation on the subtlest level
- 2.2. Having meditated on selflessness, establishing designated phenomena

### 2.1. Identifying the object of refutation on the subtlest level

Since we have already covered the topic of calm abiding, can you give the definition of calm abiding.

*Student: It is a single-pointed focus generated from the nine stages of concentration combined with physical and mental bliss.*

That's nearly complete, but something is missing.

*Student: Being able to maintain that focus for an indefinite time.*

So a newer student was able to give that answer!

The definition of special insight is: *The wisdom that arises as a result of having analysed the object of analysis, which is based on having obtained calm abiding, accompanied by the bliss of the pliancy that one obtains from that.*

The term special insight doesn't imply that one sees something extra in meditation that one has not already seen during calm abiding. Rather it is a special attribute that one gains from that investigation, which isn't obtained during mere calm abiding meditation. Based on calm abiding, when the object is analysed, the specific attribute is the actual bliss and pliancy that are obtained from that specific analysis of the object. That bliss and pliancy is in addition to that of calm abiding, so it is not an extra understanding.

The auto-commentary then explains:

In order to meditate on the selflessness of a person, one must first identify the object to be negated.

As explained by Shantideva:

If you have not come into contact with the object that is to be refuted,  
You cannot gain an understanding of its refutation.

Of course you would have heard this point many times in previous teachings. So, what does this mean?

*Student: After you achieve calm abiding and intensify the practice through special insight, you gain some sort of understanding of the mind.*

I am actually after a specific explanation of the quote from Shantideva.

*Student: If the object is the nature of the mind and you have experienced it as emptiness it is hard to refute what you have not experienced.*

That is close.

*Student: We need to understand how the object is held other than by being merely imputed by thought.*

How do we derive the meaning from Shantideva's quote, 'If you have not come into contact with the object that is to be refuted, you cannot gain an understanding of its refutation'? Shantideva is specifically saying that we have to identify the object that is to be refuted. What is that object? The specific object to be refuted here is true existence. Without understanding what true existence is, one cannot gain an understanding of its refutation, which is the lack of true existence or inherent existence. So one cannot realise the lack of true existence without understanding what true existence itself is. Is that clear?

What is the thing that is imputed by grasping at true existence?

*Student: Inherently existing objects.*

That is correct. The establishment of true existence is the object to be refuted. Without understanding what true existence means, one cannot negate its absence, i.e. the lack of true existence.

Then the auto-commentary further explains:

Just as has been explained, if one has not identified the object of negation, then it would be similar to shooting an arrow without seeing the target, or going to war without recognising the enemy.

To explain this in lay terms, in order to gain even an inkling of what selflessness or more specifically, the lack of true existence is, one has to first understand what true existence means. Without that understanding one could not possibly understand that something lacks true existence. To give a more tangible example, if we were to ask someone whether there is a vase here, then in order for someone to recognise the absence of a vase in the room, they would first have to know what a vase is. If they don't know what a vase is to begin with, they wouldn't know whether the vase exists in the room or not. These points will be explained in more detail later on. However the basic point made here, using the analogy of the vase, is that in order to understand the lack of true existence of any phenomena, one has to first understand what true existence itself implies.

Then the auto-commentary further explains:

Even after identifying the object of negation, if it is over-pervasive one will fall into the position of nihilism.

These points are explained in much greater detail in the *Great Treatise of the Graduated Path to Enlightenment (Lam Rim Chen Mo)*, and it is good to refer to it again. 'If it is over-pervasive one will fall into the position of nihilism' refers to the view asserted by some that all phenomena, from physical form all the way up to enlightenment, are to be negated. So according to this view when one negates the self of phenomena, everything has to be negated entirely. That is the view of nihilism – that everything is to be negated.

The auto-commentary continues:

If it is under-pervasive, one will not be able to negate the subtlest object of negation and thus one is in the grave danger of falling into the position of eternalism.

There are those who posit that the existence of phenomena is established in these three modes.

1. The characteristic of nature is that it is not produced out of causes and conditions;
2. The characteristic of its instance is that it does not change from moment to moment;
3. The characteristic of its establishment is that it does not rely or depend on other factors.

So the under-pervasive is where things are established either as being self-sufficient or permanent and not changing. It is good to refer to the refutation of this view in the lam rim teachings where it is quite clearly explained. Referring to those explanations will clarify the meaning of these points

To return to the earlier point, the auto-commentary then further reads:

As stated in Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*:

Gaining an incorrect view of emptiness,  
Will be the fall for those with insufficient wisdom,  
Just as it is a grave danger to catch a snake,  
Using faulty charms and mantras.  
Thus, seeing the difficulty of the feeble,  
To understand the correct view in its depths,  
Buddha avoided teaching at first,  
The fundamental view of reality.

This quote specifically explains how the Buddha, after having obtained the state of enlightenment (which is the

understanding of the fundamental nature of all existence) realised that such a profound view might not be understood by others. So he remained in that meditative state for forty-nine days. It was only after the god Brahma specifically requested the Buddha to impart his teachings, that he give his first teachings. We have of course explained these points in earlier teachings.

There is a text that explains the implication of why Brahma made that specific request for the Buddha to turn the wheel of the Dharma. Apparently it was because of the many beings who followed Brahma, so when Brahma made the request for the Buddha to teach, all his followers naturally turned to the Buddha's advice and teachings. So it took Brahma to turn so many other people around to receive the profound teachings from the Buddha. That is one indication of why Brahma made the initial request.

Then the auto-commentary goes on:

The eight thousand verse *Prajnaparamita sutra*, states:

Grasping on to 'me' and 'mine', sentient beings  
revolve in samsara.

Just as stated, the root cause of all faults stems from innate self-grasping or innate grasping at the 'I'.

At this point it is also good to refer to the two objects of refutation. They are refutation on the path of practice and refutation through logical analysis. *Refutation on the path* means the refutation that is made as a result of meditating on the path: being able to make certain refutations with the wisdom one gains in meditation. *Refutation through logical analysis* is negating inherent existence through the reasoning presented in the teachings; which means overcoming the misapprehensions of inherent existence or truly established phenomena or a thing being existent from its own side. It is through the various logical reasons that these misapprehensions are negated.

The quote from the *Prajnaparamita sutra* accords with the explanation in the Madhyamaka teachings that the grasping at oneself and one's possessions is the cause for entering samsara. These points were explained very explicitly in the Madhyamaka teachings. So it is good to refer to those teachings and relate them to the points being made here<sup>6</sup>.

The commentary specifies that the root or main cause of all faults and negativities is grasping at the self or the 'I'. Another technical term for innate self-grasping that is used in the teachings is the 'view of the transitory collections'. You really need to understand the actual meaning and implication of this term and what it indicates. What does understanding how one grasps at the self or the 'I' as being inherently existent mean? How does that actually manifest within oneself? From the teachings we can talk about the object of refutation, which is inherent existence or true existence or existing from its own side, or independent existence (we use all of these terms). When we use those terms in the context of general objects that have to be understood as being empty of inherent existence or true existence, then it is vaguely impersonal and outside of what we commonly understand as the self. Whereas innate self-grasping at the 'I' in relation to oneself is a bit more personal, as it involves investigating within ourselves, how we view ourselves and how we grasp at ourselves. With this personal investigation we will begin to gain an understanding that leads to personal transformation.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, teaching of 20 April 2004.

The auto-commentary then states:

In general in relation to the notion of 'me', there are three modes of apprehension of the 'I'.

1. Apprehending the 'I' that is characterised by true existence,
2. Apprehending an 'I' that is characterised by the lack of true existence, or that which is merely labelled and imputed by the mind,
3. Apprehending an 'I' that is not characterised by either of the above two.

Again, these points are also very clearly explained in the lam rim teachings. The main point here is that there are three ways of apprehending the 'I'. Then the auto-commentary further explains:

The last one establishes a mere 'I' as found by the mind validly cognising the conventional.

This is referring to the last of the three, which is the 'I' that is established by validly cognising the conventional meaning, which refers to the 'I' as in 'I am going', 'I am sitting', 'I am eating' and so forth. That is the 'I' that we are referring to when we refer to the conventional 'I', or the 'I' that exists.

The auto-commentary then continues:

The middle one is found only in individuals who have found conviction in the middle way view and not by any other.

What is being explained here is that only 'individuals who have found conviction in the middle way view' understand the 'I' that is characterised by the lack of true existence.

The auto commentary then completes the analysis of the three modes:

The first is a grasping to the self of persons. The apprehension of true existence of a person that arises by focusing on another person is a grasping at a self of person but it is not an innate grasping at the 'I'.

This point has been clarified many times before. So for those students who have received these explanations previously, what does 'The apprehension of true existence of a person that arises by focusing on another person is a grasping at a self of person but it is not an innate grasping of the 'I' mean?

*Student: The 'I' must be in one's own continuum for it to be the view of the transitory collection.*

And what is grasping at a person in general?

*Student: Grasping at the person who is still qualified as a person, but not in one's own continuum.*

That is correct. The auto-commentary further explains this point:

The innate grasping of the 'I', also known as the 'view of the transitory collections' is defined as a deluded wisdom that focuses on the personal self as an object, and has the aspect of apprehending it as inherently established.

Here the 'view of the transitory collections' is defined as a deluded wisdom. There are some texts that establish wisdom as necessarily being virtue. Therefore here it is necessary to explain that the 'view of the transitory collections' is not a true wisdom, but a deluded wisdom. As there are texts that posit wisdom as being necessarily virtue, one has to explain that a deluded wisdom is not actually wisdom.

In debate when those quoting from texts say 'if it is a wisdom it is necessarily virtuous', the question raised is

'How about the view of transitory collections, is that a virtue? It is said to be a deluded wisdom, so therefore it must be wisdom. Thus in order to sustain the argument of wisdom being a virtue, one has to then explain that it is a deluded wisdom and therefore not real wisdom.

According to the normal program, the next session is still a teaching session and the following one would be the discussion. However, if you wouldn't mind having the next session as a discussion and the following one as an exam, then that would give me a little bit more leisure for the retreat that I have to do for the White Tara initiation. If I were to give a teaching then due to the preparation time as well as the actual teaching time, it would be hard to finish the required number of mantras that I have to recite. So is that okay with you?

*Students: Yes!*

If it is not fine, then I can of course continue with the teaching. Is anyone pleased however with the announcement that there will be no teaching for our next session? That is something that can of course occur when we are young, when studying is regarded as part of our regular duties. As a youngster we used to receive teachings from our teacher over a long period of time. At times he would announce "As I'm a bit tired, we can skip our teaching session today". As young monks we were quite pleased and excited to get that news. So, I hope this is not the case for you!!

As usual, I request that you participate in the discussion well. It would be good to focus primarily on the object of negation, as presented in earlier teachings to the older students. Identifying the object of negation is not a simple matter, because there are the different presentations of the different schools, such as the Chittamatra (Mind-only), the Sautrantika and Prasangika schools. It would be good to discuss the different approaches to the object of negation in the different schools and to try to clarify them. Here we have been discussing the object of negation from the view of the highest school, but it is also good to understand the points of view of the other schools as well.

The main logical syllogism used here in identifying the object of negation is: Take the subject 'a person': it lacks true existence, because it is neither inherently one nor inherently separate.

That syllogism is the main logical formula that identifies the object of negation. In this formula, the subject is 'a person', the predicate is that 'it lacks true existence', and the reason is that it is neither inherently 'one' nor inherently 'separate'. This means that if a person were to exist truly, it would have to be either inherently one with its aggregates or inherently separate from its aggregates. But because a person cannot exist in either of these two ways, then it logically establishes the person as lacking any true existence.

Using this syllogism formula, when you establish the predicate, which is that 'a person lacks true existence', it also establishes the negation, which is the opposite of that predicate (a truly existent person). In this way the syllogism also identifies the object of negation that is to be refuted.

When one investigates with these logical reasonings and thinks over these points, it helps to make the correct view much clearer. When the object of negation is identified correctly, then it becomes clear in one's mind as to what is to be negated and abandoned.

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