
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇམ་དགེ་ལུན་ཕུག་རྒྱ་ཆེན་པོ།

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With the motivation of bodhichitta, we can spend a few minutes in meditation. (*Pause for meditation*)

HAVING MEDITATED ON SELFLESSNESS, ESTABLISHING IMPUTED EXISTENCE (CONT.)

Last week we left off at these lines of the auto-commentary:

For these reasons, the experiential explanation of how the object of negation appears and how it is apprehended is presented first in the following verse.

This is pointing out the two sub-divisions of the experiential explanation.

The relevant verse of the root text reads:

29 In the same state as the previous settling of your mind [in single-minded concentration], you should, like a small fish swimming through clear undisturbed water, examine with very fine consciousness the nature of the self-identity of just who it is who is meditating.

As the auto-commentary explains:

To further explain the meaning of this: with the previously acquired single-pointed concentration of calm abiding and within the state of meditative equipoise, just like tiny fish swimming about in a pond full of clear water will not disturb the water, similarly with a fine or subtle consciousness the meditator investigates the nature of the 'being', 'I' or 'self' who is meditating in single-pointed concentration, without the slightest disturbance. This fine consciousness also investigates how the 'I' appears to the mind and how it is apprehended.

This relates to the earlier explanation that the system here is one that attempts to find the view from within a meditative state.

The root text uses the example of a pond filled with clear water, which is analogous to calm abiding, while the tiny fish moving about, is an analogy of the investigation. That is, just as tiny fish that move about quite rapidly at the bottom of a pond of clear water do not disturb the surface of the pond at all, likewise investigating the object (the 'I' of the meditator, in this case) within the state of calm abiding should not disturb the single-pointed concentration.

Then the manner of investigation is explained: while remaining in a meditative state of single-pointed concentration one part of the mind investigates the object with analytical wisdom, which is an intelligence that is able to differentiate between what is to be adopted and what is to be discarded. This is the subtle consciousness that the auto-commentary is referring to.

Two modes of appearance

This subtle consciousness investigates how the 'I', the self, or the being appears to the meditator. There are two modes of appearance of the 'I', being, or person: the mode of appearance of an 'I' or person to an ordinary being, and that which appears to an arya or noble being.

The 'I' or 'person' that appears to an ordinary being is that which does not accord to its appearance. It's false and not true because the way the person appears is not in accordance with reality. Whereas the appearance of the 'I' or the individual person to a noble being is in accordance with reality - it exists just as it appears to them.

Mode of appearance for an ordinary being

The particular investigation that is indicated here is identifying the mode of appearance of a person or 'I' to an ordinary being and, as mentioned earlier, it is the subtle or fine consciousness that undertakes this investigation by looking at the appearance of the person and how it is being apprehended. How does the person appear to the ordinary being's mind, and how does an ordinary being apprehend that appearance? That is what one should investigate.

The personal instruction that we can derive from this is that even though we may not have obtained the meditative state of calm abiding right now, it is nevertheless worthwhile for us to really investigate the individual 'I', and look into how it appears to us, using whatever degree of focus that we have developed. How does our 'I' or ourself as a 'person' appear to us? How do we actually apprehend our 'I'? Thus, we investigate the two modes of person - how it appears to us, and how we apprehend it. When we do that sincerely, it can be really very meaningful for us and will enhance our understanding.

Merely labelled phenomena

As the auto-commentary states:

When investigated in this way, the nature of the being, 'I' or person, (and likewise all other phenomena), is seen to be merely labelled, and merely imputed by conception, which is similar to labelling a striped rope a snake, or a heap of stones and a tall log a person.

This is explaining how a person actually does exist. When we investigate the mode of existence or the nature of the being, or whatever other phenomena we choose to focus on, we will come to the same conclusion, which is that it is merely labelled and merely imputed by conception.

When we thoroughly investigate how the person exists, and what conception we have of its mode of existence we will come to notice that the 'person' or 'I' is actually just a label placed upon the collection of the aggregates. The label 'person' or 'I' is placed upon the collection of the physical body and the other aggregates, and so it is nothing more than that mere label. What is being explained here is how the person, the individual being, as well as all other phenomena, are merely labelled or merely imputed by conception. Thus, what is being established here is the imputed existence of all phenomena.

What one needs to understand from the explanation here is that term 'merely' is used for a particular purpose. The terms merely labelled and merely imputed negate the slightest existence from its own side. Besides being a label or an imputation by the mind, there is no existence from the object's own side. This becomes clear when we refer to the analogy used in the auto-commentary.

The analogy that is used here is labelling a striped rope a snake. When one sees a striped rope at a particular time of the day, one may at first glance, think 'there is a snake', and thus label the rope as a snake. But in fact a snake does not exist upon the rope even the slightest bit; a snake is not found in any of the parts of the striped rope nor the collection of the parts of the rope, and so referring to a striped rope as a snake is a mere label or mere imputation by

conception. It is the same with the other analogies given in the auto-commentary as well. Apart from the label, none of them exists from their own side.

Likewise, it is similar to how a person is merely labelled upon the aggregates. One needs to understand that a person or 'I' is a mere label placed upon the collection of the aggregates. However if you were to search within the aggregates, you would not find the person or 'I'. Thus, besides being a mere label or a mere conceptually imputed extent, there is no 'I' or person that exists within the aggregates. Establishing all phenomena as imputed existence is the unique explanation of the Prasangika, which is the highest Buddhist school. This presentation differs from the Svatantrika-Middle Way school, which also uses the term 'merely labelled', but it has a different connotation for them.

This reminds me of the time when I was sitting for my final geshe exam. In debate this point was raised by the prominent master, Lati Rinpoche. I explained that even though both the Prasangika and the Svatantrika-Middle Way schools use the same term 'merely labelled', what it implies for the Prasangika is that the existence of phenomena is dependent solely on the label given from the side of the conception. Whereas for the Svatantrika-Middle Way school, 'merely labelled' doesn't negate something as existing from the side of the object as well. Lati Rinpoche said, 'Well, you do seem to make a point here', and he didn't contradict my explanation.

After the geshe exam, it is traditional that the monks come and greet you with *khatags* (white offering scarves) and a monetary offering. Rinpoche actually came over to see me after I completed the exam to offer me a *khatag* and an offering, and he said 'Your geshe exam went very well, it was very good'. He asked me where I was staying. At that time I was teaching at Kopan and had come from there specifically to do the exam, and was going to return to Kopan. Rinpoche said, 'So I suppose you will be starting to get an iron wing soon' [*laughs*], indicating that I would be flying off to the west. When he actually said 'So, you have plans to go to the west?', I responded by saying 'Well, I don't have any specific plans, but it may be possible'.

I said that I didn't have any specific plans, but that Lama Yeshe had already requested me to go to the west on a few occasions, and initially I had not accepted. I explained that there were some who kept telling me that it was a good idea. Physically I wasn't too healthy, so some were suggesting that if I went to the west it might be beneficial for my health. Also on a practical level, others said 'you don't really have much wealth, so if you go to the west you might find some good conditions for yourself as well'. Then Lati Rinpoche said, 'Oh well, maybe those are reasons why some would go to the west'.

That debate occurred some twenty-seven years ago, and I hadn't had any contact with Lati Rinpoche since then. Then last year when I went back to India, I noticed Lati Rinpoche at Singapore airport. He was in a wheelchair with some attendants and, thinking 'He won't remember me anyway', I didn't really want to bother him. But apparently he did remember me. We were on the same plane and when we landed in Bangalore, he recognised me, put his hands together and said 'Oh, so are you back in India now?' He seemed to have known that I was living and teaching in Australia. So he actually knew all about me even though we hadn't met for such a long time.

Going back to the main point that I was emphasising earlier, the Prasangika present all phenomena as being merely

imputed. 'Imputed existence' means that there is not the slightest existence from its own side for any phenomenon apart from being merely labelled and merely imputed. First of all one needs to understand that 'label' refers to the name or term that is given to something, and 'imputation' means the conceptualisation that we have when we refer to that object.

As a specific example consider Jeremy: 'Jeremy' is just the term or label that is assigned to the aggregates that we see. It would have been Jeremy's parents who gave the label 'Jeremy' to his aggregates and that, in itself, is proof that Jeremy does not exist from the aggregates own side. If Jeremy were to exist within the aggregates – from its own side, then his parents would not have had to label or name him 'Jeremy'. The fact that Jeremy had to be named soon after he was born (or before, whatever the case), is due to the fact that Jeremy does not exist upon the aggregates themselves. When we see Jeremy and think 'that's Jeremy', that's a conceptualisation of Jeremy.

This however does not deny the existence or the functionality of Jeremy, because we can see that Jeremy functions as a person. He not only functions as a person, he is a father of children too! [*laughter*]. So the indication that Jeremy is a mere label, doesn't imply that besides the label there is no function there. One must not misunderstand that the 'merely' of 'merely labelled' implies that it is just a mere term and that there is nothing that actually functions or exists there. So while 'Jeremy' is a mere label or a mere term given to the aggregates, Jeremy is also able to function as a person. That is how the Prasangika explain that while things do not exist inherently from their own side, they still exist nominally or conventionally. The conventional existence of Jeremy is that he functions as a parent and in all other activities that he performs. So while Jeremy does not exist inherently from his own side there is the conventional existence of Jeremy, which is the existence of Jeremy dependent on many causes and conditions.

Jeremy lacks any inherent existence, but nevertheless Jeremy does exist interdependently, and the existence of Jeremy is based upon a suitable basis, which are the aggregates of Jeremy. The label 'Jeremy' is given to the appropriate basis and the function that it is able to perform. Thus, Jeremy does exist and function as a human being. The main point is that even though things are merely labelled, the label has to be nominated upon a suitable basis for it to be an existent phenomenon. When it is merely labelled upon a suitable basis, then through its interdependent origination, it exists and functions as an existent phenomenon.

We get this understanding from, for example, the *Heart Sutra* where it says 'Form is empty and emptiness is form'. 'Form is empty' indicates that form does not have any inherent existence, i.e. all forms lack inherent existence. The implication of 'emptiness is form' is that while form lacks inherent existence it nevertheless still functions conventionally, i.e. it has a conventional existence and function. What also needs to be understood here is that the manner of how Jeremy exists as a merely labelled phenomena, is completely different from a merely labelled striped snake. One must be careful not to misinterpret the analogy and take it too far. The difference lies in the fact that the merely labelled snake is based upon a striped rope, and the rope does not function as a snake, whereas 'Jeremy' being a mere label does not negate the function of Jeremy. All other existent phenomena are the same; even though they are merely labelled they still have functions.

The analogy to be understood here - naming or thinking a striped rope to be a snake - is an analogy of mere labelling, but is not an analogy in terms of the functionality of that object. Further analogies presented in the auto-commentary are a heap of stones or a tall log being labelled a person. The analogy is to be understood like this: from a distance or at dusk, a heap of stones may be mistaken for a person or a tall log or a small tree may be mistaken for a person. Nevertheless there is no person existing from the side of the object, so it is merely imputed by the mind.

Again, this reminds me of an incident that occurred when we first settled in India. Sera Monastery and others were re-established at the camp in Buxador over thirty years ago. The area was known to have ghosts and spirits and the energy was quite disturbed. We had to go out into the wilderness to go to the toilet, and when it was dark it was very scary. So when Geshe Shakya went to the toilet he would take a kerosene lamp in one hand to see, and in the other hand he took one of his protection cords with a protection wheel on it, and he kept repeating the syllogism 'a vase is not inherently existent because it is interdependent'. He repeated that because it is known that if one has some understanding of emptiness and actually meditates on emptiness, then that can ward off any evil forces or negativities. So reciting that syllogism was a way of reminding himself of emptiness as he went out into the dark night. But at one point he came rushing back *[laughter]* and when asked, 'what happened?' He replied 'There is something there, I saw something!'. Later on we went to check, and we found that what he had believed to be a spirit or ghost was just a tall bush *[laughter]*. Whenever we mentioned that to him later he was always embarrassed.

There are further and more subtle implications with the analogy of labelling the striped rope as a snake. For example as explained in other texts, the striped rope is analogous to our physical aggregate, and labelling it snake, which is false, is analogous to the object of negation. The mind that apprehends the striped rope as a snake is analogous to grasping at inherent existence, which is innate self-grasping. The fear that arises when one sees the striped rope as snake is analogous to the fears and the unwanted miseries of samsara. Until and unless one recognises the striped rope for what it actually is - a rope - one's fear of the snake will not be eliminated. This means that from the moment one realises that it is not a snake and only a striped rope, the fear of the snake will be eliminated. This is analogous to the fact that we can only remove all of the unwanted miseries of samsara when we remove our misconception of innate self-grasping.

The tathagata view of how things exist

The auto-commentary then quotes from the sutras:

As stated in the sutras:

Even though one may have the appearance of a city of gandharvas, [i.e. a conjured city that doesn't exist]

Such a city is not found to be existent anywhere in any of the ten directions,

Thus, such a city is none other than a mere label,

Similarly this is how the tathagata perceives all living beings.

As explained, things exist just as they are perceived by the tathagatas. If our perception was not mistaken, then all phenomena would appear to us as being merely labelled imputed existents too. However, because of being under the spell of ignorance, phenomena don't appear to us in this way.

The tathagatas see all existence as being merely labelled, in the same way that just as we see illusions and mirages of places and things that do not exist, we understand that the illusion is just a mere label and a mere conceptualisation.

The statement 'things exist just as they are perceived by the tathagatas' implies that tathagatas (meaning the enlightened beings) perceive all existence as being merely labelled and merely imputed. For us unenlightened beings things don't appear as being merely labelled or merely imputed; rather they appear as existing from their own side. Referring back to Jeremy, when we look at Jeremy, and when we talk about Jeremy he does not appear to us as being merely labelled upon the aggregates, or merely imputed by our mind. Rather Jeremy appears to us as really existing out there independently. When we see Jeremy it seems to us as if Jeremy is actually there, existing within his aggregates, from his own side.

Another analogy that is used in the teachings such as the *Lam Rim*, is that when we observe a galloping horse we are completely convinced that there is an actual horse there that exists from its own side. We see no distinction between the horse's mind and body, only a very real galloping horse. In other words we don't have any notion of a horse that is merely labelled upon the aggregates. We totally believe that there is an actual horse that exists from its own side. These are ways of explaining how, by observing and investigating our misconception of things, we get closer to the understanding of what the object of negation is, which we have to recognise in order to negate.

Ignorance and karma

As indicated here in the auto-commentary

However, because of being under the spell of ignorance, phenomena don't appear to us in this way. On the contrary, the opposite of their mode of existence appears to us. As we grasp this faulty appearance, we accumulate karma and create the causes to circle in the rounds of samsara to experience numerous types of suffering.

What is being indicated here is that the reason things don't appear to us as being merely labelled and merely imputed by conception, is because we are under the spell of, or influenced by, or tainted with ignorance, and so phenomena don't appear to us as being merely labelled and imputed.

As explained in our last session, we should investigate and really consider how our individual self appears to us, particularly at those times when we have a strongly opinionated mind such as 'If you do this, I cannot accept it. This is totally unacceptable to me'. How does that 'me' or 'I' appear to oneself at that moment? If we were to actually stop and investigate it would be quite evident that the 'I' or 'me' appears as if it exists in and of itself, and that it does not relate to our physical aggregates or to our mind. The 'me' or 'I' seems to appear solidly, independently and existing in and of itself, and such an appearance is a faulty appearance, which we actually grasp onto. We apprehend and grasp at that faulty appearance, believing that it is 'me'.

It is this grasping at that faulty appearance which, as mentioned here in the auto-commentary, leads us to create the karma that propels us into the rounds of cyclic existence. To be more specific, because of that strong opinionated mind, that sense of 'me', and the grasping at the faulty appearance of the 'me' or 'I', the differentiation between 'I like this' and attachment to what 'I like' naturally arises, and conversely anger naturally arises with 'I don't like that'. This is how through the attachment to things with which one

agrees, and anger to things with which one doesn't agree leads one to create the karma that becomes the cause for us to be propelled into samsara.

If one can use this explanation to further enhance and expand one's understanding of how one creates karma, then that would be really meaningful. When we honestly look into how anger or strong attachment arise, we will come to notice that the stronger the sense of grasping at 'I' or 'me' (which are actually a false 'I' or 'me'), the stronger our opinions of what we like and dislike will be. Thus with a strong sense of 'I want this' or 'I like this' or 'this agrees with me', attachment develops. Whereas a strong sense of 'I don't like that', 'It doesn't agree with me', creates a strong aversion. Thus due to cravings or attachment and aversion or anger we create the karma that propels us into samsara.

Both the twelve links and the four noble truths explain that ignorance is the main cause for us to create karma, which is the secondary cause for us to be born into samsara. Here ignorance refers to the faulty appearance that we grasp onto and believe in, which is called innate self-grasping. If we were to overcome that faulty appearance and replace that innate self-grasping with the realisation of the wisdom realising selflessness or emptiness, then the causes to be re-born into samsara will cease.

There is a quote in the teachings saying that once the state of an arya has been obtained, the karma that propels one into samsara is no longer created. What is to be understood here is that the reason an arya being does not create the new karma to be re-born into samsara is because the arya being has realised selflessness or emptiness, which completely opposes self-grasping. And because there is no self-grasping, then strong attachments and aversions or anger do not arise any more. That is how the causes to be re-born in cyclic existence cease.

Here, one can also understand the connotation of the word 'arya', or *pag-pa* in Tibetan. It has the connotation of ascending to a higher level. The general connotation of 'ascending' is understood as ascending from an ordinary being to a noble being. I feel however that a more profound connotation could be 'ascending from having the ignorance of grasping at a self, to achieving the state of the wisdom realising selflessness'. Thus, when one ascends to that state, one no longer creates the karma to be reborn in cyclic existence.

Applying this to ourselves

Coming back to our personal experience and practice, it is good to honestly check and then observe that the stronger the sense of 'I', and the more opinionated that 'I' is, the more likely we seem to develop strong attachment or aversion to something. Thus if we begin to think about how the 'I' does not actually exist as it appears, then we will reach a point where we begin to notice 'Maybe there is something wrong with this perception that I have of myself; perhaps it could be false'. Even that basic understanding will help to reduce the strong sense of the opinionated 'I', which will reduce strong attachment or anger. That will definitely help us not to create heavy negative karmas.

We have not really been able to go much further into the actual subject matter of the text this evening. However I have taken the time to explain some of the main points that are presented in the text, because these points are in fact really important points for us to consider, particularly in relation to our own practice. As mentioned earlier, investigating how the 'I' appears to oneself and how one

actually grasps at it, is a worthwhile investigation to do in the practice of meditation.

In order to overcome all of the confusion and problems that we are going through, we have to investigate and see that the misconception that we have is actually the cause of all of our problems. The root of all of the problems comes from within ourselves, so trying to look for a solution somewhere else, will not help us in any way. We have to do a self-investigation and really look within ourselves. An analogy is that if a thief takes our valuables and goes off into the forest, then we have to look in the forest for the thief and the valuables. If were to look in the city when the thief has gone into the forest then we have completely missed the point, and are on the wrong track. So the source of all our problems and their causes lies within ourselves, thus self-investigation is a really worthwhile and essential activity.

The point that I'm raising here is how, for our own benefit and practice, it is much more worthwhile that we look within ourselves and do that self-investigation to find the source of all our problems, rather than pointing outwards and complaining about the selfishness or ego of others. People often make comments like 'he is really egocentric' or 'she is very short-tempered, and gets upset or angry so quickly' or 'they are very selfish'. Noticing that in others doesn't help us in any way, as it doesn't help us to overcome the causes of our own problems. What will help us is looking within ourselves. Rather than complaining, spend your time and energy in self-investigation and checking out how much ego there is, or how selfish or short-tempered one may be. Such a personal investigation is far more worthwhile and meaningful than investigating or checking others out, as it can lead to constructive and positive results.

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Edited Version*

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