
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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Let us sit in a comfortable posture and generate a motivation along the lines of the refuge and bodhichitta prayer that we have just recited. We should try and develop a strong sense of refuge in our mind, followed by a bodhichitta attitude for receiving the teachings.

HAVING MEDITATED ON EMPTINESS, ESTABLISHING THE OBJECT

At our last session we left off at this point in the auto-commentary:

If our perception is 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.

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.

This was explained in our last session and you would have also discussed it further in the seminar, as well as having a lot of discussion amongst yourselves. It is good to think about these points.

The commentary then continues:

If one were to take full advantage of one's potential now, then one will be able to identify this faulty appearance as the appearance of the object of negation, or the appearance of truly established existents; and the grasping as grasping or apprehending truly established existents.

This is explaining the possibility of identifying the object of negation. First of all - in relation to oneself as an individual or as a person searching for one's own 'I' - if one were to ask whether this 'I' or person exists, then of course, as explained earlier there is no question that the 'I' or person definitely does exist. However what is being explained here is that the 'I', person or the individual being does not exist as it appears to exist to our ordinary perception.

If we really look into, and investigate how, the 'I' appears to us (as ordinary beings), it will be evident that the 'I' appears to us as being inherently existent, i.e. as existing from its own side, rather than being a merely imputed or a merely labelled 'I' or person. We then apprehend the person as existing in that way. Note the terms that are used: the appearance of a truly existent person, an inherently existent person, and a person that exists by its own characteristics are synonymous. While apprehending the person to exist in that way is referred to as the misconception of grasping at a truly existent person, or a truly established person, or an inherently existent person. Is that clear?

Then the commentary reads:

As an ordinary being, besides the appearance that we have now, there is no other way for us to apprehend the negation of the syllogism's thesis.

What is being explained here is that apart from how a person appears to us ordinary beings, there is no other appearance of the object of negation. In particular, there is no other way to apprehend the negation of the syllogism's thesis. In the mahamudra context the particular syllogism used is, 'Take the subject 'a person': it doesn't exist inherently, because it is imputed upon the six elements'. In another format the reason would be 'because it is an inter-dependent origination'. In both cases the thesis concerns the lack of inherent existence of the person. So the negation of the syllogism's thesis is the inherent existence of a person or being, which is also the object of negation. Thus, what is being explained here is that besides the usual appearance of a person or being, there is no other way for the object of negation to appear to an ordinary being. In other words, the appearance of the person is the appearance of the object of negation.

As part of our normal routine we should have spent a few minutes in meditation at the beginning of the session; anyhow the point I want to make is that one could base the meditation on this explanation. As explained earlier, one first tries to identify the 'I' or the person as it appears to us, i.e. investigating how the innate self-grasping apprehends the 'I' or person. We basically relate this to ourselves: how does our 'I' or individual being appear to us? How do we apprehend that? That is our first task.

When we come to identify how the 'I' appears to us, which is that it appears to exist from its own side; not depending on anything it appears to exist self-sufficiently, in and by itself. We further become aware that we also grasp at that 'I' just as it appears to us. At that point in our meditation we have identified the actual misconception that we have in relation to the 'I'. Then one tries to recall the reasons why this 'I' or person does not exist in that way, using the syllogism quoted earlier (an 'I', person, or being could not exist inherently, because it is an entity that is merely imputed upon the six elements). When one really contemplates this reasoning, then one will get a sense of how the 'I' that appears to us does not actually exist in the way that it appears; this will become quite evident and strong in one's mind. Then one will gain a sense of what is to be negated. As one negates the inherent existence of an 'I', then selflessness - the fact that there is no inherently existent self - becomes more apparent to our mind.

When investigating the 'I' or being, one really must have the correct understanding of what it is that one is actually negating. As mentioned previously, if you are not able to identify the object of negation very clearly, then there is the danger of actually negating a conventionally existent 'I' or person. If one were to negate the conventionally existent 'I' or person, then one would be falling into the extreme of nihilism. If one comes to the conclusion that the 'I' or person does not exist at all, then that means that one has negated too much and fallen into the extreme of nihilism.

Initially when one meditates, one investigates the five aggregates and the six elements, and searches for the 'I' within that basis of imputation. One will then come to

realise that there is no 'I' within the heat element, and that there is no 'I' in the water element and likewise within the earth, wind, consciousness and space elements. When one thoroughly investigates in this way, one arrives at the point of not finding the 'I' within any of those six elements. Thus one reaches the point where there is seemingly no 'I' to be found at all. When one comes to that point of not being able to find the 'I' in that way, then although there is a sense of the 'I' being 'empty' or that there is no 'I', that is not yet the actual realisation of emptiness.

Nevertheless, it is said that this is a good point to reach initially, but if one were to leave it at that, i.e. that because one cannot find the 'I' within the six elements, therefore an 'I' does not exist, then one has fallen into the extreme of nihilism. However when the 'not finding' is based upon not finding an inherently existent 'I' (which is the object of negation) then one will be clear about what it is that does not exist. That will give the sense of what the emptiness of the 'I' or what the selflessness of the 'I' actually is. In other teachings, it mentions that the 'not finding' is the ultimate finding. Searching for and not finding the object of negation to be existent, is indeed a very subtle understanding of emptiness.

The auto-commentary further reads:

That is because all types of consciousness within sentient being's mental continua are tainted by ignorance and thus we necessarily perceive whatever object appears to our mind as being truly existent.

Another important point to note from the explanation here is, while the apprehension of truly established or truly existent phenomena can be overcome when one realises emptiness, the mere realisation of emptiness does not mean that one will necessarily overcome the appearance of inherent existence for either persons or phenomena. For example, an arhat would still have the appearance of an inherently existent person, and that is because an arhat has not abandoned the obscurations to omniscience.

According to the Prasangika, because an arhat has not overcome the obscurations to omniscience, the appearance of inherently existent phenomena still exists within their mental continuum. As explained in the teachings, the method for overcoming the obscurations to omniscience is by supplementing and enhancing the realisation of emptiness with bodhichitta, and thus creating extensive merit through the practice of the six perfections. One becomes enlightened when all taints of inherent appearance have been completely removed.

These points were clarified in the Madhyamaka teachings and it is good to try to recall the main points of difference between deluded obscurations and the obscurations to omniscience. According to the Prasangika the difference between these two obscurations is that, for example, the seed of the fundamental ignorance, which is the grasping at inherent existence or true existence, is called a deluded obscuration, and the latency or the imprint of that ignorance is referred to as an obscuration to omniscience. An arhat would have removed the actual delusions and their seeds and therefore overcome the deluded obscurations, thus becoming a foe destroyer or arhat. However they still have the imprints of that ignorance

and related delusions in their mental continuum. Therefore, because the appearance of inherent existence is still in their mind, they have not overcome the obscurations to omniscience. As explained in the teachings the reason why the appearance of inherent existence is still existent in the mind stream of an arhat is because their mind is still tainted by the obscurations to omniscience.

An analogy used to explain this is that when spectators see illusions of horses and elephants that are conjured up by magicians, they do so because their eyes are tainted by the magician's spell. For as long as the eye consciousness of the spectators is under the spell, that appearance will be there. Another analogy given in the teachings is that when one is asleep the sleep mind overrides one's awareness; thus everything is tainted by that sleep consciousness. Therefore while the events that take place in dreams appear to be real, they are all actually tainted by the sleep consciousness, so in fact they are not real. Thus when the mind is tainted by spells and so forth, one sees objects that do not actually exist. Similarly, the minds of ordinary beings are tainted by both deluded obscurations and the obscurations of omniscience; while the minds of arhats are tainted by the obscuration of omniscience; and it is only a valid being, a buddha, who has completely overcome both obscurations. Thus, a buddha has completely abandoned all misconceptions and mistaken views. This gives us a sense of what achieving enlightenment means.

The commentary further explains:

Thus by conceiving persons and phenomena as being merely imputed existents, one begins to understand how the 'I' is apprehended by innate self grasping – which is the root of samsara.

This is another subtle point. When one conceives the person or phenomena as being merely imputed existents, (for example how the person is merely imputed upon the aggregates or the six elements, and how the conceptual mind labels the aggregates or six elements as being person) it is not as if the person exists from within the six elements, so it cannot exist from the side of the aggregates. Rather, based on the six elements a person is imputed upon that collection, and that is what merely imputed means. When one begins to understand this, then one will also begin to understand how the 'I' is apprehended by innate self-grasping. This means that when one actually understands that the mode of existence of phenomena is that they are merely imputed, then one will also understand how the misconceived 'I' is apprehended by the innate self-grasping. When that is understood then one will recognise that as being the root of samsara.

Then the commentary reads:

By realising that, one will be able to fully understand how the subtle object of negation is apprehended.

The Venerable Omniscient One [Lama Tsong Khapa] has stated: 'The method is, presenting all phenomena as imputed existents and identifying the object of negation that opposes that'.

When we really think about the meaning of this quote from Lama Tsong Khapa, we will realise that he is making a very profound point. 'Presenting all

phenomena as imputed existents', refers to phenomena being merely imputed or labelled from the side of the conception and not existing in any way from the side of the basis. When one understands how phenomena are merely imputed and labelled by conception, then the opposite of that, (that things are not imputed or labelled, - but exist from their own side, or from the side of the basis) will be understood as being what has to be negated. This makes it clear that there is a direct relationship between the understanding of the actual mode of existence of things and the refutation of the object of negation.

One of the main points to be understood here is the meaning of imputed existence. Is it clear what imputed existence means? Another main point to be understood is identifying the object of negation. So it has to be clear what these mean.

The commentary continues:

Regarding these methods, indeed there is no certainty that great and famous scholars, with the conceit of being the guide of many migrating beings, really could lead others with a few words. The holy beings who have accomplished the essence are however the ones alone who have the utmost knowledge on this matter.

There have been many who have proclaimed themselves as scholars but, despite their conceit, their mere words do not necessarily explain the essential meaning of what is being explained here. On the other hand those holy beings who have engaged in the practice of meditation and so forth, and then relate these points from their experience are the ones who have the most knowledge on this matter.

As proclaimed by the great adept Norzang Gyatso:

The constellation of conceited scholars,
Who follow Losang, the Lord of Illumination,
Speak of objects established by their own
characteristics,
Inherently established entities, and truly existent
phenomena,
As objects to be negated that are bound by words
that designate,
Or objects to be refuted through cognising that they
are posited by one's mind,
And are seen to desire the great middle way that is
free from extremes.¹

I think what is being explained here comes to the same meaning as that presented in the Madhyamika text by Changkya Rolpa Dorje called *Recognising My Old Mother*. As a verse in that text states:

These days some bright minds,
So attached to terminology,
'Self-sustaining', 'truly existent' and so on,
Ignore this animated appearance
And search for another horned creature to refute.

As explained in another commentary on Mahamudra by Trije Tenpa Gyaltsan:

Some say that because the person is conventionally existent it should not be refuted. What is to be refuted is the true existence of person, for a person cannot in any way be truly established. However, while they assert

that on one hand, on the other hand, they assume that the 'animated appearance of a person' is not to be refuted. So leaving the animated appearance of person as it is, they assume a person merely bound by words that designate 'truly existent' is to be negated. This presentation can in no way be accepted.

So, it is my feeling that the explanation given by Norzang Gyatso comes to the same point being made here, which says that leaving aside the animated appearance of a person, and trying to look somewhere else for an object to be negated is missing the point. As explained, there are some who fear that if one were to negate the animated appearance of a person, one would fall into the extreme of nihilism. The main point to be understood in the Prasangika school is that what is to be negated is a truly established person as it appears and apprehended by sentient beings. Thus as these texts explain, holding on to the animated appearance of a person as the conventional person, while using the mere terms 'self-sustaining' and 'truly existent person', and assuming that the animated appearance of a person is not to be negated, is missing the point. So, it is my feeling the explanation given here comes to same point, however I could be wrong.

Another important point not to confuse is that for sentient beings there are two parts to the appearance of a person, a part that is the appearance of a conventional person as well as the part that is the appearance of a truly existent person. So, the object of negation is a truly established person in relation to the appearance of a truly existent person; and not the conventional person itself. In other words the apprehension of truly extent person as it appears to sentient beings is what needs to be negated and not the appearance of the person itself. If one is not clear about this point, it can lead to further confusion. [Translators note: in further checking with Geshe-la, he clarified that while the apprehension of a truly existent person can be abandoned through logic and reasoning, the appearance of a truly existent person, being an obscuration to omniscience, can only be abandoned when one reaches enlightenment - which is done by accumulating merit along the path to enlightenment.]

The quote in the auto-commentary from Norzang Gyatso further reads:

But if they only (assert) mere appearance to mind,
Such as the forms in a dream or illusory horses and
oxen,
And other than that (assert) nothing exists in the
least.

As explained here, the forms in a dream, or illusory horses and oxen are established as being a mere appearance to the mind, but they do not actually exist as they appear. This is the analogy used to illustrate how while things appear as truly existent, in fact they do not exist as truly established phenomena.

The quote continues:

Or if they only (assert) that individual sentient
beings,
From the summit of existence to the hells,
Are merely imputed by conception,
Then I know that without negating the subtle existent
object of negation,
However much they engage in analysis,
There is no way they will become aryaas through this
partial view.

¹ Jampa Ignen kindly translated this quote from Norzang Gyatso in the auto-commentary.

This translation uses the term 'aryas', a word can also mean that one will not go to higher levels by being satisfied with only that analysis, which is a partial view. The main point made here is that to merely affirm that dreams or illusory horses and oxen, or all existence from the summit of existence of samsara to the hells, are a mere appearance to the mind and are imputed by conception, and that no matter how much they engage in analysis, without actually negating the subtle object of negation they will not actually reach higher levels. So 'partial view' would mean gaining an understanding of how things lack substantial existence, according to the lower schools' explanation of selflessness. The main point being made here is that without really identifying or negating the subtle existent object of negation, one will not really go to the higher levels of gaining the realisation of the correct view.

The auto-commentary then further explains:

Thus, when investigated, if the 'being', 'person' or 'I' were to exist as it appears to the mind, then there is no other way for it to exist besides as a truly existent entity.

First of all we try to look into how the 'I', or being, or person appears to us. If we were to conclude that the 'I' or person exists as it appears to us, then there is no other way for it to exist besides as a truly existent entity, because that's how it appears to us - as being truly existent or inherently existent. When we really analyse how that 'I' appears to us, it appears as being independently existent, and not depending on any of the other bases such as the six elements or the aggregates, but rather as existing from its own side independently or inherently. Here 'being' 'person' and 'I' are to be understood as being synonymous. Thus what one needs to conclude that a being or person or 'I' does exist, and thus a person exists, but the (inherent) self of a person does not exist. Thus a person is selfless.

What needs to be understood is that if one were to be asked if a person exists, we would be able to answer with confidence that a person does exist. Yet the (inherent) self of a person does not exist. This is a particular distinction that we make in Buddhism. Some non-Buddhist schools such as some Hindu schools would be shocked if it were to be explained that the self of a person does not exist, because they believe in the self of a person as ultimately being established [as the *atma* or soul].

Since the conclusion is that 'I' does exist, what is the 'I' established upon?

Student: An 'I' is that which is imputed on the aggregates and the six elements.

Where is that 'I'?

Student 1: It is imputed on the basis.

Student 2: In the consciousness.

Once, up at Chenrezig Institute we were discussing how the 'I' is established and where it exists, and a lady called Dorje Drolma said confidently 'well, I am sitting on the chair, so that's where it is!' **The definition of a person is: an 'I' that is imputed upon either of the five aggregates as its basis.** While the teachings establishes the existence of the 'I' in this way, we still need to ask, 'So where is that 'I' that is imputed upon the five aggregates?'. My

explanation is that when we refer to our aggregates, then that clearly is not the 'I' because we talk about 'my aggregates', 'my head' or even different parts of the body as being a possession of the 'I'. The same is true for the mind or consciousness - we talk about 'my mind' or 'my consciousness', which indicates an 'I' that is separate from it. So, I feel that there is an instinctive and spontaneous sense of 'me' or 'I' that we have within ourselves, which is what we can identify as the 'I'. Maybe you have another interpretation. However we do have that instinctive sense or notion of 'I' or 'me', don't we? So, what is that based upon? How does that notion of 'I' or 'me' arise?

Student 1: Causes and conditions

Student 2: In the consciousness

We do have that notion or sense of 'me' or 'I' irrespective of our aggregates and mind. Of course, even to us it is clear that none of our body parts are the self, because we have that sense of ownership of our body. With the mind too, the very term we use, 'my mind', has that notion that the mind is a possession of the 'I' or the 'me'. Yet there is that instinctive sense or notion that the 'I' or 'me' does exist within ourselves, and since that is there, we need to further investigate how that arises. I would suggest that the instinctive and spontaneous notion or sense of 'I' that is present within ourselves is the basis of what we refer to as a person or 'I'. That is a point for further discussion and investigation.

Besides investigation through discussion, the masters have mentioned that it is really worthwhile to spend some time investigating where the 'I' or the person is while in meditation. Whatever time you spend in meditation investigating the 'I' or 'me' is very, very meaningful if we are to gain a deeper understanding of our identity. And while doing that, it also calms and settles down the mind, so there is that temporary positive effect of calming the mind down too. Besides that immediate positive effect, there is a deeper value to be gained from investigation, which will help us to utilise our potential for a deeper understanding.

There is a verse in the Madhyamika text that reads:

Seeing with awareness that all afflictions and faults arise,
From the view of the transitory collections,
And having realised the self to be its object,
Yogis strive to negate the self.²

So, it would be good to reflect on the meaning of this verse and incorporate it in our meditation.

As mentioned in our last session, it is very important that we really understand the point that it is a matter of focussing on the same object, and apprehending it in different ways. This refers to innate self-grasping versus the wisdom realising selflessness, both of which focus on the 'I' or the person. So although the focal object is the same, the innate self-grasping apprehends it as being inherently existent or truly established, whereas the wisdom realising selflessness apprehends it as lacking inherent existence and true existence. Thus, the two

² See the teaching of 11 May 2004

different apprehensions of the same object are to be understood as being completely opposite to each other. When one understands that, then one gets a sense of what is to be established and what is to be negated.

It is by meditating on these points that one becomes more acquainted with them. When one actually meditates on these points, and will recognise that the apprehension of the 'I' or person as perceived by the innate self-grasping is false, whereas the apprehension of the 'person' or 'I' perceived by the wisdom realising selflessness is true, and it is that which is to be established. So when one gets a good sense or understanding of that, then one acquaints one's mind with the true establishment of the person as perceived by the wisdom realising selflessness. One acquaints one's mind more and more with how the person has to exist in that way, and the more one does that, the more the misconception or misapprehension of the self or 'I', as perceived by the innate self-grasping, will naturally reduce in strength. This is how we eventually negate that misconception of the 'I' or self completely. It is in this manner in meditation that one gains higher and higher realisations. So, it is the main point that we need to understand from the practice.

Student: I wonder whether the 'I' has to be a primordial; that which has existed from beginningless time?

Actually the distinction between the 'I' that is categorised by this life's existence will cease when this life, whatever one's name or label and functions and so forth, ceases. However the mere 'I' is, as you have said, a primordial 'I' that comes from beginningless lifetimes and continues on to future lives. That is the distinctive and instinctive sense of 'me' or 'I' that we have, which would be the primordial 'I' that one has from previous lifetimes. So there is definitely that sense of the 'me' or 'I' that we instinctively have, which is actually something that we had in the past lives and will have in future lives. We will always have that sense of 'me' or 'I' regardless of the characteristics that one has in relation to ourselves now.

There followed considerable discussion among the students on this matter.

As mentioned in our last session, there are three modes of apprehension of the 'I': the apprehension of 'I' that is characterised by a truly existent or established 'I'; the apprehension of 'I' that is not characterised by a truly existent 'I'; and the apprehension of the 'I' that is characterised by neither. Whenever we think 'I want something', or 'I want to do something', or 'I want to go somewhere', that is the sense of 'I' or 'me'.

The different Buddhist schools have different interpretations of what that 'I' is. For example, the Svatantrika school assert the consciousness as the 'I', whereas the Chittamatra or the Mind-only school assert the consciousness that is the basis of all is the 'I'. Then there are the lower schools that assert that the five aggregates are the 'I'.

One master from the Svatantrika school asserts that the 'I' is sort of a continuum within oneself. When we die, the consciousness and this continuum goes on to the next life and then the next life after that, and so on, and that is what has to be considered as the 'I'.

It is only the highest Buddhist school, the Prasangika school, which establishes a 'mere I' as the instance of a person. So the Prasangika do not posit any of the aggregates, or the collection of the aggregates or the consciousness as the 'I' as it is actually just a 'mere I' that is posited as the person or being.

In the lower Buddhist schools when you search for the 'I', you can basically find it, because there is something that is established as being the 'I'. Whereas in the Prasangika Buddhist school, you cannot find the 'I' when you search for it. So the position of the Prasangikas is that when you search for it you cannot find anything besides the mere label 'I'.

Sometimes we may have more familiarity with the lower school's position, so if we are not careful that understanding might influence us, and assume that is what we are referring to as the 'I'. It is important that we try to get a grip on the 'mere I' that is being explained as being the person by the Prasangika school. It is a matter of investigation and finding out through one's own experience.

Apparently scientists have come to a similar conclusion. They have come to the point where when you try and look for the subtlest atom, you can't actually find it, and some scientists have come to agree that the atom is actually nothing more than an imputation or label.

Thus the Prasangika point of view is that things are merely imputed by the mind and exist as an imputation, and that if we were to actually search for the object within itself, we can't find it. For the Prasangika that is the indication that it exists as a mere imputation or a mere label. You can do further discussion and investigation of this for yourselves.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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