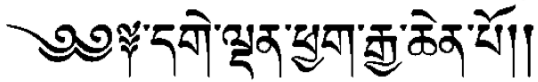


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# Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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Just as we have recited, bring to mind the particular characteristics of refuge and bodhichitta. Refuge secures one from following perverted paths while bodhichitta secures one from the lower-vehicle paths. Based on that understanding we can set our motivation and spend about five minutes in meditation. (*Pause for meditation*)

Of course, we don't have much time to spend in meditation here, so this is a sample of the meditation practice that you can do at home, when you have time. Keep in mind that the main purpose for practising meditation is to calm oneself by subduing one's mind - to free one's mind from negative thoughts. So try to meditate with that intention.

The Buddhist practice of meditation is unique in investigating and understanding the internal matter within oneself. Ultimately the techniques are used as means to overcome grasping at a self, and so that is the ultimate purpose of meditation. As presented in the teachings, that which serves as the main opponent or antidote for overcoming grasping at a self is the wisdom realising selflessness or emptiness. Thus, we are studying selflessness.

## **The manner of meditating on special insight**

### **HAVING MEDITATED ON SELFLESSNESS, ESTABLISHING THE IMPUTED EXISTENCE (CONT)**

In our last session we explained the meaning of the quote by Norzang Gyatso with the following explanation in the auto-commentary:

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. However, such a being as it appears to conception, is totally non-existent.

When one searches for the being, person or 'I' and investigates whether it exists as it appears to the mind, then the conclusion is that if it 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'. However the being that appears to the mind is totally non-existent. This indicates that the person or 'I' is not truly existent. In order to understand the full implication of what is being explained here, it is not sufficient to leave our understanding at the mere words 'the "I" is not truly existent'. Just being able to say that will not really help us to gain a deeper understanding of what is being implied here.

Rather, one must further research and investigate - if the 'I' was to exist inherently, then how would it exist? One needs to really search and further investigate the 'I', trying to bring to mind a vivid image as to how it would exist if it were to exist inherently. That is what identifying the object of negation means. Then based on a clear understanding of the object of negation, one goes into the process of eliminating the possibility of there being a truly existent 'I' or person.

Of course there are a variety of syllogisms that are used, however one of the most prominent ones is this: Take the

subject 'a person' - it lacks true existence - because it cannot be established as a truly existent singular entity, nor can it be established as truly existent multiple entities. The implication of this is that if the person or any other phenomena were to exist truly or inherently, then the only way for it to exist is either as a truly existent single entity or truly existent multiple entities. Because anything that is perceived by the mind is perceived as either a single entity or as multiple entities, all existence is subsumed into these two categories. So if the 'I' were to exist inherently, then it would have to exist as either a singular entity or as multiple entities. However, no matter how much we may search for it, we cannot find an 'I' or person that exists as an inherently existent single entity, or as inherently existent multiple entities. Lama Tsong Khapa elucidated this syllogism in his teachings on the lack of truly established existence of things.

When one reaches the point of having totally eliminated any possibility of the 'I' or person existing in that way, then the sense of how it is empty of true existence, or inherent existence, dawns. The main point here is not to leave one's understanding just at the mere words that a person or 'I' lacks true existence or inherent existence, but to undertake a thorough search to understand how the 'I' lacks true existence. If the truly existent 'I' were to exist, where does it exist within oneself? Thus, the commentary leads us into the actual investigation of searching for a truly existent 'I' within oneself. One gets a sense of what it is that is to be negated after a thorough investigation, when one successfully eliminates all possibility of a truly or inherently existent 'I' or person within oneself. Thus, the object of negation becomes clear to the mind, and in this way we are able to establish the lack of inherent or true existence. If we have time later on in our sessions, we can elaborate more on the reasonings presented in the *Lam Rim* and other syllogisms. However, one can also supplement this understanding now by reading the relevant texts.

What has to be specifically understood as the meaning of 'however a being, such as it appears to conception, is totally non-existent', is that it is not the appearance that is 'totally non-existent' but rather that it does not exist in the way that it appears to exist. So the appearance does exist. Using the analogy of the conjured horses and oxen, that illusion of a horse and ox does appear to us, nevertheless it does not actually exist in the way that it appears to us, i.e. it appears to us as a real horse or ox, but in fact it is just a conjured horse and ox that does not exist in reality. Similarly with phenomena, things appear to us as being truly existent, but they don't exist in the way that they appear to us. However the appearance does exist. In terms of obscurations, even though the appearance of inherent existence is an obscuration to omniscience, the appearance does exist. What we have to understand here is that the object does not exist in the way that it appears to oneself.

The search for the non-inherently existing 'I' is done in a meditative state, i.e. one has to actually be in meditation. This means that one withdraws from all distractions and maintains a complete focussed mind. Then, in that focussed state of mind one searches for the 'I' within oneself. One goes through the process of really looking into every aspect of oneself and investigating whether the 'I' exists as an independent or inherently existent 'I'. That is the process of identifying the object of negation, which then forms the basis for one to meditate on the selflessness of the 'I'. What has to be understood is that one investigates the 'I' within meditation, so one is investigating the meditator's 'I', and

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based on that investigation one establishes the selflessness of the meditator's 'I'. So that is the process.

As the auto-commentary further reads:

That is because such a being's body and mind respectively are not the 'being'. The combination of body and mind is also not the 'being'. Each of the six elements is not the 'being'. The combination of the six elements is not the 'being'. Yet, there cannot be a 'being' which is completely separate from the six elements. Thus the incomparable protector Lord Nagarjuna has said:

The current heading from Kyiwo Tsang's commentary - 'Having meditated on selflessness, establishing the imputed existence' - is the second of two subdivisions of the heading 'The manner of meditating on special insight, (the first subdivision being 'Identifying the object of refutation on the subtlest level').

This second sub-division is further divided into four:

1. Meditating upon oneself as an object
2. Applying it to others
3. Using the mind as an object
4. In brief, applying it to all appearances

There is a significance in the order of these outlines that is quite apparent.

### **1. MEDITATING UPON ONESELF AS AN OBJECT**

This sub-heading is concerned with establishing imputed existence. Initially in meditation, one uses oneself as an object; then having gained a good understanding using oneself as the object, it is relatively easy to apply that understanding [of selflessness] to other objects. The root text reads:

*30. An individual person is not the solid matter of his body, nor is he the liquid, heating or gaseous matter. He is not the space of his body, nor is he the consciousness. If an individual is not any one of these, then the kind of person other than this who does exist is merely the label of a person on the six sensory spheres.*

The explanation in the root text is actually a verse from Nagarjuna's text, *The Precious Garland*. Thus the author is using the very reasons that are presented in Nagarjuna's treatise. In relation to this presentation, the syllogism being used is this: Take the subject 'a person' - it lacks true existence - because it is imputed on the six elements. We introduced this syllogism last week, whereby one gains a further inkling of how the person lacks true existence because it is merely imputed on the six elements.

The main point to understand here is that it is through the logical reasoning 'because the person is imputed upon the six elements', it therefore lacks inherent existence. This is the reasoning that is presented in the sutras. Nagarjuna extracted the essence of the sutras when he explained it in this way. Shantideva also uses this very reasoning to establish the lack of inherent existence or true existence, and Lama Tsong Khapa then further elucidated that. Thus the author presents this reasoning as an essential way of establishing mahamudra. Of course this also is related to the reasoning of interdependent origination, and so, even though it is worded differently, it comes to the same point.

There are actually many attributes of this particular reasoning that is derived from the earlier masters. One of the specific characteristics of this reasoning that has been highly praised is that it enhances one's understanding of the correct view of selflessness or emptiness. Furthermore, it has the

characteristic of being able to eliminate a lot of misconceptions or conceptual thoughts easily. It also has the characteristic of being able to enhance the focus of one's meditation. Another important characteristic is that this syllogism establishes the correct view while not in any way harming the laws of cause and effect and interdependent origination. It is said that rather than harming it actually enhances the establishment of interdependent origination. Thus in the meditation, one relates the reasoning that is based on this syllogism 'Take the subject "the person" or "the being" or "the individual" - it does not exist truly - because it is an imputation based on the six elements' to oneself, and one then goes through each of the six elements within oneself. Thus the understanding of the reasoning is developed from within one's meditation.

The reasoning that the person lacks inherent or true existence negates the possibility of true existence of an individual or a person. The actual reason that a person lacks true existence is because it is merely imputed upon the six elements. The connotation of 'merely imputed' implies that the 'I' does not exist upon the basis.

When this is first presented to someone who does not have much acquaintance with the view of emptiness or selflessness, then that can be a bit of a shock. They might think, 'if the person does not exist upon the very basis that it is imputed upon, then where else could it possibly exist?' It is not surprising that this view might be a bit of a shock. However, the way that it is presented here is a bit more skilful than being just a bald statement. Firstly it says that when searched for, you cannot find it on the basis that it is imputed upon. Not being able to find it after searching for it, gives more space in one's mind, rather than bluntly stating that it does not exist upon the basis at all. So saying you cannot find it on the basis of imputation when you search for it gives a little bit more time for the mind to digest that information. Then as the teaching presents, one actually goes into each of the six elements and searches as to whether the self or 'I' or person exists there or not.

The main point is that if you investigate how you cannot find the 'person' within the six elements. Thus as mentioned earlier, the being's body and mind are not the being, the combination of the body and mind are also not the being, each of the six elements is not the being and the combination of the six elements is not the being either. That is the summarised result of investigating and searching into every aspect of the basis of imputation.

In relation to the meaning of the verse itself, 'An individual person is not the solid matter of his body' refers to the earth element. Solid matter would be for example, the structure of the bones, so the earth element is the solid aspect within one's body. So, upon investigation the bones are not found to be the person. Nor are the liquid aspects of the water element the self. Just as we have to be based on solid matter (bones and other structures), we also need the liquids within our body for survival. 'Heating' refers to the fire element, so we need to have warmth and heat for survival. However, the heating or fire element within oneself is not the self. The gaseous matter refers to the wind element, which at a gross level functions as our breath. And the fact that the external sign of death is when our breathing stops shows how much we depend on the wind element. However, the wind element or the air within oneself is not the person. Then there is the space element, which refers to the crevices, hollows and empty spaces within the body that we also depend on. Even that is not the person. The consciousness is

also not the person. 'If an individual is not any of these' indicates the collection of all of the elements. Therefore individual or being or person is neither one of these elements, nor is it the collection of all of the elements. As the root text further indicates that even though the person is not any one of the elements and not even the collection of the elements, there cannot be a person who is not related to the six elements, i.e. a person that exists as an independently existent entity does not exist.

In this investigation, it is clear that an individual or person cannot exist as a separate entity from the six elements, but that rather the person or individual exists in dependence on the six elements. But when one searches within the six elements (as mentioned earlier) and goes through each of the six elements of the earth, water, fire, wind, space as well as the consciousness, one eliminates every singular aspect of the elements within oneself as being the person. When one does further investigation and finds that the collection is also not the person, then through that process of investigation in meditation one will come to the clear assertion and understanding of how 'person' is a mere label that is imputed upon the six elements.

The auto-commentary then quotes from Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* text, which I have explained previously. The presentation in the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* is a more thorough investigation of the basis of imputation, going into each and every aspect of what makes up ourselves. It first looks at the physical aspects, and then goes on to the aspect of consciousness and every other aspect of the characteristics that make up a person, searching whether that is the person or not.

As the auto-commentary reads:

Similarly, as stated in the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*:

Teeth, hair and nails are not a 'self',  
Nor is 'self' the bones or blood,  
'Self' is neither mucus nor phlegm,  
Nor is 'self' lymph or pus  
'Self' is not fat nor sweat,  
Neither is 'self' the lungs nor liver,  
'Self' is not any other visceral organs,  
Neither is 'self' faeces nor urine.  
Flesh and skin are not a 'self',  
Nor is 'self' heat or wind,  
In no way is 'self' one of the bodily orifices,  
Nor are any of the six types of consciousness a 'self'.<sup>1</sup>

The auto-commentary then further explains the meaning of these verses, and includes definitions of each of the elements.

As the auto-commentary reads:

As stated, the being, self or 'I' is not any of the solid body aspects of the earth element, such as the bones and so forth. Nor is the self any of the fluid aspects of the water element, such as blood and so forth. The self is neither any of the heat aspects of the fire element – which pervades from the top of the crown to the bottom of the feet. The being is not the light and moving aspect of the wind element. The orifices of the body such as the pores are not the being. The various types of consciousnesses such as the eye consciousness are not the self, and the self is not any of the consciousnesses either. The collection of the consciousnesses is not the self, and the self is not the collection too. As such, there is no other

instance of the self existing in the way that it appears and apprehended by the meditator.

The auto-commentary next quotes from sutras that explain that the self is not one of the five aggregates.

The sutras also state: Form is not 'self'; feelings are not 'self'; discrimination is not 'self'; compositional factors are not 'self'; consciousness is not 'self'.

The auto-commentary then further explains:

Thus, the meditator's five aggregates, six elements, the collections of these, the shape of the collections and so forth are not the meditator's 'being'. For if it were, then the fallacy of the bases of imputation and the imputed phenomena; the one that adopts and that which is adopted; and that which possess branches and the branches themselves; would have to become one.

This is a more elaborate explanation relating to explanations given in other teachings as well.

The sutra quoted above actually identifies each of the five aggregates as not being the self. The first, the form aggregate refers to our physical aggregate, our physical body. Nor are the second aggregate, feeling, and the self. The third of the aggregates is the aggregate of discrimination; the fourth the aggregate of compositional factors, and the fifth aggregate is the aggregate of consciousness. So the sutra identifies each of the five aggregates and explains that they are not the self.

I have explained the reason for the particular order of the five aggregates in the past, however to refresh your memory I will just go over the sequence again. When we perceive anything, the first thing that we perceive is the shape or colours of an object, which is the *form aggregate*. Then based on whether the object appears attractive, unattractive or neutral, one develops either a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling, which is the *aggregate of feeling*. Then based on any of those feelings, a faulty sense of discrimination develops in our mind, which is the *aggregate of discrimination*. Then we generate attachment towards attractive objects, anger towards unattractive objects and indifference towards neutral objects. Attachment, anger and indifference are encompassed in the *aggregate of compositional factors*. The states of mind of attachment, anger or indifference then leave an imprint upon the consciousness, which is the *aggregate of consciousness*. This is how we create the karma to be reborn again and again in the cyclic existence. This explanation is from the *Abhidharmakosha*.

When we understand the significance behind the order of the five aggregates as actually relating to our own experiences of relating to objects, then we gain a deeper understanding that sums up our existence here in the cyclic existence. We can leave the second part of the quote from the auto-commentary for our next session. Meanwhile it is good for you to read the commentary as translated in the textbook that you have. It is good if one has access to these books and familiarises oneself with the points made here.

The purpose of going into great detail is so that we will be able to gain the unmistakable and correct understanding of the view of emptiness. As mentioned previously, just repeating the words 'things don't exist inherently', or 'things don't exist truly', will not be sufficient for us to get the correct understanding of the view of emptiness. Rather, the process of gaining the correct view of emptiness or selflessness is through a thorough investigation based on sound reasonings.

<sup>1</sup> See the teaching of 24 May 2005.

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If we were to try to do some reasoning just by ourselves, without reference to the teachings, then we could easily come to the wrong conclusions, and that again will not serve the purpose of gaining the correct understanding of the view of emptiness. In fact if we were to rely just on our own reasoning then we could easily fall into either of the two extremes. If we try to do too much analysis and investigation, without the basis of good reasoning, then there is a danger of falling into the extreme of nihilism (where we assume that nothing exists and the self does not exist at all). Whereas if we don't investigate enough, then we will not be able to gain the correct view, and we will just remain with that normal notion that we have of things as being solid and existing truly. So for an unmistaken and correct understanding of emptiness, one must investigate using the reasonings that are presented in the teachings.

The masters who presented these reasonings based on the Buddha's teachings have really worked hard in presenting it in the most correct manner possible. A good understanding based on the correct view of emptiness is necessary if we are to do other practices such as the tantric practices of visualising oneself as a deity. With every tantric practice of visualising oneself as a deity, one has to arise as a deity in the sphere of emptiness. This means that one has to have a correct understanding of emptiness in order to rise as a deity in the sphere of emptiness. If we don't have a proper understanding of what emptiness means, then in the beginning we might assume a deep state of trying to do the visualisation of the deity within that sphere of emptiness, but then later on in the practice we come back to assuming our view as an ordinary being, where we go back to normal perceptions and act as an ordinary being. That is the fault of not having a sound and proper understanding of emptiness or not maintaining a proper understanding of emptiness. Thus in every aspect of the practices, sutra or tantra, it is essential that we get the proper, unmistaken and correct understanding of emptiness.

Of course these points have been explained earlier during our Madhyamika classes, however I will just re-cap the main ones. In the process of study, and periodic recollection, and thinking about the view of emptiness and how it is established, we may not be able to gain an actual realisation of emptiness in this lifetime. That might be too high an expectation, as it might, in fact, be quite impossible to actually achieve this in one lifetime.

Nevertheless, every effort and every attempt that we make in that process will not be in vain. Every time we make an attempt to understand emptiness it leaves a very profound imprint in our mind to become the suitable vessel for receiving the profound teachings of emptiness. What we do now is preparation for when we meet the correct master, the master who is able to impart the unmistaken view of emptiness. The Madhyamaka text says,

Whoever, upon hearing emptiness while an ordinary  
being  
Repeatedly generates intense inner joy, whose eyes are  
Moistened by tears arising from intense joy,  
And whose body hairs stand on end.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned, a suitable trainee is moved to the extent of feeling such joy that it manifests in a physical aspect of tears uncontrollably flowing from one's eyes and the hairs on one's body standing on end. If upon hearing the words 'emptiness' one is not moved in that way, then that is

already a sign that one has not yet become the actual and proper trainee with all of the right conditions. What I'm trying to point out here is that every attempt that we make now it will leave deep imprints in our mind to gain all the necessary conditions as a trainee to receive the profound teachings on emptiness, which will result in quickly developing the realisation of emptiness.

As people would be aware the next session is discussion and the one after that is the exam. It is good to take that to heart and try to do the best you can, in both the discussion and the exam.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright  
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Edited Version*

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<sup>2</sup> See the teaching of 26 November 2002.