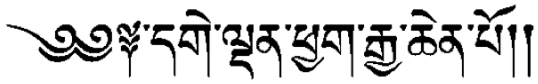


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# Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



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As reminded many times previously, it is good to develop a good motivation for receiving the teachings. (*Pause for meditation*)

## HAVING MEDITATED ON SELFLESSNESS, ESTABLISHING IMPUTED EXISTENCE

### 1. MEDITATING UPON ONESELF AS AN OBJECT (CONT.)

This outline is the first of four subheadings from Kyiwo Tsang's commentary. In the last session we quoted verses from the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* and covered the auto-commentary's explanations of those verses.

The auto-commentary states:

As such, there is no other instance of the self existing in the way that it appears and apprehended by the meditator. 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.

Having investigated whether there is a truly established or truly existent 'I' within oneself, one comes to the conclusion that if there is a truly existent self, then it would have to be somewhere within one's six elements or aggregates. Verse 30 of the root text<sup>1</sup> investigates whether the self exists inherently or is truly existent within any or all of the six elements from which we are comprised. Nor are any of the five aggregates the self.

Before we go on with the text, it would be good to try to gain a really good understanding of what has been explained so far, and try to develop a vivid image of what it is that is being negated. In relation to the self, what is it that is being negated? What is the object of negation? We need to try to gain a really clear understanding of what that is first.

When we think of the self, how does it appear to us? How do we apprehend the self? When that is clear to the mind it means that we are getting closer to identifying the object of negation. As explained in the teachings, the self appears to us as being a self that is inherently existent; an independently existent self.

As the auto-commentary mentions, if such a self were to exist, then it would have to exist in relation to the five aggregates, because it is the five aggregates that make up one's existence. Thus, as the teachings suggest, we carefully investigate first how the self is related to the form aggregate. If the self were to be inherently and independently existent, then that would mean that the form aggregate is also independently existent. We need to be able to relate to this logical analysis so that we can expand our view. If we were to conclude that the form aggregate is independently existent, then that is clearly contrary to the normal perception of the aggregates, which are not a single independently existing entity, but a collection of many different parts.

If the self or the 'I' were to be independently existent as the form aggregate, then the form aggregate itself would have to be a single, independently existent entity or phenomenon. But when we observe our own form aggregate, which is the body, it is clear that our body is made up of many different parts, so it is not a single entity existing just by itself. In this way, even when we use our common sense it becomes clear that the self or 'I' that appears to us, and that we grasp as being an independently existent entity, does not exist in that way. Then the object of negation becomes very clear in our mind, and when that becomes clear then we know what it is that we need to refute.

The auto-commentary continues:

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.

The appropriate syllogism for this explanation is: Take the subject 'a person or being' - it does not exist truly or ultimately - because it is merely imputed upon the five aggregates. This reasoning shows that because the self or being is merely imputed upon the five aggregates, it cannot exist inherently or independently within the five aggregates. One needs to specifically understand here that the self or being is neither inherently one with nor inherently separate from the aggregates. One must understand the reasoning that the self is not inherently one nor separate from the aggregates to mean that the self cannot be found within the five aggregates. When we think in this way we arrive at a deeper understanding.

As the auto-commentary further reads:

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 possesses branches and the branches themselves; would have to become one.

The fallacies mentioned here would occur if the self, person or being were to be inherently existent. If the being or the person were to be inherently existent, then the basis of imputation, which is the aggregates, would also have to be inherently existent. If the person and the basis of imputation were both inherently existent, then because 'inherently existent' implies a single independently existent entity, the fallacy that would occur is that the person (the imputed phenomena) and the aggregates (the basis of imputation) would have to exist as a single entity, as one and the same. And if they were one, then there would be no way to identify the imputed phenomena as being a separate entity from the basis of imputation.

Likewise, 'that which is adopted' refers to the five aggregates. Due to karmic consequences, we come to adopt the five aggregates, so the one who adopts the five aggregates is the person. Therefore there is a distinction between the one who adopts and that which is adopted. While that distinction exists conventionally, if it were to exist inherently then the fallacy would occur that the one who adopts and that which is adopted (the five aggregates) would have to be one and the same, an inseparable entity.

What one needs to understand is that if asked whether there is a basis of imputation, then yes, there is a basis of imputation, and yes, there are conventionally existent imputed phenomena, but they do not exist inherently or independently. The same fallacy occurs with the example of the branches and that which possesses the branches being

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted at the end of the teaching.

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one and the same, or a single entity. These fallacies would occur if all these examples were to be inherently existent.

The conventional existence of, for example, the basis of the imputed phenomena that is the person, is that it exists as a mere imputation of the mind or conception, i.e. that it exists as merely imputed phenomena. So the conventional existence of a person is a merely imputed existence of the person. Likewise the conventional existence of the basis of imputation, are the merely imputed aggregates. That is how it is to be understood. When one relates the understanding of mere imputation on the conventional existence of phenomena, then one gains a deeper understanding of how, according to the Prasangika system, phenomena are established as being merely imputed. One needs to incorporate an understanding of 'merely imputed' into the conventional existence of phenomena.

The auto-commentary further reads:

If the aggregates are claimed to be the 'self' then the following fallacy will also occur, because of many aggregates there would have to be many selves.

This is presenting the particular fallacy where if the aggregates were to be the self then, as there are five aggregates, there would have to be five different individual selves; and if there is one self, then all the five aggregates would have to become just one single entity. These fallacies, of course, were presented in the Madhyamaka teachings so basically students should be clear about this fallacy<sup>2</sup>. If the self were the aggregates, then there would have to be either five selves (because there are five aggregates) or there would be only one aggregate, just as there is one self.

The reason the teaching goes into all of this detail of looking into every possibility, is to rule out any instance of an inherently existent self. If the self were to be inherently existent or truly existent, then there would have to be an instance of it - it would have to exist somewhere. Thus the teaching goes into every possible way that a self would exist if it were to exist inherently. Then, having exhausted every possibility, one is left with a clear conclusion that a self cannot exist inherently. The process of investigation is followed by contemplative meditation.

Having identified the object of negation (a self that is to be negated) and determining the nature of that object of negation, (which is that it is an inherently or truly established self), one investigates in every possible way whether such a self exists or not. Having investigated every possibility, one comes to the point of not being able to find an inherently existent self anywhere. Thus one is left with a sense of complete absence of anything resembling a self and the meditator experiences a sense of vacuity. It is that vacuity which is the absence of anything resembling an inherently existent self, that one then remains focussed on in meditation. That is basically the understanding of selflessness or emptiness that one meditates on.

In particular, if the consciousness were the being, then statements such as a being or person getting sick, talking, seeing, giving birth to a child and so forth would not be possible.

This is referring to a specific doubt relating to the consciousness. If the mind or consciousness were to be the being, then because the consciousness or the mind is intangible and unobservable to our eyes, we would not be

able to say that a person is becoming sick, or talking, or seeing, or giving birth to a child. These are all things that we can see and relate to, but which would not be possible if the consciousness were to be the being.

As the auto-commentary further explains:

Also, just as there are six consciousnesses, so too will one being will have to become six beings. Or alternatively, just as there is one being, so too will the six consciousnesses be a single, inseparable consciousness.

This is presenting the same logical fallacies that were explained earlier. Here again, if the consciousness were the being then because there are six consciousnesses, there would naturally have to be six beings or persons. And if we were to say that there is only one being, then because the consciousness and the being could not be separated, we would have to conclude that the six consciousnesses become one consciousness. The auto-commentary continues:

If the shape of the collections [referring to the shape of the person, for example, of the aggregates] were the being then as the being would have to be physical form, the fallacy of no beings existing in the formless realm would occur.

Also a person other than the five aggregates does not exist because the aggregates would not possess characteristics that illustrate compounded states, since they would be unrelated inherently established entities.

Basically what is being presented here is that if the aggregates were to exist inherently, then the aggregates themselves would not possess the characteristics that illustrate the compounded states, because that which illustrates compounded states does not relate to inherently existent aggregates. The reason given is that 'since they would be unrelated inherently established entities'. This means if the aggregates and that which illustrates the compounded states are unrelated inherently established entities, then it would not be possible for them to relate to each other. Thus the aggregates could not have those characteristics. There are three characteristics that illustrate compounded states: production, abiding and disintegrating. The aggregates have those characteristics - they are produced, they abide and they disintegrate. What is being explained here is that if the aggregates were to exist inherently, then those three characteristics could not apply to the aggregates.

These sorts of fallacies are backed-up with a quote from the texts:

As stated in the texts: If they were other than the aggregates, the characteristics of the aggregates would become non-existent.

Also as stated in the sutra *Play of the Elephant*:

If an inherent nature of phenomena were to actually exist,  
Then the Conqueror, hearers and so forth would have to realise that,  
At the end there will be no liberation of any phenomena,  
And scholars will never be free from mental fabrication.

If phenomena were to actually exist inherently, then the conquerors (meaning the buddhas), and the followers such as hearers, bodhisattvas and so forth, would have to realise that. If phenomena were to actually exist inherently, then liberation would not be possible and the scholars who are trying to realise emptiness will never be free from mental fabrications. These are the fallacies that would occur.

<sup>2</sup> This material was covered over a number of sessions, beginning on 25 May 2004.

Then the auto-commentary further explains:

Thus when investigated with a subtle mind during the meditative equipoise, the false appearance of the being, self, person or 'I' as it appears to the meditator, will be completely removed without even an atom remaining. Bringing to mind the generic image of that vacuity, one meditates single-pointedly on it without allowing anything else to come to mind. When the apprehension of the vacuity of the non-affirming negation begins to slightly wane, then within a state of meditative equipoise, one again engages in the analysis as done previously. Combining analysis with a single-pointed meditation in this way is what is referred to as the space-like meditative equipoise.

One needs to gain the clear understanding of what 'the apprehension of the vacuity of the non-affirming negation' implies. Without a clear understanding of what is being negated, there is the danger that one will negate too much and come to a mere absence of phenomena, which is then confused with the actual emptiness of phenomena. So if one does not have a clear understanding of the vacuity induced by the non-affirming negation, there is the danger of making a grave mistake and missing the point.

When one does the investigation exactly as explained earlier, one comes to the point where the non-affirming negation dawns. Realising that vacuity or absence of an [inherently existent] self is where one gets a sense of actual emptiness or selflessness. Then one meditates on that.

As the auto-commentary further explains:

When a person without much acquaintance with the view first realises this, they will experience fear. Whereas for those who already have a degree of familiarity; they will experience joy.

When a person without much familiarity with the view of emptiness or selflessness initially begins to realise the non-affirming negation and the sense of vacuity, they may experience some sort of fear. I suppose that comes from a sense of losing touch with everything and a feeling as if one is falling into an abyss. When Lama Tsong Khapa was giving teachings on emptiness, one of his disciples had to grasp on to his own shirt just to make sure that he was still there. That sense of fear arises with the dawning of the sense of emptiness. However, for those who have some familiarity with the experience of emptiness, when the sense of emptiness or selflessness dawns there is a sense of great joy in actually having found the correct view.

Thus far we have covered the thorough investigation of selflessness using oneself as the object, and arrived at the point of gaining the sense that there is no inherently existing self. As mentioned previously, it is very important to have a really clear understanding of the self that is to be refuted, which is the object of negation. Based on that clear distinction in one's mind, one investigates oneself by going through the six elements and the five aggregates and so forth, as explained earlier. Then when the vacuity/absence of the self that is to be negated dawns upon the meditator, then the sense of selflessness becomes clear in the mind.

However even though the self that is to be negated is eliminated, the conventionally existent self needs to remain stable, and not disturbed in any way. Otherwise there is the danger of falling into the extreme of nihilism, where one actually negates the very existence of the self, and comes to the wrong conclusion that there is no self that exists at all. One has to be clear that while there is a self that is to be

negated, the conventionally existing self remains in place. That has to be clear from the very outset.

All of these explanations arise from Verse 30 of the root text which is actually a quote from Nagarjuna's text:

*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 relevant syllogism here is: Take the subject 'a person or an individual being' - it is not truly existent or ultimately existent - because it is merely imputed upon the six senses. Using that syllogism as a basis, this quote explains how none of the six elements are the self - solid matter is not the self or individual person, nor is the liquid and so forth. Nor is the collection of the six senses the self. The verse goes through each of the six elements and refutes each one of them as being the person, while 'an individual is not any of these' refers to the collection of the six elements not being the self. 'The kind of person other than this who does exist' is saying that a person that exists as a separate entity from the six senses also cannot exist. Thus a person is a merely labelled entity.

In preparation for our next session, it is good to read ahead in the text and try to get a preliminary understanding of it. If we periodically read and think about these points, it will help to maintain whatever one has understood and make it further clearer.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright  
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