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# 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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In accordance with the refuge and bodhichitta prayer that we have recited we visualise the lama above us. Then having taken refuge, the lama in a very pleased manner descends to the top of one's crown and enters into one's crown aperture. At the point when the lama abides at one's heart, one feels great joy and bliss. Being aware of that state of bliss, remain focussed on it for the next few minutes. (*pause for meditation*)

Last session we left off the auto-commentary where it reads:

... for those who already have a degree of familiarity; they will experience joy.

What needs to be understood from the explanations given so far is that it is not sufficient to just remain in the single-pointed state of meditative concentration with calm abiding. Just focussing on emptiness and remaining in that concentrated state is not sufficient to generate special insight. To develop special insight within the meditative state, one needs to actually engage in investigation, which is explained in the text. One must really take this to heart and understand the point that is being made here. Otherwise one may fall into the wrong conclusion that it may be sufficient just to attain calm abiding focusing on emptiness and remain in that state.

## 5. PRESENTING THE STATE OF POST-MEDITATIVE EQUIPOISE

The commentary reads:

To present the state of post-meditative equipoise:

As stated: Because the 'being' encompasses the six elements, it is not ultimate.

The syllogism in relation to this statement was presented earlier: take the subject 'the being' - it doesn't exist ultimately - because it is merely labelled upon the six elements.

As the auto-commentary further reads:

When investigated after rising from the meditative equipoise, one comes to understand that the distorted appearance of a being as it appears to the consciousness under the spell of ignorance, does not actually exist. However a mere being, person, or 'I' does definitely exist.

After coming out of meditative equipoise, one brings to mind that the being that appears to the faulty state of mind under the spell of ignorance (meaning the misconception that we have) does not actually exist in that way. However that does not negate the existence of a conventionally existent being, because there is definitely a person or a being.

Then the auto-commentary further reads:

The mode of its existence is: just as one would label a heap of stones as a person, and a stripped rope as a snake, similarly a being is a mere name, mere label and mere imputation by conception on the mere collection of the six elements or five aggregates. Like an illusion it is not true, and is merely an appearance of emptiness arising as interdependent-origination. One needs to develop a sound understanding on this point and then meditate on it.

'Like an illusion it is not true' means that it does not exist truly or ultimately. These analogies are similar to what has been explained earlier. The main point to be understood here is that conventional phenomena will reappear to the meditator when the meditator comes out of meditative equipoise and enters the post-meditative state. Thus a being or person will once again appear as being truly established, or inherently existent. Then the meditator must bring to mind the point that even though it appears to be truly established or inherently existent, in reality it does not exist in that way, i.e. it does not exist in the manner that it appears.

An analogy used to verify this point is for example, mistaking a heap of stones to be a person. From a distance, a heap of stones may appear to be a person. However, not even an atom of a person actually exists on the heap of stones. Even though it appears to be a person, there is no person there at all. Likewise with a striped rope: at dusk a striped rope may appear to be a snake. Even though it appears exactly like a snake and one may believe that there is a snake there, in reality there is not even an atom of an actual snake existing within the rope. These analogies show that even though a person, a being or an individual appears to be truly established or inherently existent, it does not exist in that way at all. Is this clear?

What one really needs to understand here is that things or phenomena are merely imputed, and so the understanding of imputed existence has to readily come to mind. What is being explained is that the mode of existence of a person is that it is merely imputed on the basis of imputation, which are the five aggregates or six elements. A person is a mere imputation, a mere label given on the basis of imputation, and does not exist from its own side. One needs to incorporate the understanding of the object of negation here as well.

When a person is analysed, the object of negation is a being or an individual person that exists independently, without depending on the conceptual mind that labels it, or the name or label itself. In other words a person that exists independently and self-sufficiently is the object of negation. So, when identifying the mode of existence of a person one needs to incorporate that understanding as well.

What is being specifically introduced here is that since a person does exist, what then is the mode of its existence? As explained, the mode of existence of a person is that it is merely labelled and merely imputed by conception and does not exist in any way from the side of the basis, independently, or self-sufficiently. When the object of negation is clear in one's mind then one can understand

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the actual mode of existence of a person, being or individual.

We need to be very clear about the process of identifying the object of negation, and undertake a thorough investigation of understanding what is being negated. If one has analysed thoroughly and really worked towards gaining a very clear understanding of what the object of negation is, then when one comes out of the meditative state and things still appear as being inherently existent, then due to the earlier investigation and analysis, one will immediately be able to understand that it is a false appearance; and that even though there is no inherently or truly existent person, there is still an existent person that is a merely labelled and imputed upon the aggregates. In other words the perception of a truly existent person or being will not harm the reality of the conventional existence of a person.

The practical benefit of familiarising ourselves with this view is that the understanding of emptiness can help one to deal with strong emotions such as attachment and anger. Even though our understanding right now may be a mere concept rather than the actual realisation of emptiness, nevertheless the more we familiarise ourselves with the view of how things do not exist in the way that they appear (i.e. as being inherently or truly existent), the more it can help us in our daily lives when we encounter objects of delusion, such as objects of attachment like beautiful objects or objects of anger. For example when we encounter an object of attachment, the reason why we normally allow ourselves to cling to the object is because we truly believe in its attributes as they appear to us. This influences us to develop strong grasping.

However, if one has familiarised oneself with the view of how things do not exist in the way that they appear, then when one encounters a beautiful or attractive object, one would be able to resort to that familiarity and immediately apply that logic. If one can actually apply the logic that even though the object appears to be very beautiful or attractive, in reality it does not exist in the way that it appears, then one will find that, the strong attachment starts to reduce immediately. Then and one will not be influenced by strong attachment that beautiful or attractive object.

In this way one will reduce the negative karma that is created as a result of having strong attachment to the object; it is the same with anger. By reducing the negative karma arising from the influence of attachment and anger, one will then be naturally preventing the creation of karma for future unfortunate rebirths. If one can actually reduce the negative karma that leads us to unfortunate rebirths through even a mere familiarity with the understanding of how things actually exist, then that would be really worthwhile. Even though we may not have gained the actual realisation of emptiness or selflessness right now, just the mere understanding of the view can still help prevent creating negative karma. So in that way there is definitely a practical personal benefit.

This explanation sheds light on the explanation in the teachings where it says that projecting karma, (which is the specific karma that causes us to be reborn into cyclic existence in the next life) is influenced by ignorance. The

more we familiarise ourselves with the correct view that 'things do not exist in the way that they appear' (even just repeating this phrase) the more it will help us to really limit the creation of negative karmas, which is a great benefit for ourselves. As mentioned in the auto-commentary one needs to relate to the appearance of phenomena as being like an illusion, i.e. as not true. This is the manner of how one should train one's mind in perceiving and relating to phenomena in the post-meditative state.

Things are conjured by a magician to appear in a certain way to our eye consciousness. However the mental consciousness can assert that those things do not exist in the way that they appear to the eye consciousness. The understanding that one needs to derive from this explanation is called the 'emptiness of appearance'. While there is a certain appearance to the eye consciousness, that appearance can be verified as being non-existent or empty by the mental consciousness. In relation to the analogy of an illusion, the eye sees the illusion but the mental consciousness knows that it is an illusion, and so it can contradict what is seen by the eye consciousness. Just as the illusion can be seen as being empty or not existing in accordance with how it appears, so too the mental consciousness can verify that all phenomena, even though they appear to be inherently existent or truly established, do not exist in that way. Thus one can understand the meaning of the emptiness of appearance. With this explanation, one comes the conclusion that 'emptiness of appearance' applies to all conventional phenomena, in that they are like an illusion and thus false and not true.

Even though the following explanation has been presented many times before, nevertheless it is a way to re-affirm and remind you of the difference between conventional and ultimate phenomena. First of all, the conventional existence of phenomena is regarded as being like an illusion - as being not true, and false. The distinction between conventional phenomena and ultimate phenomena should be understood through their definitions: *that which is not established in accordance with how it appears to the primary consciousness that perceives it as its object, is the definition of conventional phenomena. That which is established in accordance with how it appears to the primary consciousness that perceives it as its object, is the definition of ultimate phenomena*

If we were to use form as a particular instance to clarify this distinction: first of all, the primary consciousness that perceives form is the eye consciousness. So, form itself is a conventional truth because it does not exist in accordance with how it appears to the eye consciousness that perceives it. In fact the Tibetan term for conventional truth incorporates the element of being false.<sup>1</sup> It is false and not true, because its mode of existence does not accord with how it appears to the primary consciousness that perceives it. Whereas the emptiness within form is ultimate truth, because it is established and exists in

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<sup>1</sup> Ed: To convey this Jampa Ignen suggests the translation 'concealer truth' while Ven. Fedor suggests 'illusory truth'.

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accordance to how it appears to the primary consciousness that perceives it, which is the wisdom realising emptiness of an arya being in meditative equipoise. Thus the emptiness within form is true and not false.

What I've been elaborating so far is the mode of existence of a person in accordance with this explanation from the auto-commentary:

...the distorted appearance of a being as it appears to the consciousness under the spell of ignorance, does not actually exist. However a mere being, person or 'I' does definitely exist. The mode of its existence is: just as one would label a heap of stones as a person, and a stripped rope as a snake, similarly a being is a mere name, mere label and mere imputation by conception upon the mere collection of ones six elements or five aggregates. Like an illusion it is not true, and is merely an appearance of emptiness arising as interdependent-origination. One needs to develop a sound understanding on this point and then meditate on it.

Without a sound good understanding of this one will not be able to grasp the unique presentation of Prasangika. Even though the auto-commentary only refers to it by saying '...it is merely an appearance of emptiness arising as interdependent-origination', one needs to understand that it implies both ways; just as the appearance of emptiness needs to arise as interdependent-origination, likewise the appearance of interdependent-origination also needs to arise as emptiness. In other words the perception of emptiness and interdependent-origination should enhance each other.

What does 'an appearance of emptiness arising as interdependent origination' actually mean? It means that the same mind that validates emptiness, also contributes to the understanding of how things exist conventionally or interdependently. It is applied in the same way in the opposite direction. Interdependent-origination arising as emptiness means that, without using further reasoning, the mind that investigates and validates phenomena as being interdependent originations is also able to validate emptiness. Is this clear? For some who say that you understand now, perhaps that understanding may be gone after you leave the room.

For example, the mind that establishes the conventional or nominal existence of the person (which is that it is merely imputed or merely labelled) also understands, without using further reasons and without having to rely on further investigation, how a person is thus empty of inherent existence. That is what is meant by interdependent origination arising as emptiness.

On the other hand, when one investigates the non-inherent existence of a person and concludes that a person does not exist inherently or truly, that same mind also understands, without resorting to further investigation and reasons, the conventional/nominal or inter-dependent existence of the person. That is what is called emptiness arising as interdependent origination.

The understanding of 'merely an appearance of emptiness arising as interdependent-origination' relates to the instance of the meditator in meditative equipoise focussing single-pointedly on the non-inherent existence or the emptiness of their individual being. When the

meditator comes out of that meditative state into the post-meditative state, then they are able to enhance their understanding of how the nominal existence of a person does exist as being a merely labelled and merely imputed phenomenon, even though a person does not exist inherently or truly. That is the meaning of emptiness arising as interdependent-origination.

These are actually quite subtle points that are not easily grasped even by some scholars. To gain an understanding of emptiness itself is not that difficult but being able to establish emptiness so that it does not harm the interdependent-origination or nominal existence of phenomena; in other words being able to use the understanding of emptiness to enhance the understanding of interdependent-origination of phenomena is much more subtle and difficult.

The unique view of the Prasangika is that the appearance of emptiness negates the extreme of nihilism, whereas the appearance of conventional or nominal existence negates eternalism. The explanation of lower Buddhist schools from the Svatantrika and below is the other way around: the appearance of emptiness negates eternalism and the appearance of conventionality negates nihilism. The unique presentation by the Prasangika will be explained further on in the text, so we can go into more detail then.

As a way of backing up this explanation the auto-commentary presents a quote from a sutra:

The sutras also confirm these points, as stated in the *King of Concentration Sutra*:

When magicians conjure up forms, creating various  
horses, elephants, or chariots,  
What appears to be there does not exist at all.  
The nature of all phenomena is to be known like this.

If one doesn't know it to be an illusion then conjured horses, elephants and so forth appear to be actually existent. However they do not actually exist in the way that they appear. So too, one must understand all phenomena to be like this - they appear to be inherently existent, but yet they do not exist in that way.

When a young woman sees the birth and death  
Of a son in a dream, she is delighted at birth but not at  
the death.  
All phenomena are to be known like this.

When, for example, a woman has a dream of giving birth to a son then there is a great joy. However, in the same dream she dreams that the son died and then there is great sorrow. But in fact, both are equally an illusion - no son has been born, and no son has died. The emotions are based on a false notion that is affected by the sleep state. When the mind is affected by the sleep consciousness, emotions and so forth arise in dreams but they are not based on real events.

The main point being made here is that although the appearances in dreams appear to be real that it is only because of the mind is under the influence of the dream state, which makes appearances in dreams seem to be real. However when one wakes up, one realises that it is not true and that it was just a dream. Likewise in our waking state the reason why phenomena appear to have inherent existence or true existence is because our mind is influenced by the ignorance grasping at true existence.

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That is what one needs to understand: even though happiness, sadness and everything that one experiences appear to be truly existent or inherently existent, that appearance of being truly existent or inherently existent is because of the influence of ignorance.

It is good to incorporate these explanations into our daily lives, and develop a cautious mind. Sometimes we may not be clear that something is an illusion and start to really believe in it, so it is good for us to understand that there are times where we might be actually just imagining things or even hallucinating. We should be able to recognise that, so that we don't get carried away or affected in a negative way.

Many years ago when I was living in Kopan, there were about six geshe serving as teachers there. Once we were all coughing at the same time with a contagious cold. There was an acupuncturist who suggested that we should all have acupuncture done. I declined that offer and said 'no, I won't have acupuncture'. However Geshe Tenpa Dhargye did have acupuncture, so I asked him later whether it had helped. He replied 'well, I lay down with needles stuck in me for about two hours and I don't know if it really helped or not'. Later on he said that this doctor had given him some good medicine, and one of the reasons he said this medicine was very good was that after taking it he started seeing flowers, and had a feeling of being uplifted and floating in the sky. *[laughter]* Then he started to also see individuals who were looking into the window where he was lying down. He said that he was able to console himself thinking, 'OK, I see these people looking at me, but this must be an illusion, it cannot be true; I am having an hallucination here'.

There are incidents where we may see things that don't really exist. Of course sometimes it may be because of some medication or drugs, but even normally we might start seeing things that really don't exist or even start hearing things that are not really true, like songs and so forth. If we can be a little bit more mindful and maintain our awareness, we will be able to detect whether or not we are having an hallucination.

We can cover the rest of the verses from the sutra in our next session. Meanwhile you can refer to the text books and try to familiarise yourself with the material and try to get a good understanding by reading it.

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