
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇམ་དགེ་ལུན་ལུག་ཀྱི་ཚེན་པོ།

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As usual we will spend about five minutes in meditation.
(*pause for meditation*)

That will also suffice for generating a positive motivation for receiving the teaching.

3. USING THE MIND AS AN OBJECT TO FOCUS ON

We have already covered part of this heading.

The auto-commentary states:

When investigating the mind within the continuity of the previous meditative equipoise, this mind that is void of being established as form or matter, which - like the sun being free from clouds - is unobstructed is the basis of all conceptual thoughts and superstitions to arise and issue forth, and unlike the rays of a butter lamp that cease when the flame extinguishes, the mind's continuity of clarity and knowing is unceasing. To the awareness that apprehends one's own mind, it appears as a self-sufficient entity that is not dependent upon anything else, and is apprehended in that way. This mind which seems to exist in this manner is just as Shantideva states in his *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*:

Streams of instants and collection of parts,
Are false, just as a rosary or an army and so forth.

We gave a brief explanation of this extract from the auto-commentary in the last session. The main point to be understood from Shantideva's examples is to relate it to the reasoning in the syllogism 'things lack inherent existence, because they are dependent on a collection of parts'. The reason for the lack of inherent or true existence is that things exist in dependence on their parts, rather than existing independently.

Shantideva's examples are used to explain that just like a mala and an army are a collection of many parts, so too the mind is a collection of many moments. Thus, because everything has to depend on their parts for their existence, things cannot exist independently.

In explaining the meaning of the two lines of Shantideva's text, the auto-commentary reads:

As mentioned, a rosary is merely labelled upon the collection of individual beads strung together...

This was briefly explained in our last session. A rosary or mala is actually a collection of many individual beads. However, when we think of a mala it does not appear to us as being an entity that is a collection of many different beads. Rather, we apprehend a mala that exists independently, in and of itself. The mala appears to exist solidly or independently as a single entity. Of course when we investigate the reality of the mala's existence, we find that it is in fact a collection of individual beads that have been strung together. This is a very important example that shows how deceptive our perception is.

While our perception gives rise to an appearance of an independently existing mala, in reality there is no inherently or independently existent mala. One has to really think about these analogies thoroughly and try to get a real sense of what is being explained. This explanation is in fact refuting the object of negation.

The main point to be understood is that for ordinary beings, the very mode of appearance of any phenomena is the object of negation. How does the mala or rosary appear to us? It appears as being an independently or inherently existent object. So this very appearance is the object of negation. Does an independently or self-sufficient mala exist? If it does, then how does it exist? Where does it exist? If we further investigate each of the individual beads that make up the mala, does an independently or self-sufficient mala exist in any of those beads? No. Right?! So, in the process of investigation one comes to the conclusion that an inherently existent mala cannot be found anywhere.

At the point in our investigation where we conclude that an inherently existent mala cannot be found anywhere, we need to further investigate whether one is negating something that actually exists, or something that has never existed before?

Of course, if we negate something that actually exists, then we have missed the point and fallen into the extreme of nihilism. What we find through our investigation, is that the object of negation is something that has never existed previously. If the mala were to actually exist as it appears to us, then the more we investigate it, the clearer and more evident its inherent existence should become. However the opposite is true - when we investigate the mode of existence of the mala in relation to its appearance to us, it becomes very elusive and in the end we can't actually find such a mala. That in itself is proof that there was never an inherently existent mala to begin with.

One needs to also reflect on the fact that in the process of investigation one is not altering the basis of imputation in any way. It is not as though we are actually taking the mala apart and spreading the beads around in order to illustrate that there is no inherently existent mala, right? We have not physically touched the basis, so the basis is still intact. Thus, we have not altered the basis of imputation in any way to come to the conclusion that there is no inherently existent mala.

When we come to the point of not finding the mala that initially appeared to us, we bring to mind the fact that because not finding the mala is not due to altering the basis of imputation in any way, this proves that an independent and self-sufficient mala does not exist, and that it has never existed before. When in your investigation you reach the conclusion that there is no inherently or self-sufficiently existent mala to be found on the basis of imputation or anywhere else, then that is finding the ultimate mode of existence of the mala. It is equivalent to refuting the object of negation, which is an inherently or self-sufficiently existing mala. One needs to understand that these two understandings come down to the same thing. Refuting the object of negation in relation to the mala and that not finding a self-sufficiently or inherently existent mala when you search for it comes down to the same thing.

When one comes to the understanding that the ultimate mode of existence of a mala is that it is devoid of inherent existence or existing self-sufficiently, then one has also clearly identified the mala that is to be negated. At that point, one has touched the emptiness or selflessness of the mala, while at the same time understanding appearance of a mala. Normally one has the apprehension of an inherently existent mala, because that is how it appears to us without any investigation, and that is what needs to be refuted. When the actual mode of existence of the mala dawns upon oneself, then one comes to understand that what is referred to as 'mala' is a mere label and mental imputation placed upon the basis which is a collection of many beads. Although being merely labelled, at the same time it fully functions as a mala. That is the mode of existence of the mala.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary then touches on an explanation of Shantideva's next example, which is that a collection of different individuals is called an 'army'. An army is merely a mental imputation or label that is given to a collection of different individuals bearing arms. Apart from that collection there is no army that exists independently or self-sufficiently by itself. Again, in relation to our perception, an army appears to us as being a single, self-sufficiently existent entity, but in reality an army is dependent on many different individuals who make up what we label an 'army'.

These two examples are to be used to understand the point that just as the collection of beads is labelled as a rosary and the collection of individuals is called an army, so too what is called 'mind' is nothing but a collection of different moments of mental continuums. According to the root text, the mind is to be understood as a mere collection of the continuity of different mental continuums.

The auto-commentary continues:

...and an army is merely labelled upon the collection of individuals armed with weapons and wearing a uniform. Thus they are not truly established from their own side. Thus, with the validity of the citations and logical reasons, one reaches a point of determining the fact that phenomena [the mind in this case] do not exist in the way that they appear to the mind. Then within that meditative equipoise, you must place a single-pointed focus on this conclusion.

As stated in the *Eight Thousand Verses*:

The mind does not exist as mind, because the essence of mind is clear light.

This means, an inherently established mind cannot exist as mind because the essence of mind is clear light and thus empty....

This last sentence explains the first part of the quote from *Eight Thousand Verses*, 'The mind does not exist as mind', because 'the essence of mind is clear light and thus empty'. Here, one must be careful not to misinterpret the mind itself as emptiness. Rather it is the essence or the ultimate nature of the mind that is emptiness, which does not mean that the mind itself is emptiness. Elsewhere this quote from *The Eight Thousand Verses* is used to explain the mind itself not being stained by the defilements.

The auto-commentary then further reads:

The *Kontsek sutra* states: All buddhas of the three times has never seen in the past, do not see at the present and will never see in the future an [inherently existent] mind.

An inherently existent mind is not seen by the buddhas of the past, is not seen by the buddhas of the present and will never be seen by the buddhas of the future.

Then the auto-commentary continues:

The lord Marpa also uses the term 'flaring the mind with emptiness'¹ when the nature of mind is meditated upon and clearly identified; as Marpa states:

This is indicating that Marpa gained the realisation of emptiness by relying on his master Lord Maitripa.

To quote from Lord Marpa's sayings:

I went to the banks of the River Ganges in the East,
There through the kindness of the Lord Maitripa,
I was able to gain realisation of the basic nature of reality which is unborn,
And my mind flared in voidness, [my mind was grasped by emptiness]
As I saw the nature of the actual primordial state parted from all mental fabrication,
I directly met with the three Buddha-bodies like with my mother,
From then on, I cut off my mental fabricating.

The commentary then quotes another master:

Drokun Paktru also states:

The root of samsara and nirvana is the mind,
The mind is primordially pure in suchness,
It is primordially peaceful and unproduced,
Thus the mind has always been free from fabrications.

The indication that 'it is primordially peaceful and unproduced' is an indication that the actual nature of the mind is primordially or from the very beginning, free from mental fabrications.

4. IN BRIEF, APPLYING IT TO ALL APPEARANCES

The auto-commentary explains:

In summary, I convey the instructions of my own spiritual master who is not only 'omniscient' in name, but in accordance with the meaning of his name, is indeed all knowing.

36. *Let me record a few words from the mouth of my root Guru, Sangay Yeshe, a truly omniscient Buddha, who has said succinctly,*

37. *'If you can see whatever thoughts arise in your mind as a process of mental labelling, then the sphere of all things [cho-ying, dharmadhatu], the true supreme voidness, is dawning on you without any reliance on other forces of logic. In this state, when voidness has appeared [on your mind's perception], fixing your consciousness single-pointedly on that voidness, is truly a wonderful feat.'*

The verse says that 'If you can see whatever thoughts arise in your mind as a process of mental labelling, then

¹ That is the term used by Alexander Berzin. Another translation is 'grasping the mind with emptiness'

the sphere of all things, the true supreme voidness, is dawning on you without any reliance on other forces of logic.'

The auto-commentary then explains the meaning of the verse:

As mentioned, when whatever appearance is perceived as being projections of thoughts, a mere labelling by conception, then the supreme voidness dawns upon you without having to resort upon other factors. It is as stated in the *Madhyamakavatara*:

Nominal truth becomes the method and,
Ultimate truth becomes that arising from method.

Being able to resort to the very reasoning of appearance, which is the ability to unite the appearance of emptiness with the mind that apprehends emptiness itself in the state of meditative equipoise, is indeed a wondrous feat.

Referring back to the last two lines of verse 37 the root text continues:

38. Similarly, Pha-dampa Sangay has said, 'Consciousness applied in the perception of voidness, once it has understood voidness, should be turned round full circle to destroy the ignorance of grasping for its own true independent existence. Voidness itself and the perception of voidness are both devoid of being tangible concrete entities obstructing anything, O! people of Ding-ri.' All such quotations lead to the same idea.

As the Kyiwo Tsang commentary explains, the main point of this presentation refers to using whatever appears to one's mind as a way to enhance the understanding of voidness. Furthermore, when the auto-commentary says 'in summary', the author - Chokyi Gyaltsan is indicating that this is the summary of how to engage in the practice. Then Kyiwo Tsang quotes from Lama Tsong Khapa's *Three Principles of the Path*.

11. You've yet to realise the thought of the Able as long as two ideas seem to you disparate: The appearance of things - infallible interdependence; and emptiness - beyond taking any position.
13. In addition, the appearance prevents the existence extreme, emptiness that of non-existence, and if you see how emptiness shows in cause and effect you'll never be stolen off by extreme views.

When one understands that the understanding of emptiness enhances interdependent origination and that the understanding of interdependent origination enhances the understanding of emptiness, then at that point one has gained the intent of Buddha Shakyamuni.

As explained in our previous session, striving to understand interdependent origination should help to enhance the understanding of emptiness or voidness, and striving to gain an understanding of emptiness or voidness in turn should enhance the understanding of interdependent origination. When one has understood this then one has touched the main point. The quote from the *Madhyamika* text, 'nominal truth becomes the

method and, ultimate truth becomes that arising from method'², relates to this point.

As Kyiwo Tsang's commentary further explains, what is being clarified here is the demarcation between the point where one has gained the correct understanding of the view, and the point where one has not yet gained the understanding of the view. As explained here, when one gains the clear understanding of the emptiness or voidness of any phenomenon, then that in itself establishes the independent origination of the phenomenon. The point where one reaches the correct understanding of the view is that when one is able to establish voidness or emptiness, one is also able to establish the independent origination of that phenomenon. If, in establishing the emptiness of an object, one is able to maintain the nominal or conventional understanding of phenomena, then one is not tainted with the faulty appearance of phenomena that we have right now, which is that it exists inherently or self-sufficiently.

As the quote from the *Madhyamakavatara* indicates, it is only when one is able to fully grasp the conventional existence of phenomena that one is able to establish the ultimate existence of the phenomena. It is impossible to establish the ultimate existence of phenomena, without being able to establish the conventional or nominal existence of phenomena.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary goes on to further explain the quote from Lama Tsong Khapa, which is that the understanding of the appearance of emptiness should enhance interdependent origination, and the appearance of interdependent origination should enhance the understanding of emptiness. What does that actually mean? When one relates to the interdependent origination of any phenomena then one is able to gain the understanding of the emptiness of that phenomenon, which is that it lacks inherent or true existence. The reverse is also true: when one relates to the emptiness of that phenomenon, then that enhances the understanding of the phenomenon as being an interdependent origination.

In other words, referring to emptiness helps to negate the extreme of nihilism, and referring to interdependent origination helps to negate the extreme of eternalism, and that is when one has gained the unique presentation of the Prasangika point of view. This, as mentioned previously, is different to the presentation in lower schools where interdependent origination negates the extreme of nihilism and the view of emptiness negates the extreme of eternalism.

Referring to an explanation from another commentary, to understand the statement, 'things do not exist inherently', we can take the example of a sprout; if merely hearing the words 'a sprout does not exist inherently' brings about the understanding that this does not mean that the sprout does not exist at all, but rather that the sprout exists in relation to, or in dependence upon, many causes and conditions, and that it is actually an interdependently arisen phenomenon, then that is referred to as 'emptiness

² Verse 6.80. See teachings of 2 March 2004.

enhancing the understanding of interdependent origination'.

On the other hand if, when hearing the statement 'a sprout is dependent on causes and conditions and is an interdependent origination', one gains the understanding that the sprout does not exist self-sufficiently and independently, but rather that it is completely devoid of inherent or independent existence, this is then 'the understanding of interdependent origination enhancing the understanding of emptiness'. This is how they enhance each other and one should be able to relate to this really profound and subtle understanding of the relationship between the two.

Verse 36 of the root text uses the words 'let me record a few words', this can be understood to mean 'in summary'. So the summary comes from the author's own guru, Sangay Yeshe, which is the validation of gaining the correct view.

As the Kyiwo Tsang commentary further explains, the main point is that one needs to be able to gain the understanding that interdependent origination (or how things are dependently arisen) is the complete opposite of the view that things exist inherently or truly. When a person is able to apprehend that those two distinct modes of existence cannot co-exist together at any one time, and that they are in fact complete opposites, then with this understanding of interdependent origination, one can gain an understanding of the lack of true or inherent existence of any phenomena. The view that establishes the reasoning of interdependent origination as the reason why things do not exist inherently or truly is unique to the Madhyamika system and does not apply to any other system.

The auto-commentary does not give an elaborate explanation of 'in brief applying to all appearances' at this point, however, it does do so later, under the heading 'Dedicating the merits derived from the composition'.

The main point presented this evening is the crucial point that gaining the correct view is the understanding of how interdependent origination enhances the understanding of voidness or emptiness and the understanding of emptiness enhances the understanding of interdependent origination. We can go into more detail about these points in our next session.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
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Edited Version*

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