
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇམ་དགེ་ལུན་ལུག་གྲུ་ཚེན་པོ།

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As usual we will begin with a short meditation (*pause for meditation*).

We can now remind ourselves of the positive motivation for receiving the teachings.

3. CONCLUSION¹

According to the Kyiwu Tsang commentary this section has three sub-headings:

1. The manner of dedicating the merits
2. The manner of applying the benefits and removing impediments
3. The manner of actualising the fine path

1. The manner of dedicating the merits

We have covered this first heading, which relates to verse 39 of the root text.

2. The manner of applying the benefits and removing impediments

1. THE MANNER OF APPLYING THE BENEFITS

With respect to this sub-division, the auto-commentary reads:

After having come out of meditative equipoise, 1) the manner of practice during the post-meditative state, 2) the manner of determining the object of negation when re-entering meditative equipoise, as well as 3) clearing doubts about how to overcome the extremes during both of those two states, is presented together in the following verses:

Note that these subdivisions in the auto-commentary have a different wording to that used by Kyiwu Tsang.

40. *Having developed in this manner, the habit of meditation on mahamudra, then during the post-meditation period you appear to your six types of consciousness and scrutinise how they appear to you. In this way the bare mode of existence of things will arise before you brilliantly.*

41. *In short, then, whatever appears to you, such as your mind, [you should take its ordinary appearance as a truly independently existing entity to be your object of refutation for voidness analysis]. You should not grasp at such things as existing the way they appear to be. Instead you should try to ascertain their actual mode of existence.*

42. *Then constantly nourishing your understanding [by meditating alternately on space-like voidness during formal meditation sessions and on mirage-like voidness during post-meditation periods], you should combine the essence of all things in samsara and nirvana into their single*

common nature as void [and meditate upon this]....

The first line of verse 40, 'Having developed in this manner, the habit of meditation on mahamudra' refers to developing familiarisation with meditative equipoise on mahamudra. The next line refers to the six types of consciousness. So, first we need to recall that what appears to your six types of consciousness are the six types of objects that are perceived by the six consciousnesses². As indicated here, it is good to develop a sound understanding of what the six consciousnesses and their corresponding objects are, as the teachings often refer to them.

As the verse indicates, having familiarised oneself with them during the state of meditative equipoise, you then examine or scrutinise how the objects of the six consciousnesses appear to you during the post-meditative state.

The auto-commentary explains:

Because of having acquainted yourself in the state of meditative equipoise, when in the post-meditative state, whatever appears to the six consciousnesses such as forms to the eye consciousness and so forth, if you investigate the mode of that appearance with a fine mind, it will dawn upon the investigator that though things appear as truly existent, just like dreams and the reflection of the moon on a lake appear to be true but can be understood as being false, similarly the interdependent origination of phenomena will become very clear. This in turn will enhance the understanding of suchness.

As explained here, in the post-meditative state things will still appear as being truly existent, but one needs to scrutinise that mode of existence. Do the six types of objects that appear as being truly established actually exist in that way or not? As mentioned in the auto-commentary 'with a fine mind, one further investigates' their mode of existence. Then due to the familiarity with that in the meditative state, one will be able to understand the definitive mode of existence of those things in the post-meditative state as well.

When single-pointedly focused on the emptiness of form, for example, only the mere negation of 'inherently-existent-form' will appear to the being in the state of meditative equipoise. Thus, what appears to the meditator is a mere voidness. Except for the mere negation, nothing else appears, thus 'form' itself does not appear to the meditative equipoise single-pointedly focused on emptiness. After coming out of that meditative state into the post-meditative state, form will re-appear to the eye consciousness as being truly established and inherently existent, due to the imprints still in the mind.

When form re-appears in that way, one resorts back to the familiarity of focusing on the negation of 'inherently existent form' during the state of meditative equipoise. After analysis in the post-meditative state using the reasoning of interdependent origination, one sees that

² They are the eye, ear, nose, tongue body and mental consciousnesses which perceive respectively form, sound, smell, taste, tactile or objects of touch and phenomena.

¹ The wording of the headings has been revised since last week.

even though the mode of existence of phenomena such as form appears as being truly established and inherently existent, one understands that in fact form doesn't exist in that way. Because of one's familiarity with the reasoning of interdependent origination, (which was presented earlier) the dependent arising of phenomena will become very vivid in one's mind. So it will be clear that even though form does exist, it lacks inherent or true existence.

The main point being made here, which is also emphasised later in the text, is that it is necessary to maintain the connection between how things appear in the meditative state and how to apply that in the post-meditative state by alternating these two states of meditation. It is crucial to understand that, in regard to how things actually exist, there is no difference in the mode of existence of things in either state. Thus, one needs to familiarise oneself with, and integrate this view in one's daily life as much as possible.

As indicated in the auto-commentary, by resorting to the reasoning of inter-dependent origination with respect to analogies like the reflection of the moon on a lake, illusions, dreams and so forth, and clearly seeing that things arise in dependence on causes and conditions (which is what inter-dependent origination means), one will understand that things could not possibly exist independently, existing from their own side; this in turn enhances the understanding of suchness.

As mentioned in earlier sessions, this is also the main Prasangika point of view, which is that the mere appearance of interdependent origination enhances the understanding of suchness or emptiness and vice versa. When one resorts to these points and really reflects upon how there is no contradiction between phenomena arising as interdependent originations and their lacking inherent existence, then one sees that the emptiness of phenomena and the interdependent origination of phenomena are actually one and the same thing; there is no contradiction at all. When, through such reasoning one arrives at a profound level of understanding, then there is no way the delusions can affect us. The union of interdependent origination and emptiness will overcome any strong delusion in one's mind, as one will not be carried away with the mere appearance of phenomena. Thus, one will begin to see the real value of gaining the correct view.

The reason why the teachings and all great masters keep reminding us of the importance of the realisation of emptiness is that it is the main antidote for overcoming every delusion. When one has a profound understanding of emptiness, then there is no possibility of the delusions affecting us.

The auto-commentary continues:

Just as the venerable Matripa has said: 'The crux of the correct view is in the identification of appearance'.

This essential point relates to the earlier point that the correct identification of appearance relates to the identification of interdependent origination of all phenomena. When one has the correct understanding of interdependent origination of phenomena then one has obtained the crux of the realisation of the correct view of emptiness as well.

Kyiwo Tsang emphasises the same point: without having to resort to other factors, gaining a profound understanding from the appearance itself (i.e. within the very appearance of phenomena), seeing that because things are dependently arisen they cannot be inherently or independently existent, is the crux for gaining the correct understanding of the ultimate reality of phenomena. This also comes to the same point as understanding that as things are merely labelled and merely imputed they therefore lack true or independent existence. This was the point indicated in verse 37 of the root text:

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

The point being made here is that when it dawns upon you that things are merely labelled and merely imputed, then the understanding of voidness or lack of independent existence of all phenomena will dawn upon you. One should reflect deeply on the profound meaning of these passages and not take them lightly. What is being explained here is how one needs to use the very appearance of phenomena to understand that everything that appears is merely labelled and imputed by conception, which then directly contradicts the appearance of phenomena as being independently existent. If we don't scrutinise in this way then we normally fall victim to the usual appearance, as we totally believe that things exist from their own side in the way that they appear to us. And for as long as we apprehend that appearance then delusions arise unceasingly from that misapprehension. So, to use the very appearance of phenomena as a reason for things lacking independent existence is indeed a very profound and unique technique!!

To explain this further: rather than believing that things exist from their own side, inherently and independently as they appear to do, one needs to resort to the fact that they are merely labelled and mentally projected. We are actually projecting a label onto the bases, which is completely contradictory to the way they seemingly appear to exist. When we really begin to get a sense that what appears to us is nothing more than a mental projection, a label that we give from our side, rather than existing from the side of the object, then there is no way for delusions, such as attachment or anger and so forth in relation to that appearance, to arise in our mind. This is how we can begin to relate to the profundity and effectiveness of this presentation.

That, of course is not surprising, as the author, the Venerable Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltsen was in reality an enlightened being; in terms of his realisations and achievements he is revered as being the same as Lama Tsong Khapa. We can see how the Venerable Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltsen presents these teachings in such a profound way that it really becomes a very powerful

method to overcome our delusions. If we really consider the points being made here, we will find that it is actually advice that sinks right to the core of our heart, in that it shatters the view of our normal appearances. The point is that when we reflect upon the uniqueness of this presentation and analyse and really think about it, then we can definitely derive a very positive effect.

The auto-commentary then reads:

Leaving aside too much elaboration, in brief for us ordinary beings who are this-sider³, the very mode of appearance of mind and other phenomena is the appearance of the object of negation.

Referring to ordinary beings as this-siders implies that they are 'merely concerned with the affairs of this life'. Having explained these points earlier, the point being presented here should be clear. The clause 'the very mode of appearance of mind and other phenomena is the appearance of the object of negation', refers to the way how things appear to ordinary beings as being the object of negation, which is a faulty appearance.

The auto-commentary further reads:

Not grasping and apprehending that mode of appearance but rather affirming the mere negation of that appearance...

As explained here, one deals with overcoming the appearance of inherent or true existence by affirming the mere negation of that appearance, rather than grasping and apprehending at that apparently inherent mode of existence.

In earlier sessions we used the example of a vase to give a more detailed explanation of this point. When we are asked to identify a vase, we identify a vase that seems to exist independently and truly - there is no other way to refer to a vase other than as an independently and truly existent vase. When someone says 'bring me a vase', we immediately identify and refer to a truly and independently existent vase without any hesitation. The point here is that for as long as we grasp at that appearance and believe that that is the vase, we fall victim to that appearance, and rather than refuting it, we are actually affirming the object of negation. What we need to do is the exact opposite which, as mentioned here, is not to apprehend and grasp at that faulty appearance.

As we go through the remaining presentation of the text, the earlier explanations will dawn upon one, and it will make sense as it all begins to fall into place. The auto-commentary continues:

Arising from that meditative equipoise and looking into what is left after having refuted the object of negation, the merely labelled and merely imputed interdependent functionality of phenomena will dawn upon oneself. The yoga of alternating meditative equipoise with the state of post-meditative equipoise is adhered to in this way.

Then, having refuted the object of negation in the state of meditative equipoise, when one comes out of that meditative equipoise, and interacts with phenomena on conventional level again, then the merely labelled and merely imputed interdependent functionality of phenomena will dawn upon oneself, which will protect oneself from falling into the extreme of nihilism. So, in the state of post-meditative equipoise one is able to resort to the fact that though things don't exist inherently or truly, they still exist nominally or conventionally. This relates to the meaning of verse 42.

42. Then constantly nourishing your understanding [by meditating alternately on space-like voidness during formal meditation sessions and on mirage-like voidness during post-meditation periods]....

The point to emphasise here, is the need to constantly nourish your understanding by meditating alternately on space-like voidness during formal meditation sessions and on mirage-like voidness in the post-meditation period. Here 'alternately' refers to periodically changing from meditative equipoise to the post-meditative state. Rather than having to be in meditation for a long period and then a long break in the post-meditative state, it could be that one goes into meditative equipoise and comes out of it at will, many times during a day. As you come out of meditative equipoise, whatever understanding you have gained will enhance the mode of appearance in the post-meditative state. In this way a meditator can go back and forth between these two states, without falling victim to the inherent appearance of phenomena in the post-meditative state.

As the auto-commentary further presents:

Having understood the manner of practice in the state of meditative equipoise, as well as that of the post-meditative equipoise; i.e. when you see that the nature of all phenomena in samsara and nirvana are merely the negation of true existence, without separating from this, you engage in the state of meditative equipoise. In the post-meditative state, you meditate on the nature of conventionality as being a mere appearance, like an illusion.

The point being made here is similar to the points made earlier, which is that the more one relates to the interdependent origination of phenomena (or the cause and effect functionality of phenomena), the more the understanding of voidness of the emptiness of phenomena (or their lack inherent or intrinsic existence) is enhanced. Then the more one reflects upon the lack of inherent or true existence of phenomena (or the emptiness of phenomena) the more the understanding of the interdependent origination or the functionality of phenomena will be enhanced. At that point one gains a profound understanding of the reality of how things actually exist. The way in which the understanding of interdependent origination and emptiness enhance each other is re-emphasised again and again.

As the Kyiwo Tsang commentary further explains, alternating between the state of meditative equipoise and post-meditative state, and gaining familiarity with that practice will strengthen the conviction that while lacking interdependent or inherent existence, all phenomena are

³ The meaning of the literal translation of this-sider is ordinary beings who are only concerned with the affairs of this life. See the teaching 17 July 2001, for example. Another interpretation is that it refers to seeing only the side of cyclic existence and not being able to see freedom from cyclic existence (liberation and enlightenment). The main point, though, is that the word 'this-sider' implies ordinary beings.

established as being interdependent originations, (i.e. dependent on causes and conditions). Moreover their mode of existence is that they are merely labelled and merely imputed. When those understandings are applied in unison to all existence, then that is when one has derived the great benefit from the practice of alternating between the state of meditative equipoise and the post-meditative state.

The root text states:

42. ... *Concerning this point Aryadeva has said,*

43. *'Whichever watchman [mind understands the void nature] of one particular thing, that same watchman [mind should be applied for understanding the void nature] of all things. The way in which one particular thing has voidness as its true nature is the same way in which all things have voidness as their true nature.'*

The main point here is that when one realises the voidness or emptiness of one phenomenon, then without resorting to any other reasoning, and just by merely reflecting on another phenomenon with the same perception of the emptiness of the earlier object, one can immediately use the same reasoning to reflect upon the emptiness or voidness of that second (or any other) object. This point was also mentioned in earlier sessions. It was further clarified then that 'seeing the emptiness of one is seeing the emptiness of all' does not imply that the emptiness of all phenomena is the same. It doesn't imply that the emptiness of one phenomenon is the emptiness of all phenomena. Rather, it means that when one is able to realise the emptiness of one phenomena then without having to resort to any further reasoning, one can change the object and reflect upon that and be able to immediately perceive the emptiness of that second phenomenon as well.

With the techniques used in other meditations such as generating love and compassion and bodhichitta, we can see that the object of meditation changes from equanimity, to recognizing the kindness of sentient beings, developing great love and compassion and so forth. Whereas with the meditation on emptiness, one does not have to change the object of one's focus when analysing the ultimate mode of existence. Rather one uses the same object and the same mode of analysis to gain the understanding of the ultimate reality of the object. Then, as one goes further into analysing the mode of existence of that object, one comes to the final stage of refuting the object of negation in relation to that object. As the emptiness of that object dawns upon oneself, one is taken to the subtlest level of understanding the reality of that object. Thus the very technique of realising emptiness involves just scrutinising and analysing the same object on a deeper and subtler level. When one realises that for the one object, then when focused on other objects, the fact that this is the same mode of existence of all phenomena will dawn upon oneself.

2. THE MANNER OF REMOVING IMPEDIMENTS

Having presented the explanation of verse 43, the auto-commentary presents this qualm:

If asked, while in the state of meditative equipoise on emptiness, does interdependent phenomena appear as being merely imputed and labelled or not?

The Kyiwo Tsang commentary presents two of these doubts or qualms. These are not just hypothetical doubts but rather doubts that arise as the meditator analyses the nature of the reality of phenomena at increasing levels of subtlety. Hence they are referred to as impediments that need to be overcome in order to gain the correct view. The first doubt, which is also explicitly mentioned in the auto-commentary, is whether or not the conventional levels of phenomena appear as being merely imputed and labelled during the state of meditative equipoise. Do they appear as being merely imputed and labelled to the meditator? The Kyiwo Tsang commentary presents a second doubt: if they don't appear as being merely imputed and merely labelled, then do things appear as being totally non-existent to the meditator? These two doubts are quite profound doubts.

Thus, these impediments are described in the form of doubts. The teachings have explained that interdependent origination and emptiness are not contradictory but are complementary and should be understood in unison, so the doubt as to whether the meditator, single-pointedly focused on emptiness, perceives things as being merely labelled and imputed is feasible. If the interdependent origination of phenomena, don't appear to the meditator while they are in meditative equipoise, then the next doubt that arises is then in that case, do things appear as being entirely non-existent?

The auto-commentary says:

In response, the following verse is presented:

44. *Thus in your formal meditation session when you concentrate single-mindedly on voidness according to the proper methods, you will become convinced that all things in samsara and nirvana, whether validly existent or not, are devoid of the extreme of the mental fabrication that they have true independent existence*

The meaning of this verse eliminates these doubts or impediments. This same point was clarified in the *Madhyamaka* teachings. According to Kyiwo Tsang, things do not appear as existent to the wisdom realising emptiness. Thus the doubt arises as to whether phenomena are existent or not. To illustrate this we will use the mind as an example. The mind does not appear to the wisdom realising emptiness in meditative equipoise, but that does not mean that the mind does not exist. Conventionally of course the mind does exist. However for the being in meditative equipoise on emptiness, the non-appearance of the mind is the ultimate mode of existence of the mind. This is the point that was clarified in the *Madhyamaka* text.

These are important points to understand. For the wisdom realising emptiness in meditative equipoise, there is no conventional appearance, as there is no dualistic appearance. However, even though conventional phenomena do not appear to the wisdom realising emptiness, that does not mean that things do not exist. Kyiwo Tsang also gives an example of how, just because something doesn't exist conventionally to the

wisdom realising emptiness in meditative equipoise, that does not negate the general existence of conventional phenomena. He says that although our back does not exist in the front, that doesn't mean that the back does not exist at the same time that the front exists. Likewise, even though phenomena such as the mind do not exist for the wisdom realising emptiness in meditative equipoise, that does not negate its actual existence. So this explanation also removes the second doubt as to whether things do not exist at all.

The auto-commentary quotes Milarepa:

The Venerable Milarepa says:

In regard to the ultimate truth,
Let alone obstacles even the Buddhas don't exist,
Both meditator and object of meditation,
Grounds to be obtained, as well as,
Paths and realisations don't exist.
The resultant form and wisdom bodies don't exist.
Therefore, nirvana doesn't exist.
Besides being merely labelled by name and words,
The three realms as well as the entire universe,
Lack production, because they lack intrinsic establishment.
They are baseless and lack spontaneous birth,
Thus samsara doesn't exist even in name.
This is what dawns in the light of the ultimate.

If asked, in that case is karma and its effect and so forth non-existent? Just because it does not exist ultimately, that doesn't mean that it does not exist at all. Karma, its effects and so forth definitely do exist.

At this point the next verse is presented:

45. Moreover, when you arise from your meditation session and make further analysis of things, you will then be able to see the unmistakable operation of independent origination working merely on the fact that things exist only on the basis of mental labelling alone. In this way things will naturally appear to you as similar to dreams and hallucinations, like mirages and the reflection of the moon in water.

The auto-commentary quotes Milarepa again:

As presented, the Venerable Milarepa also says:
Goodness, if sentient beings don't exist,
From where did the buddhas of the three times originate from?
Without a cause there can not be a result,
In regards to conventional truth,
As the Buddha said,
Everything in samsara and nirvana do exist.
To perceive that which exists as functional,
And that which does not, as empty.
When these two are seen inseparable in one taste,
Without distinction between subject and object,
All is broadened in the state of unification.

Also elsewhere it has been stated:

The perfection of wisdom is unfathomable and inexpressible.

The great adept Khedrup Kyungpo also states:

All appearance will naturally subside like magical illusions and dreams.

As the auto-commentary then further explains:

One needs to be satisfied with 'merely labelled' and 'merely imputed' as the mode of existence of phenomena.

This is the same point that was explained earlier. To come to the wrong conclusion that things do not exist because they don't exist independently or inherently would be falling into the extreme of nihilism. Thus, one needs to understand and be satisfied with 'merely labelled' and 'merely imputed' as the mode of existence of phenomena. This was explained in detail earlier as well.

Then the auto-commentary quotes Nagarjuna:

As the great arya Nagarjuna states: 'Because tangible things are merely labelled, space is merely labelled too'. Therefore since the ultimate meaning of the mahamudra view asserted by the father and sons is said to be 'mere nominal imputed existence' this should be clearly understood and thus explained.

These points were also mentioned earlier. The ultimate meaning of the mahamudra view is the view of ultimate reality. Here 'asserted by the father' refers to Nagarjuna and sons refers to his main disciples, for example Aryadeva. The mode of existence is said to be 'mere nominal imputed existence', which is the main point that is to be understood. The Prasangika point of view is that the mode of existence of things is that they have a mere imputed existence. The auto-commentary then goes on to explain this with an example that is not too complicated to understand. However we can leave it for our next session. I think the upcoming explanations will be quite easy to follow as we have already covered the main points.

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Edited Version*

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