
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇམ་དགེ་ལུན་ལྷན་ཀློང་གྲྀ་ཆེན་པོ།

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As normal, it is good to set the proper motivation for receiving the teachings, which is developing the bodhichitta attitude: 'In order to benefit all sentient beings by liberating them from all suffering, I need to first achieve enlightenment myself. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well.'

It is good to remind ourselves that this motivation encompasses the main core of the practice. The whole purpose of engaging in study and the practices is to actually be of benefit to other sentient beings. That attitude of wishing to benefit sentient beings is something that must be kept at heart at all times. Then try to engage in that practice as much as possible.

In fact the attitude of wishing to benefit others, which is based on the attitude of being kind to others, is something that is really worthwhile for ourselves. As I usually stress, losing that attitude is a great personal loss that can be likened to losing a most precious object. I definitely consider the attitudes of love and compassion as being a most worthy and meaningful possession, and if we lose that then we lose something priceless.

In fact when we look into normal everyday life situations, we can definitely see the consequences for relationships when that essential, basic altruistic state of mind of love and compassion is lost. So that's why, even from a general perspective, I can see that this attitude is most necessary. I don't know what you would feel about that; if it's something that you agree with, you can put your head down in acceptance, and if not then you can raise your head up. Whether you agree with me or not doesn't make much difference. However, I personally would choose to be amongst those who bow their head to these precious attitudes, and I would not associate myself with those who raise their head thinking 'this is not important'. I am making a significant point here. I think that basically it relates to being master of oneself. If one can identify with the essential tools that one needs, then one can really be master of oneself, otherwise one is a slave to others.

2.2.2. MAHAMUDRA ACCORDING TO SUTRA

In our previous session we covered the explanation of the literal meaning of mahamudra, in accordance with the explanations in the auto-commentary.

Different teaching traditions

Now we come to the point where the auto-commentary reads:

Even though there are eighteen different schools of thought in the Buddha's doctrine, all are similar in seeking the means to achieve liberation. Likewise, even though there are different tenets presenting mahamudra with different points of view, they are all similar in striving to achieve the resultant mahamudra, the ultimate state of unification.

The first sentence refers to the Vaibashika school of Buddhism, where there are eighteen different sub-divisions. Even though there are eighteen different sub-systems, with their own presentations of certain points, they are all seeking the means to achieve liberation—the state of being completely free from delusions. So they have the same aim of overcoming the delusions at their very root and thus achieving the state of self-liberation, or nirvana. Using that analogy, even though there are different presentations of mahamudra, they are all striving for the same ultimate goal, which is the ultimate state of unification. There is no difference whatsoever in the ultimate goal that is sought.

One therefore needs to be careful not to judge the presentations of other schools, criticising them just because they seem to have a different manner of presentation, or because they use different terms to express their views. It is a great fault to assume that these different presentations are faulty and thus criticise them. One needs to understand that if the ultimate goal to be achieved is the same, then the means to achieve that must also be essentially the same, even though they may differ in terminology.

The auto-commentary then continues:

In order to illustrate the great masters' skill of thorough analysis the following is presented:

11. *There are numerous oral tradition teachings, such as those of simultaneous production and union, the joined amulet box, possessing five, the six equal tastes, the four letters, the pacifier, the cutting-off, the great encompassment [dzog chen] and the profound Madhyamaka theory.*

12. *These individual oral tradition teachings have different names and titles. But, if an experienced yogi, who is truly a master of scripture and logic and who can differentiate correctly between scriptures of definitive and interpretive meaning, were to examine them all, he would see that all these theories and teachings are non-contradictory. He would see how all these different explanations and methods lead in the end to the same point—a true understanding of voidness.*

The different presentations of the great masters are presented here in order to illustrate the thorough analyses they have employed to explain the meaning of the mahamudra. In verse eleven the author lists the different presentations of mahamudra. These are: simultaneous production and union, the joined amulet box, possessing five, the six equal tastes, the four letters, the pacifier, the cutting-off, the great encompassment, and the profound Madhyamaka theory. In explaining these we will just refer to the auto-commentary, and not go into too much detail.

1. The presentation of **simultaneous production and union** or spontaneously arising in union is given by one of Milarepa's great disciples, who is known in Tibetan as Dagpo Lhaje or, more commonly, the great Gampopa.

The auto-commentary says

The glorious Gampopa presents the six doctrines with five characteristics, and he nurtures the disciples by the means of simultaneous production and union. Even though there are few different presentations on the meaning of simultaneous production and union:

As Gampopa mentions:

The simultaneously arising mind itself is dharmakaya, a body encompassing everything; Simultaneously arising conceptual minds are the waves of dharmakaya;

Simultaneously arising appearances are the brilliance of dharmakaya;

Thus appearance and mind simultaneously arise, inseparably.

Another commentary explains why Gampopa's presentation is referred to as the simultaneous production and union. In particular, 'simultaneous' is used specifically to indicate that the mind and emptiness are actually the same. The mind, characterised as cognising or knowing is also clear, which is inseparable from bliss and emptiness. So in this context 'simultaneous' actually has the connotation of being inseparable. This differs a little from the usual presentation of mahamudra where 'simultaneous' refers to mind and emptiness as arising together, whereas Gampopa refers to the mind and emptiness as being inseparable at all times, and so actually they are one and the same. There is further discussion of what 'simultaneously' means in other commentaries, however we won't go into those details right now.

The main point is that the presentation of simultaneous production and comes from Gampopa, who was the main disciple of Milarepa.

2. The master presenting the **joined amulet box** is Khedrup Kyungpo. As mentioned previously, the Kagyu tradition has two main lineages—the Dagpo Kagyu and the Shangpa Kagyu. The Dagpo Kagyu is a lineage derived mainly from Marpa and the lineage masters following him. The Shangpa Kagyu is the lineage founded by the master Khedrub Kyungpo. The Shangpa Kagyu tradition is one of the prominent lineages that also elaborate the practices of Mahakala. According to one of the practices of Mahakala, the presentation of the joined amulet box is primarily a tradition of presenting phenomena as being like dreams and illusions.

One of the praises to Mahakala explains that everything that exists and appears is similar to dreams and illusions. The author of another commentary says: 'Even though it would be difficult for someone like me to explain it according to their actual profound views, if I were to interpret that in relation to our own Gelug tradition, then the meaning of all phenomena and all appearances being like dreams and illusions could be related to phenomena lacking inherent existence. All appearances that are perceived with the misconception of true existence are just like a dream and an illusion, and do not actually exist'.

In explaining the reference to all appearances being like illusions, the author of this other commentary explains further that even though things lack even an atom of inherent existence, the ability to perceive conventional phenomena and the functions of conventional phenomena is similar, for example, to the horses and elephants that are conjured by a magician. Even though those conjured horses and elephants do not exist as real horses and elephants, their ability to appear and function is similar to the illusion of seeing things as inherently existent.

Then the author goes on to elucidate the combined meaning of the simultaneously arising non-dual bliss and wisdom. He refers to perceiving emptiness as the mere negation of the object of negation, where nothing appears in place of that. That then covers the brief explanation of the joined amulet box.

3. The explanation of **possessing the five** is by the Kagyu master called Drikung Rinpoche also known as Jigten Gonpo.

The commentary states:

The explanation of possessing five was given by Jigten Gonpo, who is the founder of the Dagpo Kagyu lineage. He presents this in a spiritual song.

With the racehorse-like mind of bodhichitta,
If the racetrack-like training to benefit others is not applied,
You will not receive the appreciation of gods, humans and wrathful female deities,
Thus, you must pay careful attention to this forerunner of minds.

For the king-like generation of one's body into the aspect of the deity,
If unwavering stability is not obtained,
You will not be able to gather the retinue of dakinis,
Thus, you must pay careful attention to generating the body of the deity.

For the snow mountain-like four bodies of the lama,
If the sun-like faith does not shine forth,
The water-like blessings will not come forth,
Thus, you must pay careful attention to developing a mind of faith.

In the space-like nature of mind,
If the cloud-like disturbing conceptions are not cleared,
The planet and star-like omniscient minds will not sparkle forth,
Thus, pay careful attention to the non-conceptual mind.

For the wish fulfilling jewel-like collections,
If the cleansing-like aspirations are not applied,
The desired enlightened activities will not be obtained,
Thus, pay careful attention to the dedication at the end.

The five basically encompass the 1) preliminary, 2) the actual (which is meditating on the deity), 3) generating faith, 4) meditating on disenchantment with samsara, and 5) dedication.

4. **The six equal tastes** is explained particularly by the commentaries from the lineage of Choeje Gyaray, better known as Drogon Tsangpa Gyaray. The six equal tastes basically encompass 1) taking conceptions into the path, 2) taking delusions into the path, 3) taking sicknesses into the path, 4) taking harms of gods and spirits into the path, 5) taking suffering into the path, and 6) taking death into the path.

5. Next is the presentation of **the four letters**, or syllables. Those four syllables are *a-ma-na-si*, which comprise the Sanskrit term 'not to take to mind'. The meaning of this is presented with four points: 1) cutting the very basis of the mind, 2) method of settling the mind, 3) cutting the mind that has gone astray, and 4) presenting a method of utilising the mind on the path.

6. The **pacifier** tradition is a presentation that comes from Dampa Sangye (believed to be a different person to the Pa Dampa-sanggyay who was the first Panchen Lama's teacher). He presents the pacifier as 'the pure Dharma that pacifies suffering'. This presentation is said to be derived from the passage from the *Heart Sutra* that refers to 'the mantra that pacifies all suffering'. Explaining that, the auto commentary says:

Dampa Sangye presents 'the pure dharma that pacifies suffering', in the following:

Based on the Dharma that pacifies suffering,
When the male and female spirits and demons are

subdued,
 The asceticism of magical wheels has been
 established,
 When sickness befalls on one's body,
 The unity of basic space and awareness is integrated.
 When the slightest disturbing conception arises,
 To be able to cut through the delusion immediately,
 When lying down secretly by oneself,
 To be able to affirm the naked awareness,
 When sitting amongst a large gathering,
 To be able to observe all appearances,
 When laxity occurs, freshen up the mind with the
 sound of Phet.
 If distraction occurs, the root is severed,
 Thus, when excitement occurs, come back to the
 natural state,
 When the mind wanders off to external objects,
 Focus on the meaning of suchness.
 By using the Dharma that pacifies suffering,
 When adverse circumstances occur take it on as good
 fortune,
 Be amused with the disturbing conceptions,
 If sickness occurs, take it as a gain,
 Be glad about all that occurs,
 When death occurs, take it on the path,
 Be glad with the lord of death,
 This Dharma that pacifies suffering,
 Is the intent of the buddhas of the three times.

7. The **cutting-off** is the practice that is known as *chod*, or the rite of cutting-off. The founder of this practice is Machig Labkyi-drolma. As the commentary reads:

The cutting-off is the practice called 'the object to cut off' which is derived from Machig Labkyi-drolma, which transmits the renowned and profound practice of chod.

The practice that is called *chod* in Tibetan is literally translated as 'the cutting-off'. It refers to the practice that is done on the basis of generating the conventional and ultimate bodhichitta, which involves cutting off one's self-grasping. There are particular rituals and so forth that are done, which mainly encompass the practice of cutting-off the self-cherishing mind or attitude, on the basis of generating bodhichitta.

8. Next is the great encompassment or *dzog chen*, which is comes from the great master Padmasambhava. As explained in the other commentaries the literal meaning of 'encompassment' refers to all non-purified phenomena such as delusions, faulty appearances, dualistic appearances and so forth that are encompassed in the fundamental nature of the mind. When one is withdrawn to the most subtle of minds, then there is nothing left. All of the delusions and all of the faulty states of mind completely subside, as they are all encompassed by that fundamental state of the mind. As that is the great method of realising the ultimate nature of one's mind, it is called great encompassment (or *dzog chen* in Tibetan).

The great encompassment tradition derives from the heart essence of the mind of Padmasambhava.

The dzog chen tradition was elucidated further by the Great Fifth Dalai Lama. Amongst his various works two particular texts explain this view in detail. They are *Words of Manjushri*, which is actually a lam rim text, and *Rinchen Shalung*, which is translated as *Precious Words*. Thus, as another commentary explains, the explanations of *dzog chen* are quite exhaustive in the works of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama.

9. The final tradition that is presented in the root text, is the profound Madhyamaka theory, which is what our Gelug

tradition follows. As the author says in the auto-commentary:

The profound Madhyamaka theory and so forth have been presented by many great scholars. These may have different names and titles, but when the great scholars thoroughly investigate the definitive and interpretative meanings with logic and sound citations it comes to the same intended point at the end. Thus they are not contradictory like cold and hot.

The author of the auto-commentary then reiterates his earlier point by citing the text *The Stainless Light*.

It is as *The Stainless Light* states:

A precious gem found in the earth,
 Because of various different languages,
 May have many different names for it,
 However there is no difference in the gem itself.

The analogy used here is that a precious jewel will have the same value everywhere, even though it may have different names. Depending on where that gem is found, different terms and names might be used, but the fact remains that it is a valuable jewel. By using this analogy the author is explaining that the essence mahamudra is the same even though various different terms are used to explain it.

Then the author continues:

If asked what are the techniques for meditating on mahamudra:

Then he presents verse thirteen from the root text:

13. There are two [general methods for practising the mahamudra meditations according to the sutra system.] The first is to develop an initial understanding of the theory of voidness, and then strive to achieve single-minded concentration on that understanding. The second method is to strive for an understanding of the theory of voidness based on prior development of single-minded concentration in mental quiescence meditation.

The first method, as explained here, is to develop an understanding of the theory of voidness and then strive to achieve single-pointed concentration. The second method is to first develop single-pointed concentration and then strive to gain the understanding of voidness. What the author explains is that we will follow the second method.

However, what needs to be understood in relation to this presentation is that the first method does not refer to a practice where special insight is developed first and then calm abiding is developed later. That of course is not possible. Special insight always follows from calm abiding.

What is to be understood from this presentation is that there are some individuals who first gain quite a good conceptual understanding of emptiness. Then that understanding as the focus point, they develop calm abiding. There are others who take conventional phenomena as an object of meditation and develop single-pointed concentration first, and then develop the understanding of voidness or emptiness.

What is being explained is that this presentation will use the method of developing calm abiding first by focussing on conventional phenomena, followed by achieving an understanding of voidness, which is the second system outlined in verse thirteen. Thus, the author explains in the auto-commentary:

There are two systems and one may adopt either approach. However the Lord Shantideva says:

Having understood that disturbing conceptions are completely overcome,
By superior insight endowed with calm abiding,
First of all I should search for calm abiding.

At a literal level this could be misunderstood to mean that special insight has to be developed first. However the third line of the verse clearly indicates that calm abiding needs to be developed first. As he specifically says 'First of all I should search for calm abiding'. In order to gain the special insight in relation to emptiness, one must first develop calm-abiding or single-pointed concentration. Thus the main meaning of Shantideva's presentation is that one gains the understanding that all disturbing conceptions (which are the cause of all of one's misfortunes, suffering and so forth) are completely overcome through superior or special insight that is endowed with calm abiding. And in order to achieve that one must first develop calm abiding.

The auto-commentary then continues:

Also in the *Ratnakuta Mahayana sutra* it says:

By relying on morality one obtains concentration,
After having obtained concentration one then meditates on wisdom.

This is basically presenting the **three higher trainings**, which are the higher training of **morality**, the higher training of **concentration** and the higher training of **wisdom**. They are presented in the same order as their sequence of development. Morality serves as the basis as it is the very foundation of our practices. Then based on morality or moral ethics, one can develop the single-pointed concentration that then serves as the basis for further enhancing wisdom, in particular analytical wisdom.

Observing morality, or moral ethics, allows the very distracted mind to be subdued. As we refrain from engaging in frivolous or meaningless activities, the mind naturally withdraws from those distractions. Thus through observing moral ethics, the mind naturally becomes subdued to the point where one is then able to focus more intently. Then based on morality, one can then further develop concentration. Thus the practice of subduing oneself through morality helps us to overcome the manifest levels of distractions.

When one engages in the practice of concentration based on the foundation of morality one can then overcome the gross obstacles that hinder our practice, which are laxity and excitement. Then one develops concentration by progressing through the nine stages of developing calm abiding. As one progresses through the nine stages and develops calm abiding, one then thoroughly pacifies the two main gross obstacles, excitement and laxity.

The subtle obscuration that is the grasping at the self is overcome through the development of special insight, or wisdom. The development of wisdom, particularly the wisdom of selflessness or emptiness, overcomes the subtle obscurations within oneself, which is grasping at the self.

It is good for us to derive an understanding of the process of the practice of the three higher trainings. Moral ethics helps us to overcome the gross levels of external distractions. Using that as a basis, one then further develops one's concentration, which overcomes the gross obscurations of excitement and laxity. Then based on the development of single-pointed concentration, one then overcomes the subtle obscurations within oneself by applying wisdom.

The auto-commentary concludes this section by saying:

Just as it has been presented in these texts, the presentation here is from the method of striving for an understanding of the theory of voidness based on prior development of single-minded concentration.

That being the case, if asked what is the method for meditating on calm abiding. This is presented with the preliminaries and the actual.

At this point the author begins his presentation of the actual techniques for developing calm abiding. There are two main categories:

2.2.2.1. The preliminaries for developing calm abiding

2.2.2.2. The actual method for developing calm abiding

We will leave the explanation of this for the next session. In the following session after that, we will actually combine the teaching session with some meditation. Even though the actual presentation of calm abiding will be in accordance with the presentation in the text, it is good for you to acquaint yourself with other sources that describe the techniques for developing calm abiding, prior to coming to the teaching. That will make it easier for you to relate to the explanations given in the teaching.

It would be particularly good for you to acquaint yourself with the five faults that have to be overcome, in addition to the eight remedies that overcome the five faults. The nine stages of the development of calm abiding have been explained in the past, so try to become familiar with what those nine stages are. Then there are the six powers and the four placements, which are not specifically described in the auto-commentary. So you will need to use other sources that explain calm abiding. It is important to be familiar with these points.

In relation to the actual technique for developing calm abiding there is the explanation of needing a conducive environment, which has five characteristics. This is explained in accordance with the teachings from Maitreya's text. So identifying the five characteristics of a conducive environment, and the things one needs to have intact on a personal level are also important to know.

In relation to the preliminary stage, there are actually six preliminary practices that are necessary before engaging in the actual practice of meditation. These preliminaries are not to be taken lightly, as one cannot engage in the actual practice without them. Thus you need a good understanding of what the preliminaries are, and based on that a further understanding of the actual techniques.

The reason why we find our meditation practice difficult, and that we constantly seem to be distracted, is because we are not paying attention to the conducive factors, which are the preliminaries. So without all the prerequisites being intact, it is not possible for the actual practice to bear fruit.

Thus the next session will begin with a quiz on the five faults, as well as the eight remedies to overcome these five faults. These are presented very clearly in the extensive lam rim teaching—the graduated path to enlightenment. In fact the explanation there is amazingly clear. If you do not really comprehend and understand fully the techniques of how to engage in the practices of calm abiding, which are explained in the great exposition of the graduated path to enlightenment, you will not be able to really engage in the practice. So it is essential that you grasp these points.

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