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# Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇམ་དབྱེར་ལྷན་པུས་ཀྱི་ཆེན་པོ།

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As usual we begin by generating a positive motivation such as the bodhichitta motivation: 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, and so for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well'.

## 2.2.2. MAHAMUDRA ACCORDING TO SUTRA

### 2.2.2.1. THE PRELIMINARIES (CONT.)

We are up to verse fourteen of the root text, which reads:

*14. Sitting on a comfortable meditation platform in the sevenfold posture, you should rid yourself of defiled thoughts and extraneous mental activity by first practising the nine breathings.*

#### 1. Physical posture

We covered the sevenfold posture last week. As mentioned then, although the sevenfold posture is the usual technique presented, in some texts it mentions an eightfold posture, which includes focusing on the breath. As the presentation here includes focussing on the breath, let us actually spend a next few minutes now focusing on our breath.

#### 2. Settling the mind by regulating the breath

We begin by adopting the sitting posture to the best of our ability. Then we can start to focus on our breath. One of the main points about breathing is that it has to be silent and effortless. One must reach a state where the breath flows naturally. This means that it should not be laboured in any way and be very gentle. It should also be balanced, meaning that both inhalation and exhalation are neither longer nor shorter than the other.

There are three specific points about the breath. It should not be laboured or unbalanced, and not involve a tactile physical sensation at the nostrils when you are breathing in or out. If you feel the breath at the nostrils then since that feeling is associated with the tactile consciousness, it can cause the mind to become distracted; if you notice a tactile sensation it can become a distraction. The main reason for regulating the breath is because the entire focus on the breath must be done with the mental consciousness. As we need to be focusing on the mental image of the breath, one needs to regulate the breath so that it becomes suitable for the mental consciousness to focus on, rather than the physical breath itself.

The seven or eight point postures for meditation are called the postures of Buddha Vairochana, because they are the concentration meditative posture of Vairochana. There is also the tantric explanation, which is that adopting Buddha Vairochana's meditative posture now implants the imprint to actually achieve Vairochana's enlightened state in the future. One of the main features of tantric practice is to take the resultant state into the

practice at the time of the causal state, which in this case means that adopting the postures of Buddha Vairochana now becomes the cause to achieve the resultant state of Buddha Vairochana later.

Verse fourteen states that 'you should rid yourself of defiled thoughts and extraneous mental activity by first practising the nine breathings'. The nine breathings refer to the nine-round breathing technique. There is also the practice of settling down the disturbing conceptual states of mind through regulating the breath and just focusing on the natural breathing. These breathing techniques are specifically relevant for bringing about a settled and clear state of mind.

#### Settling the mind

As another commentary explains, the reason we need to settle down and regulate the breathing is because the breath, or air element, is closely related to our mind. Due to this close relationship, the clarity of the mind is affected when the wind (our breathing) is not regulated and cleared. Thus, in order to achieve a clear state of mind one adopts the technique of regulating one's breath. We should combine the technique of regulating our breath with an awareness of the state of our mind. When we engage in the practice of focusing on our breath, we need to maintain an awareness of what is happening in our mind as well.

The meditation practice of focusing on the breath becomes a Buddhist practice when it is combined with the following visualisation. Check the state of one's mind before beginning the practice, and if it is in a virtuous state, then begin by inhaling with the visualisation that all the good qualities of all buddhas and bodhisattvas are entering through the left nostril in the aspect of white light. As the white light enters into oneself it increases one's virtuous mind, imbuing it with bodhichitta, love and compassion, faith and so forth.

If one finds that prior to engaging in meditation practice the mind is in a bit of a disturbed state, then begin by exhaling and imagine that every kind of disturbed state of mind leaves the left nostril in the form of black light. With the exhalation of black light, one imagines that all forms of negativities, disturbances, delusions, and obstacles that are the causes of suffering, are completely dispelled, abandoned and purified, never to occur again. It becomes a much more significant practice if this visualisation accompanies the breathing.

If we engage in this breathing technique and associated visualisation, inhaling and exhaling over seven, eleven or twenty-one rounds, then we will notice that the mind becomes really settled and clear. Even though the breathing exercise is a widely practised technique, combining it with this visualisation makes the practice a unique Buddhist practice. This technique of combining breathing with visualisation is explained in Vasubhandu's *Abhidharma* and other texts as well.

Having explained the technique, we can now adopt the meditative posture again, and then focus on the breath while combining it with that visualisation. We can try to maintain our focus for at least seven rounds of our breath. Doing it diligently with full attention and focus makes it most meaningful.

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*(Pause for meditation)*

### **The nine round breathing technique**

The nine round breathing technique is specifically a tantric technique that involves visualisation of the central channel accompanied by the right and left channel. Although this is a specific tantric practice the text mentions that using the nine round breathing technique without that particular visualisation can still be effective. On the other hand if the technique involving the visualisation of the channels is not done properly, it is said that there could be complications and some danger. So to be on the safe side, we will adopt the simpler technique and not visualise the channels.

The reason it is called the nine round breathing technique is because it involves alternating between the right nostril, the left nostril and both nostrils. One begins by breathing in through the right nostril and breathing out through the left nostril three times. Then one breathes in through the left nostril and exhales through the right nostril three times. Finally breathe in with both nostrils and exhale through both nostrils three times, which makes a total of nine rounds.

Do you think that you will be able to breathe in through the right nostril and out of the left nostril without physically closing your nostrils? At first you might find it hard to do that. So initially you can physically close the right nostril with your finger while inhaling to the left, and shut the left nostril while exhaling through the right. This technique of alternating breathing in through the right and exhaling through the left, and breathing in through the left and exhaling through the right and then using both nostrils, is a thorough technique that clears the air passages, allowing the breath to flow freely in a regulated way. This makes the breath very subtle and calm. Because of the close relationship between the mind and the air element, which in its gross form is the breath, the mind becomes very clear and sharp when the breath is regulated and flows freely. This then allows the mind to accurately focus on the chosen object. So the nine round breathing technique allows the mind to become clear, sharp and focused, ready to engage in the actual practice of meditation.

### **3. Taking refuge and generating bodhichitta**

The root text states:

*15. Sorting out your dull states of mind from the clear, you should begin by taking refuge and developing an enlightened attitude of bodhichitta with a pure and virtuous motivation. You should then perform the profound meditation of guru yoga. After making fervent requests a hundred times or more with intense faith, you should visualise your guru as dissolving into you.*

Having adopted the technique of clearing the air passages and regulating the breath helps to clear the mind, or as specifically stated here, sort 'out the dull states of mind from the clear'. When one's mind reaches the state of being clear and fresh, one can then transform it into the most virtuous states of mind, which are taking refuge and generating bodhichitta. To take full advantage of that clear and pure state of mind, it is good to do a glance

meditation on the whole path leading to enlightenment, which means covering the main points of the graduated stages of the path to enlightenment. Using that fresh clear state of mind will allow the mind to focus on those points easily. Being able to cover the points of the entire path leading to enlightenment will definitely implant a very positive imprint on the mind.

This concludes the prerequisites for the practice of developing calm abiding. As mentioned here, the preliminary practices are adopting the right posture, engaging in the breathing meditation to develop a very clear and fresh state of mind, and taking refuge and generating bodhichitta. Then spend some time going over as many of the main points of the graduated path to enlightenment as possible as the utmost way to accumulate merit and engage in purification.

### **4. The profound guru yoga practice**

The auto commentary gives a very brief explanation of verses fourteen and fifteen:

Developing the pure mind by first developing bodhichitta, meditating on the profound guru yoga contains the points of the entire path. The guru yoga practice is done as presented separately. The remaining part of the verse can be understood from its context.

Here the auto commentary gives a very brief explanation, however there are explanations from other commentaries that combine mahamudra with the practice of the Guru Puja, or *Lama Chopa* in Tibetan, which translates as Offerings to the Guru.

According to that explanation, the guru yoga practice is done in the form of presenting various types of offerings to the guru. The preliminary guru yoga practice was presented earlier which is basically the same practice presented here, and the difference lies in the degree of elaboration. The visualisation of the guru in the Guru Puja involves visualising the merit field. The lam rim teachings also present an extensive explanation of the merit field. The visualisation of the merit field is done in accordance with how it is presented in those teachings.

The Guru Puja begins with the lines, 'From within great bliss, I arise as a guru-deity' so it begins with the practice of generating oneself as the guru and deity. Having visualised the guru, one then engages in the seven limb practice, which begins with prostrations followed by making extensive offerings that include external offerings, internal offerings, secret offerings and offerings of suchness. Making offerings is followed by confession, rejoicing, requesting the turning of the wheel of Dharma, and requesting to remain.

Then one goes on to the practice of meditating on the stages of the path. When it comes to the point where the guru dissolves into and merges with oneself then, as explained in the root text, the actual practice of mahamudra begins. In this way we can understand the guru yoga practice as a preliminary for the actual mahamudra practice. If the preliminary practice to engaging in the mahamudra practice is the whole Guru Puja, then that just gives us a hint as to how profound the mahamudra practice itself is. We don't have too much time to go through the profound guru yoga practice in

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detail, so you can refer to the text and familiarise yourself with the practice.

When one does the guru yoga practice in an elaborate way with the Guru Puja then the deity practice of the instantaneous generation of Yamantaka becomes the preliminary to the guru yoga practice. Then when we actually come to the point of visualising the guru in the external aspect of Lama Tsong Khapa, one actually visualises all the thirty-two deities of Guhyasamaja within the joints of Lama Tsong Khapa's body. This visualisation is from the Guhyasamaja practice, whereas the rituals, such as offerings, mudras and so forth are from the Heruka practice. So in this way doing an elaborate guru yoga practice actually includes all three main deity practices. This is as explained by the previous great masters.

What one should understand at this point is that according to Gelug tradition guru yoga practice and the Guru Puja or Offering to the Guru are the same. The Kagyu use the terminology *la dup*, which can be translated as 'accomplishing the guru', which basically has the same meaning as guru yoga practice, whereas the Nyingma use the term *Rin-chen Don-dup* to refer to the guru yoga practice. So in every tradition the Guru Puja or Offering to the Guru is the fundamental practice.

### Different techniques

Among the different techniques of guru yoga practice, the one called the combining-all-into-one-jewel visualisation of the guru, is as presented in an earlier session, visualizing Lama Tsong Khapa as the main guru. This is similar to the visualization presented in the guru puja where one visualises Lama Tsong Khapa on top of one's crown, with Buddha Shakyamuni at his heart, and Vajradhara at the heart of Buddha Shakyamuni. As mentioned previously the practice involves dissolving the guru into oneself, which in fact comes at the end of every guru yoga practice.

The guru yoga practice presented in the Lam Rim teachings is visualising the merit field with Lama Tsong Khapa in the centre surrounded by all the buddhas and deities. The elaborate technique of doing the guru yoga practice is to visualise each individual deity and then engage in the practices of accumulating merit and purifying negativities in relation to that visualisation.

In the guru yoga practice of *The Hundred Deities in the Land of Joy*, the combining-all-into-one-jewel visualisation of Lama Tsong Khapa is presented. Lama Tsong Khapa is normally depicted with the mudra of turning the wheel of Dharma. However in the merit field Lama Tsong Khapa is depicted with the right hand in the preaching the Dharma gesture, and the left holding a begging bowl filled with nectar.

You may wonder about the significance is of this depiction of Lama Tsong Khapa in the merit field. This is said to be the gesture showing Lama Tsong Khapa as a wheel turning king, or buddha. Doing that visualisation as part of the guru yoga practice implants the seed for us to become the foremost disciples of Lama Tsong Khapa when he turns the wheel of Dharma as a buddha in this world. So it is good to know the significance of that.

In relation to the line in verse fifteen that reads 'after making fervent requests one hundred times or more with intense faith you should visualise your guru as dissolving into you' you may wonder how to make those requests. This can be done by either one hundred recitations of the prayer of the lineage gurus from the mahamudra text, or making the requests in conjunction with reciting the nine line praise to Lama Tsong Khapa, which is in accordance to Gyalwa Ensapa's tradition or lineage.

For those of us who are not able to visualise elaborately, it is good to understand that there is no fault in doing the visualisation of Lama Tsong Khapa on top of one's crown with the understanding that the all enlightened beings of the merit field are within him. This visualisation is referred to as the combining-all-into-one-jewel visualisation, because it combines the entire merit field within the guru. This is also how all the enlightened beings of the merit field are understood as being manifestations of the main guru. With that understanding the visualisation becomes very significant.

Personally, I find that making fervent requests, and visualising Buddha Shakyamuni as combining all jewel refuges, is very effective for my mind. Somehow making strong requests with the understanding that 'You are the source of all goodness, the manifestations of all the other deities, and thus I have no other refuge than you', along with visualising the guru in the aspect of Guru Shakyamuni or Lama Tsong Khapa somehow seems to make a stronger impact on my mind. If one has strong faith in the guru in that aspect it seems to really help to shift one's mind and make it much more receptive to the blessings, and provide and impetus to engage in further practices.

As mentioned previously one visualises the three syllables at the three points, OM at the crown, AH at the throat and the HUM at the heart, with light radiating out and invoking all other enlightened beings that dissolve into the guru. The visualisations mentioned in earlier sessions are similar to what is presented here, so one just refers to the earlier descriptions and does the same practice at this point.

One can adopt either visualisation according to one's capacity. If doing the combining-all-into-one-jewel visualisation, the supplication can be done using either the verse of supplication from the mahamudra lineage prayer or the nine round Lama Tsong Khapa praise. After doing the supplication and making the request one visualises that the guru accepts the request. And as mentioned previously, there is the acceptance of the guru in the dharmakaya aspect and acceptance in the nirmanakaya or emanation form of the guru. The main significance of dissolving the guru into oneself is that the ultimate state of non-dual bliss and wisdom of the guru's mind becomes inseparable from one's own mind.

Having dissolved the guru into oneself, one tries to really invoke that feeling of being inseparable from the guru's mind. As will be presented later on in the text, one maintains the blissful feeling and awareness of being in the state of being inseparable from the guru's mind. If you do this practice to the best of your ability, it will actually induce a special feeling in your mind. As will be

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mentioned later in the text, one then remains in the state of one's mind merging with the guru for some time.

This practice is really significant for enhancing the positive energy of our mind. For those with some familiarity with this practice it is worthwhile to take some time to do it particularly when one feels unsettled or disturbed. Spending some time doing guru yoga practice in relation whatever deity practice one has is much more worthwhile and helpful than just running around and getting more and more confused. For those who have more affinity with Tara then the guru is in the aspect of Tara, and for those with a strong affinity for the practice of Avaloketishvara, the buddha of compassion, the guru is in the aspect of Avaloketishvara.

The techniques of these practices are exactly the same and can be applied to any deity practice. In relation to Tara practice, one does the visualisation of Tara and recites the praises to Tara. After the twenty-one praises one can do the short Tara mantra and at the point of dissolving Tara into oneself visualise the inseparable non-dual bliss and wisdom in the mind of the guru or Tara dissolving into and merging with oneself, becoming inseparable from one's own mind, thus blessing one's mind.

For those who do the Cittamani Tara practice, as explained in the sadhana, the main visualisation is one's own guru with Tara at his heart. At Tara's heart is the syllable TAM surrounded by the six-syllable mantra of Tara. When one does the practice of dissolving Tara into oneself in accordance with the Cittamani Tara sadhana, one then takes the four initiations. If one is familiar with one particular practice then one can relate that to every other practice that one engages in.

In fact if one does this practice quite sincerely one will definitely feel a real shift in one's mind, especially when one feels troubled and anxious. If one does this practice even for a short time, particularly the part of dissolving the guru (whether the aspect is Tara, Avaloketishvara, Buddha Shakyamuni, or Lama Tsong Khapa) one can actually feel one's mind becoming very soothed providing relief from one's troubles.

We may be keen to meditate, but without having first done the preliminaries there will not be much progress. Even though one sits the right posture and so forth and tries to engage in meditation there won't be much of a feeling from that. If, however, having done the preliminaries mentioned here, adopting seven or eight point posture of Vairochana, generating the refuge and bodhichitta, performing a guru yoga practice, and dissolving the guru into oneself then one will notice that there is a tremendous difference compared with the practice of meditation without having done those preliminaries.

This point does not just relate just to those who are interested in calm abiding meditation, as these preliminary practices are important for any practice or meditation that one wants to do. The significance of having done the preliminary practices, specifically generating refuge and bodhichitta, and reflecting upon the main points of the path is that when one actually engages in the practice of meditative concentration, then

one will develop a single-pointed concentration that is imbued with renunciation and bodhichitta.

One may engage in the proper technique of developing single-pointed concentration, but without the preliminaries one's mind will be devoid of renunciation or bodhichitta. Then what real purpose would the achievement of single-pointed concentration serve? Not much, as without renunciation and bodhichitta there will be no great purpose for one's practice.

If, however, one's practice has been preceded by the preliminaries of taking refuge, which includes the generation of renunciation and bodhichitta, then even though those states of mind may not be manifest when engaged in single-pointed concentration, one's mind stream will be imbued with the states of renunciation and bodhichitta due to the power of the earlier intentions. And when one actually achieves single-pointed concentration one will be able to utilise that achievement with those states of mind.

In relating to the main topic of the mahamudra text, which is of the technique for developing calm abiding we have now completed explaining the prerequisites. The text then goes on to present the different types of objects of meditation for developing calm abiding, followed by the specific objects to adopt, which is the mind itself.

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Edited Version*

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