
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



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As usual, let us begin by adopting the positive motivation that is encompassed by the prayer of taking refuge and generating bodhichitta that we have just recited. So, with a mind of going for refuge and generating the bodhichitta attitude, we can adopt the seven-point meditative posture of Buddha Vairochana that was explained in our last session. Then adopt an appropriate technique of focusing on the breath. As explained in our last session, there are two types of breathing techniques—the nine round breathing technique and the settling down the breath technique. *[Pause for meditation]*

2.2.2.2. ACTUAL METHOD OF DEVELOPING CALM ABIDING

According to the outline in the auto-commentary we have covered the preliminaries for developing calm abiding, and now we come to the actual method of developing calm abiding. The auto-commentary states:

Having thus first explained the preliminaries, the method for accomplishing mental stabilisation is presented in the following verses:

16 *[After these preliminaries, you should formally begin the meditation] by concentrating without the slightest mental wandering, single-mindedly on an unstructured or undetermined state of mind. This is a state of mind devoid of any preconceptions, doubts, wishes or aspirations [for either temporary or ultimate purposes concerning either the future or the past.*

Identifying concentration and calm abiding

This verse and the following ones explain how to develop concentration and calm abiding. Before identifying the objects of concentration it is important to identify the concentration that one is seeking to develop. Without doing that there is not much point in talking about the objects of meditation. It is essential to accurately identify what concentration is first, because it is possible to be misled into thinking that perhaps the mind itself is concentration, or that perhaps mindfulness itself is actually concentration.

The two attributes of concentration

According to the explanation in the teachings the concentration to be developed has two main attributes. One is that the nature of concentration is clear and intense, and the second attribute is that it is able to unwaveringly focus single pointedly on the object.

The definition of *concentration is a mental factor that through its own power is able to maintain a single-pointed stability on an object*. So, in accordance with this definition concentration is not a primary mind but rather a secondary mind.

In presenting the two attributes of single-pointed concentration one comes to understand why there are also two main obstacles to developing concentration. Laxity obstructs the development of clarity and intensity, and excitement obstructs unwavering stability on the object. By

relating to laxity and excitement to the nature of concentration, one can understand why they are presented as the two main obstacles to single-pointed concentration.

The mental factors

Concentration, as mentioned previously, is a mental factor that through its own power is able to focus single-pointedly on an object. So, even though our mind focuses on the object of meditation it is clear, according to the definition, that the primary mind itself is not concentration. Furthermore mindfulness also is not concentration. Rather while the primary mind is observing the object, it is an accompanying mental factor called concentration that focuses single-pointedly on the object. To understand the type of mental factor that concentration is, it would be good to refer to the classification of the mental factors. Older students who studied *lo rig*, or mind and cognition in 2001, will recall that they were presented clearly then¹. The five omnipresent mental factors were also presented recently in a Lam Rim teaching session².

The five ascertaining mental factors

The five ascertaining mental factors are faith, aspiration, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. So concentration is clearly not the first, second, or third ascertaining mental factor.

The lower Vaibashika Buddhist school asserts that the five omnipresent as well as the five ascertaining mental factors are associated with all minds. However, according to the higher Buddhist schools, the five ascertaining mental factors are particularly associated with virtuous states of mind.

In order to clearly identify what concentration specifically is, it is important to relate to, and understand the other mental factors as well. The definition presented earlier is that concentration is a mental factor that from its own side, or by its own power, is able to focus single-pointedly on an object. So thus one needs to understand that concentration accompanies the main mind, but it is not a primary mind itself. Rather, concentration is a secondary mind, which through its own power is able to focus single-pointedly on an object.

It is really crucial that we identify the specific attributes of concentration. As mentioned previously, these include clarity and being able to focus unwaveringly on an object. The more clearly we understand these attributes the more likely we will be able to overcome the obstacles to developing concentration, which are laxity and excitement.

It is explained that it is hard to determine when laxity occurs, whereas excitement is a little bit easier to identify, although at more subtle levels it is also difficult to identify. The main point is that the more clearly we are able to

¹ The five omnipresent mental factors are:

1. *Feeling*, which experiences the object as pleasurable, painful or neutral.
2. *Discrimination*, which enables the mind to discern the specific characteristics of the perceived object, and to discriminate between that object and other objects.
3. *Intention*, which directs the mind to the object.
4. *Contact*, which serves as the basis for the mind to experience the object. For instance when the consciousness, its object and the sense organs come together there is contact, and then you can experience that particular object.
5. *Attention*, which directs the mind to the particular object of observation.

See Lati Rinpoche, *Mind In Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 36. The transcripts on Mind and Mental Factors are available on the annual CD of teachings.

² Wednesday 5 November 2008.

identify the attributes of concentration, the more likely it is that we will be able to recognise faults or obstacles when they occur during meditation. It will also enable us to safeguard our minds against these obstacles.

The definition of consciousness

The definition of *mind or consciousness is that which is clear and knowing*. So mind is also explained as having two attributes, which are clarity and the ability to know, or cognise.

I have presented the definition of consciousness numerous times, I could even say over one hundred times, and some of you might wonder why I am repeating it again. That is because it is really important to be able to identify what consciousness or mind means according to Buddhist teachings.

Saying that the nature of the mind is clear implies that even though the mind is non-physical as it is devoid of shape and colours it is, by its very nature, clear like glass or a mirror.

The function of the mind is to cognise or know. Just as external objects are reflected in a mirror, so too our mind, having the nature of being clear, has the ability to reflect or know whatever objects are presented to it.

Once I defined the mind in this specific way to Lama Zopa Rinpoche who, being a bit curious about my explanation said, 'Are you sure this is not an interpretation from some other texts?'. I replied, 'actually I am quite certain that this is the way to explain the mind'.

The six primary minds

There are six primary minds. To refer to the eye consciousness as an example, in accordance with the definition of consciousness, things just appear to our eye consciousness without any effort, and when we open our eyes things just appear right away.

Everything appears to your eye consciousness very clearly and vividly. If you were to close your eyes, then there is an obstruction to the function of the eye consciousness, so external objects do not appear to you, but as soon as you open your eyes, things spontaneously appear to the eye consciousness.

In one of his teachings His Holiness the Dalai Lama explained that if one reflects inwards one might have very clear images in one's mind even if one's eyes are closed. Even though the eyes are not open there is still an image that one can see clearly. That in itself, as His Holiness explained, validates the existence of mental consciousness, as what cognises or perceives those images is the mental consciousness, and not the eye consciousness. It is good to understand that.

In explaining the meaning of verse 16 the auto-commentary reads:

The type of concentration that is indicated here is one that has two branches or attributes, intensity and clarity and non-discriminate single-pointed concentration. An authentic achievement of calm abiding originates from the single-pointed concentration developed outside a meditative equipoise in the desire realm.

Having explained the first part earlier, the second part of this explanation is that there are nine stages in the development of concentration, culminating in the achievement of calm abiding at the ninth stage. As the commentary states, the 'authentic achievement of calm abiding originates from the single-pointed concentration

developed outside a meditative equipoise in the desire realm', which is the final ninth stage.

The auto-commentary continues:

It is as explained by Lord Maitreya:

It originates from the causes of having abandoned, The five faults and relied upon the eight antidotes.

As Maitreya's text states, calm abiding is obtained as a result of having abandoned the five faults and relied upon the eight antidotes. We can go over these in later sessions.

Then as the author mentions:

As mentioned, the nine stages of mental abiding are obtained by abandoning the five faults and by relying on the eight antidotes. As explained by Asanga in his work *Compendium of Ascertainment*, the nine mental abidings are to be accomplished with the six powers, accompanied with the four mental engagements.

In an earlier session I warned you that I would quiz you on these, however assuming that you have done your homework we might leave it for the time being. It seems that some have assumed that there might be a test today, and have not come to class for fear of that.

The objects of focus for single-pointed concentration

The auto-commentary further reads:

If one were to ask what type of object should one focus on to achieve single-pointed concentration?

Having explained the definition of calm abiding, the next topic is the types of objects used to develop calm abiding.

It is worth taking note of the sequence of the teachings, which is very logical and systematic. For example, having described the two attributes of single-pointed concentration and the benefits of calm abiding, one may wonder, 'Oh developing concentration sounds good, but I wonder what object I should focus on to develop concentration?' So the author provides an answer to that query:

In general the Buddha presented numerous different objects such as 1) pervasive objects, 2) objects that purify your behaviour, 3) objects for the wise and 4) objects that purify delusions.

The use of these objects is not limited to developing calm abiding, as they are actually objects that can be used to develop any level of concentration.

1. Pervasive objects

Anything that exists can actually be an object for developing calm abiding. 'Pervasive objects' implies that any object that exists can be an object of calm abiding.

2. Objects that purify your behaviour

There are either four or five classifications of this object. To mention four that I can recall, they are objects that help to purify or overcome desire for those who have intense attachment, objects that help to overcome anger for those who have intense hatred, objects to overcome ignorance for those who have deep rooted ignorance and objects to overcome pride for those with intense pride.

Objects that help to purify the behaviour of someone with **intense desire** can also be divided into objects to help overcome an extreme, medium or lesser intensity of desire. We will not go into those details right now, but rather just use the example of someone with intense desire. Someone who has had strong acquaintance with desire in previous lifetimes and not applied any antidotes to that desire are born into this lifetime with such intense desire that even the

slightest contact with an object instils an intense desire in their mind.

An individual with that sort of intensity of desire needs to acquaint themselves with the faults of the particular object of intense desire.

For those individuals whose behaviour is dominated with **intense hatred or anger** I regularly mention that the main antidote is meditating on love and compassion.

For individuals who are dominated by **intense ignorance**, the teachings suggest meditating on interdependence, which also implies emptiness. So meditating on emptiness is the antidote to overcome intense ignorance.

For those who are dominated by **intense pride** the object presented in the teachings is to meditate on the different constituents within the body. If we analyse our body from the top of our head to the bottom of our soles and then up from the bottom of our soles back up to the top of our head, we realise that there are so many aspects and parts of our own physical body that we don't know about. Relating to the ignorance that we have even about ourselves can definitely help to reduce pride.

Also for those who are dominated with a lot of **discursive thoughts**, the object is focusing on one's breath.

3. Objects for the wise

The objects for the wise include concentrating on, the **five aggregates**, the **eighteen constituents**, the **twelve sources** and concentrating on **sources and non-sources**.

Sources refers to the fact that happiness always has virtue as its source, and suffering always has non-virtue as its source. **Non-sources** is the opposite in that virtue is never the source of suffering, and non-virtue is never the source of happiness.

4 Objects for purifying delusions

Objects that purify the delusions refers particularly to developing concentration by seeing the faults of the pleasures of the desire realm and aspiring to achieving the pleasures of the higher realms such as the form and formless realms. By developing single-pointed concentration on the faults of the joys or pleasures of one's own realm, and aspiring to qualities of the pleasures of the higher realms, one acquires clairvoyance and so forth.

From seeing the faults of the pleasures of one's own realm and aspiring to the pleasures of the higher existence, one then reaches a point of seeing the faults of all pleasures and then aspires to develop a state of equanimity. That is how the four different levels of concentration are obtained in the formless realm.

I have listed these objects just from my memory, so it is good for you to go over them more specifically in the texts and make sure that they are accurate.

The importance of applying this to daily life

We could go into even more detail about the many different objects, but what we can resolve upon is the advice of the previous masters, which is that for an individual who aspires to transform themselves, the best objects to use are the antidotes that overcome whatever delusion or disturbing state of mind that is most prevalent at the present time. What is implied in this advice is that whether one is able to develop single-pointed concentration or not, one needs to actually identify the disturbing states of mind within oneself.

These disturbing states of mind accompany us at all times and constantly disturb us, whether we are sitting, sleeping

or moving about. Having identified the most prevalent or dominant disturbing states in our mind it would be most worthwhile to apply the appropriate antidotes to overcome those disturbed states of mind, and thus transform oneself. In that way, even if one were not able to develop single-pointed concentration right away, there is still a great benefit from the practice.

The appropriateness of applying this instruction to our daily life cannot be underestimated. The practice of identifying the most prevalent delusions or disturbing states of mind as the main opponent to be overcome and then applying the antidotes, is most beneficial for our life. Having become interested in Buddhism and in Buddhist practices, this will encourage us to engage in some meditation. It will not be beneficial in the long run if one neglects working on one's own mind, while adopting some esoteric or fancy object on the side. One could come to a point where, despite having attempted to focus on an object for a long time, the delusions have not yet been reduced. There is the danger then of losing faith in the practice.

That situation is definitely prevalent, as we hear many who say, 'I have studied and practised for many years but I haven't changed a bit. I am still the same'. Then there is the danger of completely abandoning Dharma practice. That would be a pity, and in fact the great fault of criticising the Dharma or the practices arises from that, when in fact the reason for the failure is not paying attention to applying the practice in the right manner. As we have already embarked on the journey of engaging in Dharma practice, it is worthwhile doing it in an effective way.

If someone is in this negative state of mind and were to keep it to themselves then only one individual is harmed. However the greatest fault is when they start going around telling everyone that the practice is not effective, thus creating doubts and negative states of mind in others. That is when the real fault arises, and that is a pity.

If one actually puts into practice the advice given earlier, then one will definitely begin to notice the delusions beginning to subside, which is a clear sign that the practice of meditation has been effective.

If you can recall a time when you had a lot of problems and were feeling quite miserable, and notice that since engaging in the practice of meditation you have become more joyful and happy, then that is a clear sign that the meditation has been effective. It is much more worthwhile to reflect upon the positive outcomes that one has experienced, to rejoice and encourage oneself further, rather than reflecting upon the negative side of things.

The main points that we have covered so far in this evening's session are the two attributes and the definition of concentration, the distinction between mindfulness and other mental factors, and that concentration is a separate secondary mental state. We have also covered the definition of mind or consciousness itself, which is a significant point to remember, and finally the various types of objects that can be used to develop single-pointed concentration.

Having presented the four specific types of objects that are listed in the sutras, the auto-commentary goes on to explain.

However most lineage gurus of this tradition have used the mind itself as an object for obtaining calm abiding; likewise it is this method that is presented here.

Thus, it is significant to recall the definition of mind as it can be used as an object for obtaining calm abiding. The mind that is referred here is the entity that is clear and knowing.

As another commentary explains, the mind itself will not appear vividly in one's first attempt to focus on the mind, so one resolves to focus on an image of the mind to begin with—that is sufficient.

As the auto-commentary presents, the referent mind that is initially used as an object for developing calm abiding is the conventional mind, which has three attributes. The **first attribute**, which was covered earlier, is that it has the nature of being clear and the function of knowing. The **second attribute** is that mind itself is devoid of all form, meaning that it is not made of matter and so forth. The **third attribute** is that it is the basis of the appearance of all phenomena.

As the commentary further explains, the benefit of focusing on such an object is that it will help one to actually realise the voidness or the actual emptiness of the mind itself later on. Another benefit is that focusing on the mind helps to lessen one's preoccupation with external objects or distractions. It is also easier to develop calm abiding by using the mind itself as an object.

It is easier for us to focus on the breath and experience the benefits of that, because the breath is devoid of colour and shape. The mind also has the same attributes of being devoid of colour and shape. When one is actually able to focus on the mind then all the benefits that were mentioned earlier will definitely be present.

The auto-commentary then continues its explanation of the meaning of the verses:

After having generated intense faith in the lama [referring to the earlier explanation on visualising the lama on top of one's crown] to the point where tears roll down from one's eyes and the hairs on one's body stands on end, one then makes strong supplications from the depths of one's heart, at which point the lama dissolves into oneself and blesses one's mental continuum.

Within the state of great awe leaving aside all conceptions regarding temporary and ultimate hopes and aspirations, and all doubts that something undesirable may happen now and in the future; thus being in a state where one is not recalling past memories, greeting the future or having discursive thoughts in the present, without modifying one's state of mind one remains in the state of awe for a short duration.

Having done the appropriate practice of envisioning the lama, and having made supplications, at the point where the guru dissolves into oneself, one develops an intense feeling of admiration for, and faith in, the lama. One then just remains in that state of being completely overwhelmed with being one and inseparable with the lama's mind.

Without much familiarity with the practice it may initially be hard to imagine this, but with practice one arrives at the desired state where the mind is devoid of any concerns.

As mentioned specifically in the commentary, this is a state where there are no past memories, and as literally translated 'not greeting the future' i.e. thinking about future plans and so forth, or even being concerned of the present. Rather, one remains in that overwhelmed state of awe, with no discursive thoughts, and no worldly concerns, and focuses on that.

We can now adopt that meditation for a few moments. Imagine the guru (in whatever aspect one is familiar with) dissolving into oneself, and maintain that awareness of being inseparable from the guru's enlightened mind. Try to feel the awareness that does not have any particular concerns with the past, future or present but just being aware of the inseparability of oneself from the guru, and focus on that. *[Pause for meditation]*

As we would have noticed in these few moments there is definitely a good effect from attempting to meditate in this way. It is good to try to refer to the commentaries to gain a clear understanding of the technique and then try to apply that to our life.

An explanation of meditating using the mind as an object is found the concise Lam Rim teaching of Lama Tsong Khapa, where it mentions reflecting inwards and focusing on the mind itself without any discursive thoughts, or analysis of the mind, and just being aware of our awareness or consciousness, and then using that as an object. The mahamudra presents this in a slightly different way but basically it uses the mind itself as the object. It is good to become more familiar with this technique.

In the Kagyu commentaries this meditative state is explained as the mind being devoid of any discursive thoughts, so although different words are used it comes to the same point that is explained in the Lam Rim teachings. The object of the mind is just being aware of the state of mind itself.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama presents a slightly different technique, which may be in the commentaries that people have, and I will also present that technique in later sessions.

Now you have all been presented with the technique of meditating upon the mind using the mind as an object/ Right? Some years ago on some Wednesday evenings we did some meditation using the mind itself as an object, with the addition of a little bit of the technique that is presented here in the mahamudra. We spent some time meditating with that technique. There were quite a few who responded saying that it was a very effective and good technique, but I don't know whether they followed it up or whether it became effective in their life.

As people are aware, the next session is the discussion week and it is good for you to continue with that. It is also good to become clear about the points mentioned earlier in the teachings such as identifying the seven-point posture of Buddha Vairochana, and being clear about the significance of adopting that posture. As presented earlier adopting the Buddha Vairochana's posture implants the imprint in our mind to actually attain the state of Vairochana in the future. Then the posture becomes much more meaningful. So it is good to further clarify those points.

Following the discussion is the test. As mentioned previously it is good for people to attend the discussion and the test as well, as it is part of the learning process. A meaningful discussion is beneficial for everyone, and if the discussion can actually benefit someone then it serves a purpose.

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