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# Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



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Let us begin by generating a positive motivation such as, 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'. The stronger that intention of wishing to achieve enlightenment for the sake of benefiting sentient beings, the stronger our determination to engage in the practice will be. It is good to reflect on these points.

## 4. INTRODUCING THE OBJECT, EMPTINESS

In our last session we had come to the two sub-divisions of the topic 'Introducing the Object' from Kyiwo Tsang's commentary. They were the pledge of composition and how to engage in the practice after having established it. We have covered the general explanation of the meaning of verse 28.

At this point the auto-commentary lists two sub-divisions:

- 4.1. The general classification
- 4.2. Combining the essence of all

### 4.1. General classification

This section presents the views of the different lineages, which we will not go into here.

### 4.2. Combining the essence of all

This is the main part in the commentary, where the author gives the presentation according to our own system. The auto-commentary reads:

To present the second, combining the essence of all.  
As stated in the sutra *An Inquiry by Arya Rastrapala*

Not able to recognise the mode of existence as empty,  
peaceful and unproduced,  
Sentient beings have been helplessly wandering in  
different states of samsara,  
Seeing this, the one endowed with great compassion  
[Buddha Shakyamuni]  
Has revealed emptiness, through various methods  
and hundred-fold reasoning.

### The three doors to emancipation

This quote presents the three doors of emancipation by relating them to the nature, cause and effect of phenomena:

1. *Empty* refers to the first door of emancipation, which is that the ultimate *nature* of all existence is empty; specifically empty of true existence.
2. *Peaceful* refers to the second door of emancipation, which is that the *causes* of all products are free from the signs of true existence.
3. *Unproduced* refers the third door of emancipation, which means that there is never a production of a truly existent *effect*.

Thus this quote from the sutra is referring to the ultimate nature, cause and effect of phenomena as the three doors of emancipation. Failure to recognise and understand the ultimate nature, cause and effect of phenomena is what causes sentient beings to wander aimlessly in samsara.

The auto-commentary explains the quotation in this way:

Just as stated above, because of the lack of knowledge of the profound view of emptiness or selflessness, sentient beings have been helplessly wandering in samsara. Thus, seeing the plight of sentient beings in samsara, the great compassionate teacher presented various methods for realising selflessness, as well establishing selflessness through a hundred-fold reasoning.

As I indicated earlier, the quote from the sutra specifically points out the three doors of emancipation. As it is important to know what the three doors of emancipation are, can you please repeat them.

*Students: Emancipation through emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness.*

That of course is the list. What does that mean? How does it relate to the context here? It is actually very important to recognise the three doors of emancipation. When it comes to tantra, there is a fourth door, so in tantra there are the four doors of emancipation. There is reference to these three doors and the extra tantric one in every sutra and tantra text respectively, thus it is an important to recognise and understand them.

### The cause of wandering in samsara

The auto-commentary says, 'Just as stated above, because of the lack of knowledge of the profound view of emptiness or selflessness, sentient beings have been helplessly wandering in samsara'. What does 'by failing to recognise emptiness sentient beings wander in samsara,' actually mean?

*Student: It refers to the twelve links, the first of which is ignorance, which is the basis for existence in samsara.*

You need to be more specific about the precise relationship between failing to recognise emptiness and wandering in samsara.

*Student: As a result of ignorance, we create the throwing karma which, with the right causes and conditions throws us into samsara.*

Exactly how is failing to realise emptiness the reason for a living beings to wander in samsara? How are they directly related?

*Student: Grasping at 'I' and 'mine' causes sentient beings to wander in samsara.*

Specifically, what does not knowing selflessness or emptiness, actually mean?

*Student: You grasp at inherent existence.*

Of course, as you have stated, grasping at true or inherent existence is the main reason why sentient beings wander in samsara. However the specific implication is that since realisation of emptiness serves as the main antidote for overcoming grasping at true existence, without the realisation of emptiness there is no antidote to overcome the grasping at true existence. Thus, grasping at true existence remains unshaken in the mental continuum for as long as one exists, which is the cause to wander in samsara repeatedly, over and over again.

So until and unless grasping at true existence is completely eradicated from the mind with the wisdom realizing emptiness, the causes to wander in samsara will remain in the mental continuum, causing sentient beings to repeatedly be re-born in samsara. Thus out of great compassion, Buddha Shakyamuni revealed emptiness as an antidote to overcome grasping at true existence. If one understands the

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full implication in this way, one will derive a greater meaning from the quote.

### Compassion and suffering

As mentioned here, out of great compassion the Buddha revealed the view of emptiness. Now, this is a very profound and unique level of compassion. As you will recall from the Madhyamika teachings, the three levels compassion are:

1. The compassion of merely focusing on sentient beings;
2. The compassion of focusing on the aspect of Dharma;
3. The compassion of focusing on suchness or emptiness.

The compassion of merely focusing on sentient beings refers to the compassion that is developed as a result of merely focusing on the obvious sufferings of sentient beings. This level of compassion is common to all religious traditions. When seeing someone else suffering, even individuals who do not believe in any particular religion can have the compassionate feeling of wishing them to be free from that particular type of suffering. Furthermore, everyone seems to agree that compassion is the basis in all religions.

Is there is any difference between the compassion that Buddhism presents and that of other religions? One needs to understand that the specific difference is that Buddhists present the other two levels of compassion. For example, focusing on sentient beings wandering in samsara as a consequence of lacking the understanding of emptiness is compassion focusing on emptiness. When one reflects upon this reality, then that instils a deeper and much more profound level of compassion within oneself. This is the compassion that is unique to the Buddhist faith, as other traditions do not have this presentation. This is important for us to understand.

Older students will recall that the Madhyamaka text opens with verses dedicated to the first level of compassion, which is focusing merely on sentient beings.<sup>1</sup> You will recall reference to developing compassion by focusing on the endless suffering of sentient beings. That is the implication of the first level of compassion.

Just as it is necessary for us to develop our compassion to a more profound level, so too with the understanding one gets from the teachings, the level of renunciation needs to become more profound as well. For example, developing a sense of renunciation of the first type of suffering (the suffering of suffering) is relatively easy, because no one considers that type of suffering as being desirable. Physical or mental pain is something that we all understand and recognise as being undesirable and unpleasant. Whereas the wish to be free from the second level of suffering, the suffering of change, and the more subtle pervasive suffering, leads to a much more profound understanding of suffering and thus renunciation is fully developed.

For us to be able to derive more essence from our practice it is essential that we practise in accordance with the understanding that we get from the teachings. You will recall from the teachings that the level of renunciation needs to be developed to the point of where one is not only disgusted with unpleasant suffering, but disgusted with the pleasures of samsara as well. One needs to develop the profound understanding of how even the pleasures of samsara are actually in the nature of suffering. Thus one develops wariness towards samsaric pleasures and

generates the wish to renounce them as well. When we reach a level in our practice where we have a developed a real feeling of renunciation in our mind, not just mouthing the words but a true sense of renunciation, then on this firm and stable basis our practice will develop further.

### The antidote

In relation to the second two lines of the quote from the sutra *An Inquiry by Arya Rastrapala*, the auto-commentary states:

Thus, seeing the plight of sentient beings in samsara, the great compassionate teacher presented various methods for realising selflessness, as well as establishing selflessness through a hundred-fold reasoning. Thus, the path for realising selflessness had been established both explicitly and implicitly.

What is to be understood here is that the method for presenting the view of emptiness is established through many reasons, explicitly in some teachings and implicitly in other teachings. In all cases, the teachings are directed towards gaining the realisation of emptiness.

The auto-commentary then continues:

Likewise the great protector Shantideva says:  
The Mighty One taught all these practices,  
For the sake of gaining wisdom.

These are the first two lines of the ninth chapter of Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, the last two lines of which are:

Thus those who wish to be free from suffering,  
Must strive towards realising emptiness.

What is being indicated here is that all the practices that were presented in the earlier chapters of the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* such as generosity, ethics, concentration and so forth, were presented by Buddha Shakyamuni, referred to as the Mighty One, as a cause to gain wisdom, meaning the wisdom realising emptiness. Thus, Shantideva says, those who wish to be liberated from suffering must strive to gain the realisation of emptiness.

Then the auto-commentary quotes from Atisha's work:

The great master, Atisha also says:  
The forty four thousand bundles of Dharma,  
Were taught for the purpose of [realising] emptiness.

As stated, the purpose for the Mighty One to expound the forty four thousand bundles of Dharma was ultimately to serve as methods for disciples to perfectly realize suchness or selflessness [indicating the direct realisation of suchness or emptiness].

However, in order to gain the direct realisation of selflessness, one needs to meditate on selflessness based on first hearing and contemplating it.

### The direct realisation of emptiness

How do you gain a direct realisation of selflessness? I bring up these questions as way to refresh your memory and not forget those points.

*Student: You have to realise selflessness at a non-conceptual level, that things don't exist from their own side.*

What does non-conceptual mean?

*Student: The realisation of emptiness without a generic image.*

To be more specific, as you have mentioned, the direct realisation of emptiness is perceiving emptiness without mixing it with a generic image. It is not possible for ordinary beings to perceive emptiness without a generic image. This means that an ordinary being always has to go through a

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<sup>1</sup> See 9 April 2002 and 16 April 2002, and page 116 of *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism*.

generic image in order to perceive emptiness. Thus the one who has gained the direct realisation of emptiness without having to go through or mixing with a generic image is an arya or superior being.

Another point to keep in mind is before gaining the direct perception (Tib: *mnong sum*) of emptiness, one has to first have an explicit perception (Tib: *ngo su*) of emptiness. Ordinary beings can have an explicit perception of emptiness, but not the direct perception of emptiness. There is a difference between an explicit perception of emptiness and the direct perception emptiness. To have an explicit perception of an object means to see the object with its actual aspect appearing to the consciousness, while direct perception means to perceive the object non-conceptually; which is the consciousness perceiving the object without mixing it with the generic image of the object.

To give a more common example, when the eye consciousness sees the colour red with your eyes open, that perception is both a direct perception as well as an explicit perception of the colour red. It is an explicit perception because the actual aspect of red appears to the eye consciousness. It is a direct perception because you see the colour red without mixing it with a generic image. Now when you close your eyes and think about the colour red, you will perceive an image of the colour red. That image is perceived by the mental consciousness and it is not a direct perception. There is an appearance of red at a conceptual level, but it is not a direct perception of the colour red because there is a generic image involved. What is being perceived is a mental image rather than the actual colour red.

### The importance of the correct approach

The auto-commentary said that 'one needs to meditate on selflessness based on first hearing and contemplating it'. What is being presented here is the actual procedure of gaining the realisation of emptiness. One needs to first hear an unmistakable presentation of what emptiness or selflessness is. In order to gain a really sound understanding of what emptiness is, one needs to hear the unmistakable presentation many times over. Then one needs to contemplate and think about it thoroughly again and again with the various different logical reasons. Then as a result of hearing and thinking about emptiness many times over, one would have created a sound basis for meditating on emptiness. That is the proper procedure for gaining the actual realisation of emptiness.

The auto-commentary continues:

The meditation of merely developing calm abiding, such as that of the non-Buddhists, cannot serve to abandon the delusions. It is as stated in *The King of Concentration sutra*:

Although worldly persons cultivate concentration,  
They do not destroy the notion of self.  
Afflictions return to disturb them,  
As they did for Udraka, who cultivated concentration  
in this way.

The meaning of this quote from *The King of Concentration sutra* is clear: although worldly people cultivate concentration, that does not destroy the notion of self and so afflictions return to disturb them.

Apparently Udraka was an individual who developed concentration to the point of achieving calm abiding, and having obtained calm abiding, qualities such as the clairvoyance and the miraculous feats were also obtained.

However when the attainment of calm abiding is lost, the miraculous powers, clairvoyance and so forth are also lost. At that time the manifest levels of the delusions become very strong in the mind again. What is being implied here is that even though ordinary beings may develop concentration to the highest level of calm abiding, that will not in itself serve as a means of destroying the notion of a self or grasping at a true self.

### The three principles of the path

What one needs to derive as a personal instruction from this is that if meditation is done without the three essential principles of the path, which are renunciation, bodhichitta and the wisdom realising emptiness, then even if one were to attain calm abiding, that will not be a cause to be free from samsara and obtain liberation. To be more specific, lack of renunciation is the main obstacle to liberation, whereas lack of bodhichitta is an obstacle to achieving enlightenment, and the lack of realisation of emptiness is an obstacle to developing the antidote for overcoming the grasping at true existence of the self.

Without these three elements, one will not derive much essence from one's practice. What we can derive as a personal instruction here is that whenever we engage in the practice of meditation, we need to try to relate it to these three principles of the path, and to try to combine one's practice with a sense of renunciation, bodhichitta and whatever understanding one has of the view of emptiness.

As mentioned previously, at the very least developing renunciation secures one's practice to becoming the cause for obtaining liberation; developing bodhichitta is a cause for obtaining enlightenment; and developing an understanding of emptiness is a cause for developing the antidote that overcomes grasping at true existence.

The auto-commentary then gives a further explanation:

If asked what then is the meditation for actually obtaining liberation?

This question is implying that if merely obtaining calm abiding does not serve as a cause to achieve liberation, the what type of meditation does serve as the cause to obtain liberation?

To quote from the same [*The King of Concentration*] sutra again:

If you analytically discern the lack of self in  
phenomena,  
And if you cultivate that analysis in meditation;  
This will cause the result, attainment of nirvana;  
There is no peace through any other means.

What one needs to understand from this quote is that the mere attainment of calm abiding is not sufficient. In addition, one must also develop special insight in order to analytically discern the lack of self in phenomena. Cultivating that analysis in meditation, specifically implies developing special insight in conjunction with calm abiding

### The object of negation

Then the auto-commentary continues:

As stated above, by first analysing the selfless nature of phenomena, and then meditating on the meaning derived from that analysis, one will obtain the result of liberation. Even though selflessness by its own nature cannot be divided into coarse and subtle, it is however classified into selflessness of persons and selflessness of phenomena.

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As explained by the glorious Chandrakirti:

For the sake of liberating sentient beings,  
Selflessness is classified into that of persons and  
phenomena.

The older students will recall these points from the Madhyamaka teachings. Specifically this is where the actual object, which is emptiness, is introduced. What is the implication when it says 'even though selflessness by its own nature cannot be divided into coarse and subtle, it is however classified into selflessness of persons and selflessness of phenomena'?

*Student: The aspect of selflessness is the same, which is that both phenomena and person lack existence from their own side. That view is unique to the Prasangika. It is only the object qualified by emptiness that is different, not the object of negation itself.*

As opposed to the lower Buddhist schools from the Svatantrika-Madhyamika downwards, the Prasangika do not distinguish between the coarseness and subtlety of the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena. So it is unique to the Prasangika – that there is no division between selflessness of person and selflessness of phenomena in terms of coarseness and subtlety. Why is that so?

*Student: The Svatantrika posit the person's lack of being a self-sufficient substantially existent person. Realising that, will overcome the obstacle to liberation, but will not overcome the obstacles to omniscience.*

To be more specific there is no difference in the object of negation for both the selflessness of the person and the selflessness of phenomena in the Prasangika. For the Svatantrika-Madhyamika school, however, the object of negation in relation to a person is a self-sufficient substantially existent person, while the object of negation in the selflessness of phenomena is independent existence. From the Prasangika point of view, however the object of negation of both person and phenomena is inherent existence. That is, inherent existence is the object of negation for both persons and phenomena. The reason why even the Prasangika make a distinction between the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena is because they are different objects - a person is a living being and all the attributes of the person and other objects are inanimate phenomena. As there are these two distinct objects – person and other phenomena, selflessness is divided into two: selflessness of person and selflessness of phenomena.

From this part onwards the presentation is very profound, because it's all about emptiness. This is the crucial point of the teaching. It would be good for you to read the text and try to familiarise yourself with it before coming to the teachings. In that way you will become more familiar with the topic.

Those of you who responded to the questions this evening gave very good answers, however you do need to think about this subject again and again. Doing so will lead to deeper and more profound understandings of emptiness.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright  
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