
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

6 October 2009

We can begin with a five-minute meditation. (*Pause for meditation*)

With a good frame of mind and good motivation, we can listen to the teaching.

5. PRESENTING THE STATE OF POST-MEDITATIVE EQUIPOISE (CONT)

Following the quote by Nagarjuna which reads 'Because the being encompasses the six elements, it is not true' the auto-commentary went on to explain that after rising from meditative equipoise, even though a person does not exist inherently, the conventional or nominal existence of a person is nevertheless established. Thus the next investigation is how that appearance is to be contemplated in the post-meditative state.

Relating to this the auto-commentary reads:

The mode of its existence is: just as one would label a heap of stones as a person, and a striped rope as a snake; similarly a being is a mere name, mere label and a mere imputation by conception on the mere collection of one's six elements or five aggregates. Like an illusion it is not true, and is merely an appearance of emptiness arising as interdependent-origination. One needs to develop a sound understanding of this point and then meditate on it.

As was explained in our last session, being like an illusion relates to the understanding of the interrelationship between emptiness and appearance. While phenomena are empty of inherent existence to the sense consciousness of sentient beings, they still appear as inherently existent. The analogy of being like an illusion needs to be understood in its proper context. This is explained with the example of an illusion where a magician casts a spell over pebbles and pieces of wood so that they appear as horses and elephants:

- To the eye consciousness of the magician, the conjured pebbles and wood would appear as being elephants and horses, but the mental consciousness of the magician knows that in fact there are no horses and elephants present. This is referred to as 'having the appearance but not the apprehension'. Similarly, with both an ordinary being who has a conceptual realisation of emptiness as well as the being in the post-meditative state. They have the appearance of true existence but do not apprehend an object to be truly established.
- To the eye consciousnesses of the spectators who are influenced by the magician's spell of the magic, there is an appearance of the illusion of horses and elephants, as well as the belief that there are horses and elephants present. This is referred to as 'having both the appearance and apprehension'. Similarly, ordinary sentient beings who don't have any realisation of emptiness have the appearance of inherent existence as well as the apprehension of inherent existence.

- To the eye consciousness of those who come late to the magic show and thus who are not affected by the spell, pebbles and pieces of wood do not appear as being horses and elephants, and neither do they have the apprehension of horses or elephants. This is referred to as 'having neither the appearance nor the apprehension'. Similarly, enlightened beings as well as arya beings in meditative equipoise focussing on emptiness have neither the appearance nor the apprehension of inherent existence.

In this way, one needs to understand that in a post-meditative state the appearance of an inherently or truly existent person will still be there, but there is no apprehension of it as being inherently or truly established.

Just to check if you have understood the points in the analogy, who would be the person in the analogy who sees the conjured horses and elephants, but does not have the apprehension of it as being horses and elephants?

Students: The magician.

Why doesn't the magician have the apprehension of horses and elephants?

Student: He knows that it is an illusion because he performed the magic.

One has to use the proper terminology. As mentioned earlier, it is because the magician knows that it doesn't exist as it appears, i.e. even though there is an appearance to the eye consciousness, the mental consciousness knows that it does not exist in that way.

Why is there an appearance to the eye consciousness of the magician?

Student: Because the magician's consciousness is under the influence of the spell.

To be precise, you have to say that the 'eye consciousness' is affected by the spell. That is because if the mental consciousness were affected by the spell, then the mind would have to apprehend horses and elephants as well. But it is the eye consciousness that sees the conjured horses and elephants.

Who is the being that has the appearance of true existence but does not apprehend it?

Students: An ordinary being that has a conceptual realisation of emptiness.

Who is the person who has both the appearance as well as the apprehension of the illusion?

Students: The audience who are under the magician's spell.

Who is the person that has the appearance of true existence as well as apprehending it?

Students: An ordinary being.

You have to be specific here as there are many kinds of ordinary beings. So, it must be an ordinary being who does not have the conceptual realisation of emptiness.

Who is the being that does not have either the appearance or the apprehension of true existence?

Students: An enlightened arya being.

Again, to be more precise we could say an arya being in meditative equipoise, which covers both an arya sentient being who is in meditative equipoise, as well as all enlightened beings.

So, why doesn't an enlightened arya have both the appearance as well as the apprehension?

Student: Because they have removed the latencies of self-grasping and so they no longer have the causes to perceive true existence.

From this explanation one needs to understand that the reason why sentient beings have the appearance of true existence is because they are influenced by the imprints or latencies of ignorance that are present in their mind stream.

With the analogy itself, who is the being who has neither the appearance nor the apprehension of the conjured illusion of horses and elephants?

Student: The person who arrives after the performance.

Why doesn't that person have an appearance or apprehension?

Student: Because they are not affected by the spell.

In this context it relates to the being in the post-meditative state, who sees everything as an illusion. In relation to the analogy they have the appearance but not the apprehension of true existence or inherent existence. Do you now understand the meaning behind the analogy of how things are seen as an illusion? Is that clear?

Students: Yes.

The main point to be derived here is how a person or being is actually merely labelled, and that it is a mere name and a mere imputation by conception. This unique point is said to be very difficult to grasp. Understanding something to being empty while existing nominally is said to be a really unique and subtle realisation to gain.

What one needs to understand here is the unique presentation of the Prasangika, which is that while living beings and all other phenomena are imputed existents, conventionally they still perform their function.

It is quite crucial that we familiarise ourselves with these points and try to get a true sense of it within our own understanding. When I was living in Kopan and contemplating these points, there was a time when this specific and unique presentation suddenly became quite clear in my mind. Apart from just repeating the words, there was a real sense of feeling quite confident within myself about Lama Tsong Khapa's unique presentation. However over time it seems that even though I can still repeat the words and have a general understanding of it, that deep inner confidence has waned a bit. It seems that over time something that was once very clear can lose its sharpness. So that's why I'm reminding you to try to really work at it and if you get some sense try not to lose it. *[laughs]* When I got that feeling of being very very confident, it dawned upon me as being a really crucial point. I'm not too certain, but I think it was Lama Lhundrup that I shared my understanding of what seemed to be Lama Tsong Khapa's real intention about the correct view.

The main point is that if by establishing the understanding of how a person is empty of true or inherent existence helps to induce the understanding of how a person is interdependently or nominally existent as well, then one is heading in the right direction.

In our last session, we got to the point where the auto-commentary said:

One needs to develop a sound understanding on this point and then meditate on it. The sutras also confirm these points...

The auto-commentary is implying that as one recites the words from the sutra, one needs to be able to bring to mind the implicit meaning of these words. With the *Heart Sutra*,

for example, when one recites the words 'there is no form and no eyes and so forth', one also needs to be able to understand that it means no inherently existing form, no inherently existent eye or nose and so forth. One has to apply that same understanding to these quotations as well.

The earlier masters explained that if one were to recite, for example, the *Heart Sutra* and passages from the sutras such as these, while bringing to mind their meaning of emptiness, then it will definitely be a very powerful way to purify the great negative karmas that one has created. And it is also a very powerful means of removing obstacles. Thus the *Heart Sutra* is considered to be one of the main sutras to recite for removing obstacles. This is how it must be understood.

We covered the first two verses from the *King of Concentration Sutra*, which read:

When magicians conjure up forms, creating various
horses, elephants, or chariots,

What appears to be there does not exist at all.

The nature of all phenomena is to be known like this.

When a young woman sees the birth and death of a son
in a dream,

She is delighted at birth but not at the death.

All phenomena are to be known like this.

One needs to understand that the presentation in the auto-commentary is similar to that contained in many other texts. First there was a quotation from the great Indian master Nagarjuna that said 'because the being encompasses the six elements, it is not true'. Now the auto-commentary goes on to quote the actual sutra that validates that commentary as well. This is how meanings are validated with quotes from commentaries, leading back to the Buddha's own words in the sutras.

The next verses from the sutra read:

When reflections of the moon appear at night in clear,
clean

Water, they are empty and vain, ungraspable.

All phenomena are to be known like this.

A person tormented by thirst, travelling at midday in
summer,

Sees mirages as pools of water.

All phenomena are to be known like this.

'A person tormented by thirst, travelling at midday in summer' refers to a very thirsty person travelling in summer at midday, when the sun is hottest. When these conditions are intact then, such a person would see a shimmering thing in the distance that appears to be water. Then because of their own particular thirsty condition they perceive that shimmering light to be water and immediately develop a strong desire to go and drink that water. However as they approach near to the place where they saw the water, there is no water there at all. Only then do they realise that it was illusion.

Thus all phenomena, although they appear to be truly established or inherently existent, do not exist in that way in reality. That is how this is to be understood. When the conditions mentioned in the analogy - the hot mid-day sun, the summer heat, and the sandy surface - are intact, then the illusion of water naturally appears, which a thirsty person may totally believe in. Similarly, all of us have all of the conditions, i.e. the latencies of ignorance, that make us perceive phenomena as being truly or inherently existent. We perceive and apprehend them in that way because of the condition of being influenced by ignorance and its imprints.

The last verse of the sutra is:

Someone may peel away the watery trunk of plantain tree
Looking for a pith, but neither inside nor outside is there any pith at all.
All phenomena are to be known like this.

Here we can use the banana tree as an example of a 'watery trunk of a plantain tree'. When you peel away the outside layers of a banana tree, you don't come to any inner trunk. That analogy is applied to all inner phenomena that are related to a person or being, the mental consciousness and so forth, as well as outer phenomena. Whatever the phenomenon may be, no matter how much one searches for it, one cannot actually find that phenomenon within the basis of imputation. Thus it is merely imputed, merely labelled, but does not exist truly or inherently on the basis. This is how it is to be understood.

How one can also understand the meaning here is that regardless of whether it is internal phenomena or external phenomena, the mode of existence is that it is merely labelled upon the collection of the aggregates that form the basis of imputation. So phenomena exist as a collection of different parts. But if one were to separate the parts, and try to look for a phenomenon within any of the parts, one cannot find it there at all.

In the lower Buddhist schools when you investigate, you can find something that can be posited as the thing that you are searching for. Whereas the unique presentation of the Prasangika is that when you search for the meaning through analysis and investigation, you cannot find anything that exists inherently.

2. APPLYING IT TO OTHERS

The auto-commentary then reads:

One gains a good familiarity with the meditation practice on selflessness based on the self within one's own continuum. Then as stated in the text called *Compendium*: 'However one finds oneself to be, realise that to be the same for all sentient beings; however one finds other sentient beings, realise that to be the same for all phenomena'.

This is in accordance with how the meditation on the selflessness of other beings and phenomena has been presented. One first uses the self or being within one's own continuum as an instance to investigate. When one has accomplished the realisation of the lack of an inherently existent self or 'I', then it is easy to relate that to the possessions that we call 'mine'. Specifically, in relation to the quote here, when one realises the lack of inherent existence of oneself as an individual being, then one can relate that to the lack of inherent existence of other individuals. One can easily relate the understanding of oneself within one's own continuum to other phenomena. This relates to the second outline of Kyiwo Tsang's commentary, which uses others as an instance to be investigated upon.¹

The auto-commentary then reads:

In order to explain how to meditate on selflessness of other beings and phenomena, the following verses [from the root text] have been presented.

31. Thus a person or a self-identity [being merely a label on a collection of sensory spheres] has no ultimate true independent existence. Moreover, none of the sensory spheres has independent existence either, since each of them too is a label on a collection of parts.

32. Therefore, if you try to find your self-identity in the light of these teachings on the non-independent existence of all things, you will never be able to find the true independent existence of even the smallest part of a meditator who is settling his mind single pointedly in meditation. In this state [when you have realised the true void nature of your mind in the above manner], you should single pointedly settle your mind on this realisation without any mental wandering. In this way you cultivate the placement of single-pointed concentration on voidness, which is [empty of the obstructions of true independent existence] as space [is empty of obstruction and tangibility].

After quoting these verses, the auto-commentary goes on to explain:

As explained, one affirms the appearance of all ordinary and arya beings, as well as all inner and outer phenomena, by investigating whether they are either each of the elements of earth, water, fire, wind and consciousnesses, or the culmination of them all.

In accordance with Kyiwo Tsang's outline, this refers to seeing the lack of inherent or true existence, using other persons and phenomena as the object. Just as one has affirmed the lack of true or inherent existence of oneself, one relates that to other beings and phenomena. What is being affirmed here is that all ordinary and arya beings as well as inner and outer elements (earth, water, fire, wind and the six consciousnesses), and in fact the accumulation of all phenomena appear to one's mind as being truly existent or independently existent. Just as the self within one's own continuum appears as being independently or truly existent (which means existing without depending on any other factors), likewise other persons and phenomena also appear in the same way. So one must investigate how that is not true and false.

As the commentary further reads:

Just as one had previously investigated the mode of appearance and the mode of apprehension in the state of meditative equipoise, and established that not even an atom of truly established phenomena can be found; at that time it will be in accordance with the statement, 'This not finding is the supreme finding; this not seeing is the ultimate seeing'. Just as it has been stated, when the ultimate nature of mind is seen, one has recognised the mind.

In verse 31 'Thus a person or a self identity [being merely a label on a collection of sensory spheres] has no ultimate true independent existence' refers to the fact that because each of them is a label of a collection of parts, they lack independent existence. This explanation relates to all phenomena. Thus we investigate an external phenomenon such as the physical aggregates of a person, and other external phenomena that are not within one's continuum. It is easy for us to relate to the fact our physical aggregate is actually a collection of many parts. Beginning with the limbs there is the structure of the bones, the veins and so forth and then there are all the internal organs. So it is that collection which makes up the physical aggregate of our body.

¹ See the teaching of 1 September 2009. The four outlines are:

1. Meditating upon oneself as an object
2. Applying it to others
3. Using the mind as an object
4. In brief, applying it to all appearances

Likewise we can see that external matter is also a collection of different atoms and parts and so forth. Even an intangible thing like space has parts, such as its eastern part and so forth. We can understand that it is the collection of the directional parts of space that make up space. Then, of course, when we really investigate the mind we come to realise that there are different moments of mind - earlier moments, the present moment, and future moments, as well as the different states of mind. It is that combination which establishes the mind.

Then we come to even more obscure phenomena like emptiness. As explained in the teachings there are many categories of emptiness such as the twenty categories of emptiness². In this case we are not referring to one of these categories, but to the distinct emptinesses of, for example, the emptiness of the cup, the emptiness of the pillar and the emptiness of the table. These are instances of the emptiness of different phenomena where the basis of imputation is different. As the basis is different, so too the emptinesses within those phenomena are also distinct. So, even emptiness is an accumulation of different instances. When we relate to all phenomena as being a mere accumulation of different parts or instances, then we are giving it a label. So because anything is an accumulation of different parts, it cannot be independently existent or inherently existent. That is the main point of this verse.

What one also derives from this investigation is that because everything is a collection of different parts, and because its existence depends on that, it is therefore an interdependent-origination. Therefore all phenomena are interdependent-originations. The main point here is that one uses the same analysis, investigation, reasons and so forth to investigate external phenomena as was used when investigating the existence of an individual self within one's own continuum. Similarly one uses the same syllogism to establish the non-inherent existence or the lack of true existence of other beings and phenomena.

One of the verses in the *Four Hundred Verses*, indicated that having meditated upon and seen the emptiness of one object, one can relate that to all other phenomena.³ As explained during that teaching, that doesn't mean that the emptiness of one thing is the emptiness of everything else. Rather it means that when the meditator realises the emptiness of one object, they can then use the same reasoning with all other phenomena to establish the emptiness of all other phenomena.

What is to be understood here is that the mode of investigation and analysis is the same, whereas the object or the basis is different. In this teaching, one first uses the self within one's own continuum as an instance, and when one realises that self as being empty of inherent existence, and that it is not established truly or inherently, then it becomes very easy for us to relate that to, for example, one's possessions, which we call 'mine'. That is then much easier, as it does not take much effort.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*

² See Madhyamaka teachings beginning 21 September 2004.

³ Verse 191. See 26 June 2007