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# Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇིགས་པ་ལྷན་ཕྱག་རྒྱ་ཆེན་པོ།

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Sitting in an upright, relaxed and comfortable posture generate the altruistic motivation, such as 'In order to benefit all sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment, and for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

## 2.3. Conclusion<sup>1</sup>

### 2. THE MANNER OF APPLYING THE BENEFITS AND REMOVING IMPEDIMENTS (CONT.)

One needs to be satisfied with 'merely labelled' and 'merely imputed' as the mode of existence of phenomena.

If asked, the ultimate meaning of the mahamudra view is that all phenomena are 'merely labelled' and 'merely nominated'. The specific point where we left off in the last session is where the auto-commentary reads:

Therefore since the ultimate meaning of mahamudra view asserted by the father and sons is said to be 'mere nominal imputed existence', this should be clearly understood and thus explained.

We have explained in detail of how things are merely labelled and imputed, and here another example is used to illustrate how things are merely imputed.

For example one must accept that pillars exist in a house with four pillars, because four pillars exist in it.

When we refer to a house with four pillars, then we have to accept that there are pillars in it, because of the very reference to the house as a 'house that has four pillars'. So we cannot deny the fact that there are pillars in the house - that is quite obvious. Each of the four pillars of that house is also a generic universal (or generality), which means that when we refer to the pillars of the house, that very notion of the pillars of the house serves as a generic universal of each of the four pillars. When we think about the pillars in the house, we are not thinking of each individual pillar, but rather we just have an image of pillars in the house, which is a generality.

As the text further explains:

However, if one searches for an instance of that generic substance of pillar, then (something other) than each of those four is not suitable to be an instance of that...

We accept that there is a generic universal of the four pillars in the house. However if we were to search for that generic universal pillar, then none of the four individual pillars could serve as an instance of that generic universal pillar.

... and the collection of those four is neither an instance of that. Also one cannot demonstrate an instance that is separate from each of those four or (that is separate from) their mere collection.

This is similar to the earlier explanation about the six senses and labelling the person. We have to accept there is a generic universal of the four pillars of the house, but if we were to search for it, we would find that none of the individual pillars is an instance of a generic universal pillar. However, if we search for a generic universal pillar other than the four pillars, we won't be able to find an instance that can serve as a generic universal of the pillars either.

As the commentary explains:

Therefore the generic substance of a pillar among those (four pillars) is merely imputed by name to be 'a pillar in addition to the four pillars'. Other than positing it as being merely imputed by name and being satisfied with that, it is said to be 'a merely nominal imputed existent' since it is not found when sought, and all dharmas (phenomena) are similar.

We have to accept that when we talk about the pillars of the house our valid perception perceives that there are four pillars. Thus when we refer to 'pillars', there is a generic universal of the four pillars in the house. However if we were to search within each individual pillar and ask 'is this the generic universal of the four pillars in the house?', then of course it is not. Neither are the individual pillars nor the collection of the four pillars in the house the generic universal of the pillar. So one cannot find a generic universal of the pillar in the house. However it does exist, and to assume that it does not exist would be to deny what is perceived by our valid perception. Thus, its existence is merely imputed and merely labelled, and this is the same for all phenomena. This vivid analogy can be applied to all existence; apart from being merely labelled and imputed you cannot find its intrinsic existence.

*Student: Is the generic universal a perception or is it pointing to the actual pillar?*

There is a difference between, say, vase in general and a particular vase. If we say 'vase' then that is a generality referring to all vases, whereas a golden vase or an earthen vase or a glass vase would be a 'particular' of a vase. When we talk of a 'person' then that is a generality - as people do exist. Whereas when we refer to an individual person, then that would be an instance of a particular person. Similarly with pillars; when we say 'pillars', then that is a generality, but if we talk about 'the pillar in that house' then that is a particular.

Actually, we must go a little bit beyond the mere literal explanation of this example. First of all, when we think about the pillars of a house, they seem to exist intrinsically in and of themselves, don't they? So, what is really being negated here is the pillar that we perceive as being intrinsically or inherently existent, and such a pillar doesn't exist. By understanding it in that way, one gains the complete and full meaning of this analogy. Thus, this is yet another analogy to illustrate that there is no inherent or intrinsic existence in any phenomenon. The pillars of the house do exist but their mode of existence is that they are merely nominated and labelled. This is the unique Prasangika presentation: all phenomena are merely imputed existences.

The crux of the Prasangika view is that things exist by being merely labelled and imputed. The term 'imputed existence' means that everything exists by mere label or conceptual imputation. This is the unique presentation of things existing as merely labelled and imputed phenomena, while at the same time performing their particular functions. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the use of two texts with different numbering systems it has been very difficult to keep track of them as the weeks have unfolded. They have, at best, been indicative.

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positing the functionality of merely labelled and imputed phenomena is the crux of the Prasangika view point.

The auto-commentary eliminates a doubt which was also addressed earlier:

Now this doubt that should be eliminated exists and many earlier and later authors, who composed (treatises) related to this system, say that all awareness of ordinary beings is mistaken awareness and for that reason all that appears to the minds of ordinary beings appears to be inherently established. But those who assert a mode of appearance of the object of negation distinct from this mode of appearance of present (objects) hold true establishment in a plethora of ways.

The Svatantrika system asserts that whatever appears to perception of ordinary beings is mistaken. However while asserting that, they are reluctant to negate the very appearance of phenomena. As the auto-commentary explains 'those who assert a mode of appearance of the object of negation distinct from this mode of appearance of present (objects) hold true establishment in a plethora of ways'. The reason why they assert appearances in a 'plethora of ways' is because they are not able to establish things contrary to that appearance. For that reason they assert inherent existence.

As the auto-commentary further reads:

But since we cannot say that what appears to the mind of us ordinary beings is not established as it appears, there is a fault. In that way Svatantrika scholars assert that form and so on exist by the power of appearing to awareness unharmed (by valid assessment).

Scholars of the Svatantrika system 'assert that form and so on exist by the power of appearing to awareness unharmed by valid assessment'. Ultimate existence is established by the way of its appearance unharmed by valid assessment. If things were to appear in a manner contrary to that, then it could not be established as being existent phenomena. The Svatantrika posit that since the appearance of inherent existence or existing by their own characteristics and cannot be harmed by a valid assessment, they must exist in that way. So, the reason things have inherent existence is because they are unharmed by an awareness that can validly assess them.

The auto-commentary further reads:

The glorious Chandrakirti considers this method of formulating the object of negation to be excellent. However just as the five objects are not established as self-sufficient to the five sense awareness of a being who is a this-sider, they are mistaken awarenesses since those (objects) appear to be self-sufficient. But it should be understood that they are valid awareness from the perspective of the five objects appearing to be established by their characteristics, and for that reason they are posited as valid awareness establishing conventional (truth) and so on.

The Prasangika point of view is that the very appearance of inherent existence is the object of negation. Saying 'this method of formulating the object of negation to be excellent' points out that what the Svatantrika assert as being established as inherent existence is actually the very object of negation according to the Prasangika. The Svatantrika scholars posit, for example, that inherent existence of form is established because it appears to an awareness that can be validly assessed. As it can be validly assessed it is not to be negated. Whereas according to the

Prasangika, inherently existent form is to be negated i.e. that in itself is the very object of negation.

The auto-commentary continues:

Again some think that many have stated that the person is not negated, but the truly established person is negated, and then posit an entire person (fabricated) in equipoise. But toiling to negate the true establishment of a person made by mind is completely unacceptable because that would evince an extreme of permanence. [or eternalism]

Those who adhere to this assertion agree that there is an object of negation in relation to a person, but they do not attempt to negate the inherent appearance of the person. Rather they try to find another object of negation, which is, as explained here, missing the point. As emphasised many times over, the very appearance of the person as being inherently existent, is the object of negation, and this is the point which is being re-emphasised here.

The auto-commentary then concludes by stating:

There is much more to say on these points, however for fear of over-elaboration I shall end with this much.

### 3. THE MANNER OF ACTUALISING THE FINE PATH

This is the third subdivision from Kyiwo Tsang's commentary is actually in accordance with how it is presented in the auto-commentary which reads:

Having meditated in this way, now the manner of actualising the fine path which is free from the extremes of eternalism and nihilism is presented:

What is being established here is that having meditated on the mahamudra as explained earlier, one now comes to the part of actualising the 'fine path', which is free from both extremes of eternalism and nihilism.

The next verse of the root text reads:

*46. When you have seen how the conventional existence of the appearance of things does not obscure their void nature, and how their void nature does not obstruct the operative or functional existence of their appearance, then you have realised the excellent path of the unified meaning of interdependent origination and voidness.*

This is reiterating the points that were emphasised earlier; the fine point is the understanding of how interdependent origination and emptiness are supportive of each other. 'The appearance of things' refers to the conventional existence of phenomena. If the conventional existence of phenomena enhances the ultimate mode of existence - the voidness of phenomena - and if the voidness of phenomena enhances the conventional existence of phenomena, then one has actualised the 'fine path'.

The auto-commentary then quotes Lama Tsong Khapa's *Three Principles of the Path*:

On this point, the omniscient Je Tsong Khapa has said:

As long as the two, realisation of appearances – the infallibility of dependent arising –  
And realisation of emptiness – the non-assertion [inherent existence],  
Seem to be separate, there is still no realisation  
Of the thought of Shakyamuni Buddha.  
When [the two realisations exist] simultaneously  
without alternation  
And when, from only seeing dependent arising as infallible,

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Definite knowledge destroys the mode of apprehension [of the conception of inherent existence],

The analysis of the view [of emptiness] is complete.<sup>2</sup>

The auto-commentary then quotes Chandrakirti:

Chandrakirti in his *Madhyamakavatara* says:

Likewise, all functioning phenomena, even though empty,

Arise out of emptiness.

The two truths don't exist inherently,

Therefore they aren't eternal or annihilated.

In the above verse, 'all functioning phenomena' refers to the conventional mode of existence of phenomena, their functioning and so forth. 'Even though they are empty, they arise out of emptiness' means that even though things don't exist inherently, they still function. That is the main point.

The second last line reads 'The two truths don't exist inherently', which means that because they don't exist inherently, they are free from being either internally existent or completely annihilated. This quote from Chandrakirti's text also elucidates the unique point of the Prasangika system where appearance negates the extreme of eternalism and voidness negates the extreme of nihilism. So this unique point of the Prasangika is being reiterated again. It is said that Lama Tsong Khapa regards these points as the crux of the Prasangika presentation.

My own teacher the late Khensur Urygen Tsetan used to check my understanding on this very point on a few occasions (in New Zealand, Sera and when he visited here), he would say 'would you explain the point of how appearance negates the extreme of eternalism and voidness negates the extreme of nihilism?' He was basically pointing out the importance of gaining a good understanding of these points.

Indeed when I used to see Khensur Rinpoche, there would be occasions where I would be with him for three to four hours on end, just in discussion. First he would say 'I will ask you a question' then in response to that I would also raise further questions, and we would have a debate. We went on for several hours in that way. Others waiting in line to see Rinpoche would be told 'Rinpoche is now busy with Geshe Doga and they seem to be having great fun in debating', and they would have to wait because Khensur Rinpoche was so involved in our discussion. At the end of our discussion Rinpoche would say 'we have had a good and meaningful time, haven't we?' In this way we spent a significant time just discussing the Dharma, which was very precious.

The auto-commentary then further quotes Nagarjuna:

Lord Nagarjuna also says:

Those who understand this emptiness of phenomena,

Yet (also) conform to the law of karma and its results,

That is more amazing than the amazing!

That is more wondrous than the wondrous!

This is referring to the unique presentation that the ultimate nature of emptiness (i.e. the emptiness of phenomena) does not negate the law of karma and its results. It is therefore (as explained here) 'more amazing than the amazing'. This means that it that it is more

amazing and wondrous than any other presentation. This is again similar to Lama Tsong Khapa's praise to Buddha Shakyamuni in *Praise to Interdependent Origination*. The text is composed in the unique way, praising Buddha Shakyamuni, not by referring particularly to the qualities of his body, speech and mind, but rather to his profound teachings on interdependent origination.

In the verse from Nagarjuna's *Root Wisdom* that we recite at the beginning of the teaching, Nagarjuna praises Buddha Shakyamuni for propounding interdependent origination and emptiness.

The auto-commentary then presents the actualising of special insight in relation to mahamudra:

Thus, by mounting on the horse of calm abiding and upholding the techniques of mahamudra, whenever one obtains the meditative concentration focused on emptiness which is conjoined with the physical and mental pliancy and bliss derived from the power of analysis, at that point one has obtained the heat stage on the path of preparation.

Special insight is actually obtained at the 'heat stage on the path of preparation', which is the first stage on the path of preparation. In the first path, the path of accumulation, the being is focused single-pointedly on emptiness. As explained in the teachings, the point when the being focused single-pointedly on emptiness obtains physical and mental pliancy derived from their analysis occurs simultaneously with obtaining the heat stage of the path of preparation, and that is also when they obtain special insight in relation to focusing on emptiness. They have thus obtained the union of calm abiding and special insight.

Kyiwo Tsang further explains that all phenomena simultaneously have both the conventional mode of existence as well as the ultimate mode of existence. If we were to take the mind as an example, the negation of an inherent existent mind is the ultimate mode of existence of emptiness of the mind, while the mere luminosity of the mind is the conventional existence of the mind. Only the wisdom of an omniscient mind (an enlightened being) is able to simultaneously perceive both the ultimate and conventional mode of existence of any phenomenon. Specifically, awareness that perceives both conventional and ultimate realities simultaneously is only posited for the mental continuum of enlightened or omniscient beings.

As ordinary beings we are not able to perceive conventional and ultimate realities simultaneously, because of the obscurations in our mind. An enlightened mind, on the other hand, is completely free from all obscurations and defilements, and so there is no barrier that obscures the enlightened mind from seeing both conventional reality and ultimate reality simultaneously. That is also the reason why sentient beings are always the focus of enlightened beings' minds and compassion, as there are no barriers whatsoever for the enlightened minds to perceive all phenomena at all times.

What is being specifically explained here is that the ability to perceive conventional and ultimate reality simultaneously does not exist in the continuum of a sentient being's awareness. However an individual being can have both the experiential understanding of conventional reality and ultimate reality at the same time. This indicates that an arya being, for example, has gained the direct perception of emptiness, but may not be able to perceive conventional phenomena during meditative equipoise. But because they are acquainted with, and have the realisation of conventional

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<sup>2</sup> This translation of verses 11 and 12 is that used by the FPMT, which differs from that used earlier.

phenomena, they have an understanding of conventional reality as well, so one person can have a profound understanding of both truths, but the awareness of one sentient being's mind cannot perceive them simultaneously. It is only a buddha's awareness, consciousness or mind that can see both truths directly at the same time.

Kyiwo Tsang also elaborates on the particular meaning of these lines from verse 46:

*46 ...When you have seen how the conventional existence of the appearance of things does not obscure their void nature, and how their void nature does not obstruct the operative or functional existence of their appearance...*

The more one acquaints oneself with the appearance of things, which is the interdependent or conventional reality of phenomena, the more it actually enhances (rather than obscures) the void or empty nature of the phenomena. Likewise, the more one is acquainted with the void or empty nature of phenomena, the more it also enhances (rather than obscures) the understanding of the conventional reality of phenomena or the interdependent origination of phenomena. Kyiwo Tsang commentary explains how this is possible for someone who has acquainted themselves with the correct understanding.

Of course the points explained here have already been explained many times. However what is specifically being elaborated here is the reason why the appearance of conventional existence does not obscure the void nature of phenomena, which is that understanding the conventional reality of phenomena helps to enhance rather than hinder the interdependent nature of phenomena. The more one actually relates to the actual appearance of the mode of conventional reality of phenomena the more it enhances the interdependent origination of the phenomena, and so the view of the inherent and independent existence of that phenomena is naturally eliminated. That is how understanding the nature of conventional existence enhances the void nature or the emptiness of phenomena.

Kyiwo Tsang goes on to further explain that the manner of actualising this 'fine path' lies within one's own mental continuum. When reflecting on the emptiness of one phenomenon enhances one's understanding of the lack of inherent existence of that one phenomenon, then one is also able to gain an understanding of the conventional reality of that phenomenon. When one is able to gain that profound understanding based on one object, and relates that to all other phenomena, then at that point one has gained the 'fine' meaning, or the subtle point of the path.

This unique point of the Prasangika presentation of the great Indian masters, such as Nagarjuna and his main followers such as Aryadeva, Buddhapalita, Chandrakirti and Shantideva, was elucidated even further by Lama Tsong Khapa in his great works. When one gains the profound understanding of these points, then one has actualised the fine path.

The auto-commentary next presents some assertions by some Kagyu masters as well as other traditions. These presentations may appear to contradict each other but are said to come to the same meaning. We need not however go into those details here. Having quoted those different masters, there is one who explains how mahamudra is divided into four parts, which is accepted here as well. In summary, leaving aside the individual presentations by different masters, we will just refer to what the author

Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltsan states at the end of these presentations, which reads:

The actions of highly realised beings are completely beyond the understanding of ordinary beings, and the faults built up by negative thought and words about them are extremely heavy. Therefore, I, Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltsan, appeal to everyone to leave aside the anger of partisan sectarianism. May everyone's mind give rise to pure appearances.

Cho-kyi Gyaltsan mentions here that although there may be different presentations, that is not a reason for we ordinary beings to immediately come to the conclusion that they are contradictory to each other and that some may be right and some wrong. To fall into that state would be falling into a danger of creating the heavy negative karma of partisan sectarianism. Thus, as Cho-kyi Gyaltsan himself says, we must leave aside such partisan sectarianism and develop the pure appearance; that would be the appropriate way to practise.

### 3. DEDICATING THE MERITS DERIVED FROM THE COMPOSITION

The final verse of the root text is:

*47. Thus I, the meditator called Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltsan, who has heard many teachings, dedicate the merit gained from composing this mahamudra text for the quick attainment of enlightenment for all sentient beings by this excellent path. There is no way to gain peace for all living beings other than this.*

This verse presents the completion of the composition as pledged, and dedicates the merits derived from the composition for all beings to gain victory over the two obscurations.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary gives a further elaboration of this verse. He explains that Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltsan's mention of his own name is not out of vanity, but is an assertion that he has heard the unmistakable teachings from his own masters in an unbroken lineage, and after having actualised it himself, he has composed the treatise. As he had pledged to do so at the beginning, it is also an indication that he has fulfilled that pledge of composition.

Having fulfilled his purpose, Cho-kyi Gyaltsan then dedicates the merits of the composition, indicating that relying on this presentation may serve as a cause for beings to reach the freedom from bondage, and emphasising that there is no other way to be free from cyclic existence without relying on the understanding of emptiness.

The concluding verses of the auto-commentary reads:

This supreme essence of an ocean of sutras and tantras,  
The crux of all Indian and Tibetan scholars,  
The path taken by all the noble adepts,  
Is the teachings on mahamudra that shine like the sun at this time.

This is explaining that the 'supreme essence of an ocean of sutras and tantras' is like the essence of the milk that turns into cream and butter when we churn the milk. Similarly having related to these teachings of sutra and tantra, that which is seen to be the essence or crux of all past Indian and Tibetan scholars and the path that taken by all the noble adepts or practitioners, is the teaching on mahamudra that shines like the sun.

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The auto-commentary further reads:

It is a joyous sanctuary providing rest,  
For beings dragged by the sullied water of an ignorant  
mind,  
Who are placed in the fearsome person of samsara,  
And are tormented by the three types of sufferings.

This is explaining how sentient beings are dragged into cyclic existence, using the analogy of water that is sullied with dirt and filth. Similarly through the ignorant mind, sentient beings are dragged into samsaric existence and thus experience various types of suffering. That which serves as a point of rest from all the suffering is this very teaching of the mahamudra.

The auto-commentary then continues:

That which serve as eyes for all beings to see the fine path,  
The pith instructions of the great and noble beings,  
The clarified and unmixed form of Mahamudra,  
The precious mirror that reflects all appearance,  
And that which severs the bindings of the eight worldly  
concerns,  
For many fortunate ones who strive to accomplish their  
wishes,  
It is their unfailing teacher instructing them on the fine path,  
The collection of virtues amassed from endeavouring in this,  
Like the opened petals of the cooling jasmine blossom,...

Just as eyes guide us to where we want to go, so too the mahamudra guides us to the ultimate state of liberation.

Here, 'the great and noble beings' can refer to the beings who, in the ultimate sense, have realised emptiness directly. But a more general interpretation of 'great and noble beings' would those who constantly engage in virtue and shun negative karma, in addition to those who endeavour to gain a clear understanding.

The analogy of the precious mirror that reflects all appearance indicates that just as a mirror reflects all beautiful forms, the mahamudra (being analogous to beautiful form) allows us to see the ultimate nature of all existence.

'It is their unfailing teacher instructing them on the fine path' refers to the mahamudra itself as being like a great teacher.

The 'cooling' in 'like the opened petals of the cooling jasmine blossom' is another metaphor for the moon<sup>3</sup>. When the moon comes out, the beautiful fragrant jasmine flower opens its petals, likewise mahamudra is that that helps us to open our mind, and to cool us from the misery of samsara.

Finally:

Whatever I have amassed from the supreme white  
virtues,  
I dedicate to the great enlightenment for the sake of  
liberating all mother beings,  
From the might of these virtues may all migrating  
beings,  
Fill the treasure vase of their minds unified with sutra  
and tantra,  
With the nectar of well illustrated mahamudra,  
And may they be satiated with the great bliss of  
unification.

Of course much more could be said clarifying and elaborating the points made in this conclusion, but we have run out time.

When we began the teaching on this text, I indicated that if I were to serve as a mere means to inspire you to read the book and refer to the commentaries, then it would serve some purpose. It was not my intention to give an elaborate, detailed and profound explanation of the text, rather it was to present explanations that would serve as a means to inspire you to further study this text.

You seem to have very joyfully and happily engaged in reading and study, and from my observation you also seem to have enjoyed the teaching as well. So it seems that my purpose in presenting this teaching has been achieved.

In brief, Dharma practice can be abbreviated into the saying 'If it makes others happy then it's the Dharma'. So if I have made you happy by presenting the teachings then that must have some virtue. Actually this very simple saying is quite profound in itself, because it also indicates that that the opposite is also true. If making others happy is the Dharma, then doing anything that annoys others and makes them unhappy must be the opposite of Dharma; thus negative karma or non-virtue is to be avoided.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright  
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Edited Version*

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<sup>3</sup> Although jasmine is used here it actually refers to the kumunda flower, which is believed to blossom when the moon comes out.