
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

3 March 2009

I am very glad that we are able to meet again together to continue this class. *Tashi Delek!*

The common greeting in Tibetan, '*tashi delek*', is actually a very significant greeting that encompasses wishing the other both temporary success and ultimate well-being. '*Tashi delek*' can be translated as 'may all be auspicious for your well being'. *Tashi* literally means auspiciousness. *Delek* is made up of two syllables and *de* means happiness, with a deeper connotation of wishing the other the happiness of a fortunate rebirth in the next life as well. *Lek*, which literally means goodness, also has a deeper connotation that refers to the ultimate goodness, liberation and enlightenment.

So, wishing someone the auspiciousness of having a good life now and for the future as well as ultimately attaining liberation, is indeed 'good in every aspect'. The greeting *tashi delek*, is usually followed by the words *Pun-sum-tsok*, which means 'good in every aspect'.

When we reflect upon the greater implication of this greeting, it comes to mind that in fact every aspect of our well-being is encompassed within the happiness of samsara and nirvana. The well-being of samsara is for this life and future lives, while the ultimate well-being is liberation and enlightenment. There is no other happiness that cannot be subsumed into these two. We have some experience of well-being in samsara; whether it is a good experience or not is for you to decide.

As Dharma seekers, our attempt is to maintain the happiness of a human being, while striving for the happiness of liberation. That is at least what we should be aiming for. This is true not only for Dharma practitioners but also people who do not consider themselves religious. Ultimately, whether one follows a particular religion, practises the Dharma or not, we all equally seek to be happy. That is something we can all agree with.

On a personal level, as much as it is important that we strive towards well-being in our lives, it is also worthwhile to exert some effort towards accumulating the causes for attaining the ultimate happiness of liberation.

It is important for us to really understand that ultimately the causes of the happiness that we seek lie within our own mind. Although external factors may contribute to our happiness to a certain degree, ultimate happiness is only gained through our mind. To explain it a bit further, external factors may assist us in experiencing some level of happiness, but that happiness does not depend entirely in having those material things. In fact there are many who may have a lot of external things but who are not necessarily really happy. So material things can assist in bringing about some level of happiness, but how they are utilised for gaining happiness depends entirely on one's mental attitude.

The Buddha mentioned in the sutras, 'a subdued mind is a happy mind', and likewise the great Tibetan master, Sakya Pandita said that a happy mind determines one's well-being. We find that it is really true that when the mind is subdued

then the calmness, joy and happiness that is experienced is much more sustaining. The fleeting pleasures of the senses may seem to lead to some joy and happiness, but we all know that it does not last for long. In fact after having experienced some happiness and joy from the sensual pleasures, but when the happiness subsides, it is replaced with a sense of emptiness and unease in the mind. There is the feeling that something is missing, and the mind starts to feel unsettled and agitated. This shows that the happiness and joy that we experienced earlier from the sense objects has not been sustaining. Rather than contributing to real happiness they contribute to feelings of loneliness and a feeling of hollowness. Of course that is also very much related to our sense of discontent. In fact one of the attributes of the sensual pleasures is that they never really satisfy us, and they do not provide us with any sustained sense of contentment.

To assess our overall well-being we need to investigate first of all whether we have any joy or happiness now. If we find that we have a certain level of real joy and happiness, then we must take care to protect and increase it. If we find that we lack an authentic sense of joy and happiness right now then we must contemplate how to obtain that happiness. When we investigate in this way we get to the point of realising that the happiness we seek does not depend entirely on external conditions, but rather depends on internal causes that we need to cultivate within our own mind.

A sense of joy and happiness is very much dependent on cultivating the positive states of mind within ourselves and once we gain a certain level of happiness, then we can attest to the fact that such a state really contributes to our overall sense of well-being. When we are feeling happy and engage in something, say a meal, then the meal tastes good because we are in a happy frame of mind. If we have something good to eat, of course, then that contributes even more to the sense of enjoyment. However even if we do not have a lavish meal, with a happy mind whatever meagre meal we have can be a happy occasion.

Likewise with our financial situation: if we have a happy and joyous mind then whatever our financial situation, we will be able to maintain a certain level of mental stability, a stability that in turn contributes to the feeling of joy and happiness. So whatever our financial state, we will be able to maintain some stability with a happy state of mind. Without some level of happiness in our mind, external factors by themselves definitely don't contribute to our sense of well-being.

We can definitely see the truth of this, as there are many examples of people, even millionaires, who are not really all that happy. If they have not cultivated some sort of inner joy and happiness within themselves, all their wealth and the riches around them don't seem to contribute towards their happiness. It is good to use these examples to remind yourself that becoming a millionaire doesn't necessarily contribute to real happiness, and to think 'when I seek happiness it must not be entirely reliant upon external factors'.

It can also help us develop some sort of wariness about samsaric pleasures and worldly gain, and to develop some sense of renunciation within our mind. If we do not have complete trust in worldly gains, and if we can identify and develop some sort of confidence within ourselves that inner happiness is dependent upon our own minds regardless of

external factors, then that can help us to maintain a sense of stability in life.

By the same token it is also important to know that having riches is also not necessarily the cause of misery. There are people who are rich and wealthy and who have a joyous and happy mind, and because of this combination of a happy mind coupled with riches, they are able to help many others. Then there is a two-way benefit - for themselves and those they are able to help. That is of course a very good situation. The main point is to understand that the causes for happiness lie within ourselves.

If we can maintain some level of happiness and joy in our mind then what happens externally doesn't seem to affect us very much, even losing one's external riches. That is something I can personally attest to. As I have mentioned before, I have endured a lot of physical hardships in my lifetime. When I was studying in the monastery in Tibet there were times when food was so scarce that we had to depend on a few small handfuls of *tsampa* or barley dough to sustain ourselves for many days. In a later part of my life I endured many hardships as well, however when I reflect on those times I can definitely say that my mind was happy and joyous, regardless of those hardships.

Because of that early experience of being happy and maintaining a happy state of mind regardless of external conditions, I feel that it would be really wonderful to live a simple life, wandering and seeking alms and living in simple dwellings as traditionally done in India. That is something that I would aspire to. Of course, practically speaking, because of my age it might not be realistic to live that kind of life style now. However because of my earlier experience, I know that depending on the kindness of others and leading a simple life can be a very joyful experience.

It is really important to try to maintain a level of joy and happiness. In whatever you do, try to remind yourself, 'The most valuable thing that I can possess, the real trustworthy and unfailing companion, is a joyous and happy mind'. Working towards cultivating such a state of mind will in turn contribute to your physical well-being. It is medically proven that the physical health of someone who has a joyous, happy mind is also much better, whereas a mind full of worries and anxiety seems to contribute to ill health. Negative states of mind such as anger can really contribute to the deterioration of one's health.

The Tibetan medical system explains that when the mind is unhappy, then because of the strong connection between the mind and the four elements, it causes the four elements to become imbalanced. When the mind is unhappy and full of anxiety it disrupts the natural flow and harmony of the four elements, and when the four elements within our body are out of balance then that contributes to ill health. This is something that is clearly explained and which is experienced.

When we reflect on the temporary and ultimate benefits of having a happy and joyous mind, and reflect back on the causes of a happy mind, then we return to what was explained in the beginning: as the Buddha said, 'the subdued mind is a happy mind'. Working towards subduing the mind means slowly decreasing the negative states of mind such as anger, jealousy and so forth by applying the appropriate antidotes.

A subdued mind leads to a controlled mind and a controlled mind, as explained in the teachings, is a happy mind, while an uncontrolled mind is a disturbed mind. So when we work

towards controlling the mind, then that control will secure and increase our happiness, which is why the teachings mention that we must work towards having a controlled mind. So at this point we see the relevance of the practice of meditation, as meditation is the primary technique that brings about a controlled and subdued mind.

As a result of learning how to meditate and then actually applying the meditation technique in our lives, we can reach a point where the mind becomes subdued, where the delusions such as anger are reduced. If one is prone to anger, then through the practice of meditation, anger can be reduced. Likewise, attachment and pride in one's mind can be reduced; that would be a clear sign of the positive results of meditation.

The life stories of the great meditators or *mahasiddhas* often list their attainments through the practice of meditation. If it is a realisation that contributes to lessening the delusions in one's mind then it is an authentic realisation. If we can reach a level in our practice of meditation where we can confidently claim to ourselves that our anger, attachment and other delusions have been lessened, then that is a clear sign that our practice of meditation has been successful, and that it has been an authentic practice.

Conversely if all one can claim is 'I have meditated for a long time but the delusions within me such as attachment and anger have not been reduced the slightest bit', then that is a sign that the practice of meditation has not been authentic, and that one has not been able to utilise the proper technique.

If we are inclined to engage in the practice of meditation it is important that we seek the proper means and make sure that whatever practice we do actually serves the purpose of the intention, which is ultimately to bring about a subdued mind. In whatever practice we do, it is good to make a really clear distinction between those mental states that are conducive to mental happiness and those that lead to disturbance in the mind. We can immediately recognise and label some mental states as being negative attitudes that harm the harmonious feeling within our mind, and other attitudes as being conducive to a more joyous, peaceful and relaxed state of mind.

If through our inner investigation and analytical wisdom we can make that clear distinction between these two categories of mental states then it becomes a matter of trying to acquaint ourselves more with the states of mind that are conducive for ourselves, such as meditating on love and compassion. If we can spend some time, even just a few moments really trying to generate love and compassion within ourselves, one hundred percent thinking of benefiting other sentient beings, we will definitely experience a calming effect in our mind. Thus we can immediately recognise the benefits of such a positive attitude.

Whereas as soon as negative states of mind such as anger arise, we can see for ourselves that they lead to a disturbed mind. Also if we just allow our mind to go along in its normal pattern then it follows a lot of discursive, conceptual thoughts, such as lot of plans and ideas that do not really relate to our present situation right now, which leads to experiencing more anxiety and worries. Thus, these states of mind are not really conducive for our well-being.

So we really need to make that distinction between the two states of mind, and acquaint ourselves more with the positive and reduce the negative states. On a practical level

if we try to exert ourselves to do this in our daily life then that sort of measure can slowly improve our practice. The main point that I am emphasising is that in order to subdue one's mind the practice of meditation is most essential. Practising meditation contributes to subduing the mind, and controlling the negative states of mind is something that will definitely benefit you as well as your partner, your friends and so forth. If one is constantly troubled and anxious, one cannot expect one's partner to always respond in a positive way. In this way I am emphasising how practising meditation to subdue the mind is a most beneficial practice.

If we allow our minds to be completely agitated and disturbed then after a while we feel the ill effect within our body, even to the point where we start to feel aches and tightness in our shoulders and neck, and we have to have massages. Of course massage may help to reduce some level of tension for a while, but we all know that it doesn't really solve the real problem. Massaging the body can help relieve tension temporarily, but the real release from tension comes from working on, and subduing one's own mind. Besides, if we have to keep going to get massages to try to relieve our tension it can also be a strain on our wallet. Maybe that money is better used in another way?

In a practical sense, of course, it is not possible to subdue one's mind immediately, as we are not sufficiently acquainted with the process of subduing our mind. Nevertheless, acquainting ourselves with that goal and reminding ourselves to apply our practice on a continuous daily basis will definitely help us.

If our goal is financial stability then we really have to exert ourselves from our own side to try to maintain that stability, as it is expected that we take care of ourselves financially. So in every aspect we have to exert ourselves to try to take responsibility for ourselves. There are some who comment that they are actually quite happy but if they had a little bit more money then that would be even better! Others remark 'Because I don't have money others may think that I am not really happy'. However if one is really happy then one shouldn't need to worry too much about what others think of you.

Having extensively explained the benefits of the practice of meditation in our daily life the actual technique is a means to develop single-pointed concentration. How is single-pointed concentration developed? First of all we need to identify what single-pointed concentration is, and then consider how to achieve it. What are the requirements, the prerequisites for developing mental concentration? What are the faults that obstruct the development of concentration? We went through all of this quite extensively in our previous sessions, so it is important that you revise and look into those explanations. If you are really keen to meditate and develop single-pointed concentration, how are you actually going to implement that practice if you are not acquainted with the instructions?

Previously we also went into what posture to adopt which, as explained, is the seven-point posture of Buddha Vairochana. How to adopt those seven points has been explained in detail previously, so it is good to reflect on that as well.

In the text we have now come to the explanation of the actual meditation techniques for developing single-pointed concentration.

As explained in the verses of the root text the object of our meditation is the mind itself. So we use the mind itself as the

object to focus on and familiarise ourselves with developing single-pointed concentration. We will now spend the next five minutes in meditation. *(Pause for meditation)*

You may come out of your samadhi now.

As I indicated earlier one should never underestimate the need and importance of practising meditation. Most of you already have the knowledge of what to meditate on and how to meditate - that is something that you don't lack - but if one lacks putting it into practice, then that would be somewhat unfortunate, and a bit sad. So it is good to match one's knowledge with one's practice.

The reason why I claim that you have some good understanding and knowledge, which actually is a point on which to rejoice, is that many of you commented that you understood most of the points that His Holiness made in his teachings in Sydney last year, as well the Kalachakra teachings in India, and more recently his teachings in Varanasi. You seemed to have followed the teachings very well. Being able to understand and follow the teachings is a clear sign of having gained some prior knowledge and understanding from your own side. It can be a hallmark to encourage yourself to study further and gain deeper knowledge, and also to try to put it in practice.

It is good to remind ourselves periodically that what the practice means is to really look within one's own mind, and investigate and analyse it. That should then be combined with the practice of meditation, otherwise one falls into the situation where the practice is one thing and the mind is left somewhere else, as if there is no real connection between the two. If there is no connection between one's practice of the Dharma and the mind, then it doesn't serve the purpose. Whereas if one uses one's practice to really continuously check and analyse one's mind, it serves to increase the positive states of mind and slowly decrease the negative states.

Now, as mentioned previously, that is not something that comes about easily, but if one can slowly apply that in our daily life then gradually it will become more and more a part of your life and you'll become more acquainted with the practice. It is good to reflect upon the comment in the teachings where it says 'whatever the mind acquaints itself with is what it will adhere to'. Even though we might find that our mind seems to be naturally quite agitated, or sometimes negative or dull, nevertheless we do have the basis of the positive states of mind and if we acquaint ourselves more with this natural quality of the mind then it will adhere to the positive states of mind.

We can stop here for this evening. This evening can be a preparation session to the following sessions of Mahamudra for this year. I would also like to express my appreciation to you for having participated in the discussion and practice nights over the last three weeks. I have heard comments that it went very well, and that some felt that it was a positive and worthwhile experience. That is a clear sign that actually doing discussion and some practice together is really beneficial and helpful, so I would like to express my appreciation for that.

*Transcribed from tape by Judy Mayne
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

10 March 2009

As usual, find a comfortable sitting position and generate a positive state of mind for receiving the teachings. In accordance with the refuge and bodhichitta prayer that we have just recited, we can try to generate the state of mind where we commit ourselves to benefit all sentient beings. We can think along these lines: 'for the purpose of benefiting sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

With regard to the benefit of generating such a positive motivation, which encompasses the welfare of all sentient beings, the great master Shantideva mentioned in his text *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, that if one were to generate such a noble attitude for even a second, the merit accumulated from that moment is incomparable. It is the incredible amounts of merit that one accumulates from such positive attitudes that will serve as the cause to eventually achieve enlightenment.

Of course, due the state of our present condition in samsara where we are afflicted by self-grasping ignorance, even the positive actions that we engage in will create projecting karma, which propels us into cyclic existence in future rebirths. However, due to the positive motivations that we generate prior to engaging in positive activities, the conditions that we will have as a human being will far exceed normal circumstances, and thus they will be conducive for us to further engage in Dharma practice.

Actual method of developing calm abiding¹

1. Attributes of concentration

In explaining calm abiding, there are the two headings of the prerequisites and the actual, we have already covered the prerequisites of calm abiding.

¹ For ease of use, the numbers within this section start again.

The full sequence of headings to date is:

1. Deeds done in order to engage in the composition
2. Presenting the actual material of the composition
- 2.1. Preparation
- 2.1.1. Taking refuge and generating bodhichitta
- 2.1.2. Accumulating extensive merit i.e. offering world mandalas
- 2.1.3. Engage in extensive purification practices.
- 2.1.4. Rely on one's guru
- 2.2. The Actual
- 2.2.1. Mahamudra according to tantra
- 2.2.2. Mahamudra according to sutra
- 2.2.2.1. The preliminaries
- 2.2.2.2. Actual method of developing calm abiding
- 2.2.2.2.1. Attributes of concentration
- 2.2.2.2.1.1. Identifying concentration and calm abiding
- 2.2.2.2.1.2. The objects of focus for single-pointed concentration.
- 2.2.2.2.1.2.1. Pervasive objects
- 2.2.2.2.1.2.2. Objects of analysis
- 2.2.2.2.1.2.3. Objects for the wise
- 2.2.2.2.1.2.4. Objects for purifying delusions

1.1. Identifying the object of calm abiding

In explaining how to develop calm abiding, the commentary mainly relies upon describing the methods for developing calm abiding. Last year we described how to identify the object of calm abiding, and how to adopt the actual practice of focussing on the chosen object.

As the auto-commentary explains, there are two attributes to the type of concentration that is indicated here, which we covered last year. I would like to re-emphasise that it is very important to actually be able to specifically identify what concentration is. When you talk about developing single-pointed concentration, what is it? What kind of state of mind is it? As mentioned previously, mindfulness itself is not concentration.

As the teachings explain, mindfulness and introspection are aids for developing concentration, but they are not concentration itself. It is important to be clear that even though mindfulness does have the attribute of keeping the mind focused on the object, we must not confuse mindfulness with concentration itself. Likewise, introspection is not concentration. Nor is the mind, or the consciousness focusing on an object, concentration, as that is a primary mind. As the teachings explain, concentration is a secondary mind, a mental factor that has the ability, by its own power, to remain focused on the object unwaveringly. Within the mental factors, there is a specific mental factor that is identified as concentration, which has its own particular function. So if we are to attempt to develop concentration within ourselves it is important that we clearly identify what concentration is.

1.2. Objects of focus for single-pointed concentration

In our last session we covered the types of objects that one can focus on. As the auto-commentary presents, there are four types of objects: pervasive objects, objects of analysis, objects for the wise and objects that oppose the delusions. Having presented the four different types of objects that can be focused on in general the auto-commentary presents the object to be used here, which in accordance with the tradition of the previous lineage gurus, is the mind itself. That is, the object that is used to develop concentration and calm abiding is the mind itself.

We also went into the explanation of what the mind is. If the mind itself is to be used as an object to focus on, then what is mind? The definition of mind is that it is clear and knowing; those are the two main attributes of mind. 'Clear' has a connotation that it is not physical matter i.e. it does not have colour and shape. So the nature of the mind is clarity, whereas the function of the mind is that it knows the objects of cognition. So 'clear and knowing' encompasses what constitutes the mind.

The analogy used to describe the clarity of the mind is that it is like a clear mirror, or we can think of it as being like a clear crystal ball. Just as a clean mirror or glass will reflect all objects, likewise the mind, having the aspect of clarity allows for every object to be reflected or known within the mind.

What would be an example of a pervasive object?

Student: Would it perhaps be impermanence and emptiness?

Jeremy's answer, 'all existence', is the correct one. There is a saying in the monastery that there are those who assume that they have understood everything, and those who are a little bit doubtful, who might in fact be the ones who have actually got it right! There is a story about the scholar Geshe Losang Choden, who was well known to be very good in

debate. When we were studying in Buxa in North India, at a certain point of the debate you would have to find just one opponent. Geshe Losang Choden commented to me once that there was an occasion where he did not find a partner who he would normally choose. The only one left was Geshe Tengye, who is now at one of the centres in France.

Geshe Losang Choden told me that he assumed that Geshe Tengye would not know the text or the debates very well, because he was a very unassuming and quiet monk. But because he was the only person left as a debate partner, Geshe Losang Choden started debating with him. As he started debating, he noticed that it started to become very difficult to prove his points, because Geshe Tengye was giving *very good answers*. Later Geshe Losang Choden said 'I don't know what it is, maybe I had the wrong motivation in thinking that he is not very good'. Later on there was a time where Geshe Tengye was debating and Geshe Losang Choden was answering, and even then Geshe Losang Choden found it difficult to answer, because the points that Geshe Tengye was debating were very good. 'So the fact that I couldn't make and prove my points while debating, or answer well when questioned, shows there must be something wrong with my motivation', said Geshe Losang Choden.

Pervasive objects

The first object of focus is referred to as 'pervasive objects', which indicates anything that exists can be an object to focus on to develop concentration. The fact that anything that exists can be an object indicates that it is pervasive.

Objects of Analysis

The object of analysis is a very important object to focus on. There are five sub-divisions, which are the delusions of strong attachment, intense anger, excessive pride, deep ignorance and also the discursive mind with conceptual thoughts.

The object of analysis refers to finding out the ways and means of how to apply antidotes for subduing or overcoming these states of mind. As mentioned previously these five are actually very significant objects to reflect upon, as we are attempting to reduce these afflictive emotions in our mind. Actually, the literal meaning of the Tibetan word *chepa-namjong* is 'pacifying through analysis'.

The appropriate object for pacifying attachment, for example, would be to focus on the unattractive attributes of the object. If there is the imprint of attachment from previous lifetimes, attachment will naturally be very strong and prominent. For those types of beings, the object to focus on would be the unattractive attributes of the object of desire, which would help to pacify the specific delusion of attachment.

Even though this has been explained previously, it is worthwhile to reiterate this point. As explained in the teachings, on a deeper level it is very important that we understand this and see how these techniques of meditation, which focus on these particular objects, are very significant for our development and transformation. As explained in the teachings, for those who are very familiar with objects of attachment in previous lifetimes, and who have not applied any antidotes, the consequence in this lifetime would be that, as soon as such a person meets with an object of desire, attachment will arise spontaneously, strongly and without any effort. This is the indication that no attempt to see the fault, or unattractive attributes, of the object of desire and apply antidotes, has been made in previous lifetimes. Thus

in this lifetime, attachment arises spontaneously and very strongly.

There are also those who have acquainted themselves with the antidotes for overcoming attachment in previous lifetimes, seeing the unattractive attributes of an object of desire. Due to that familiarisation, if such a person were to meet with the objects of desire in this lifetime, then even though desire may slightly arise in their mind, it will not be over-powering to the degree of being completely dominated by desire. For those who have applied specific antidotes in past lifetimes and who have been acquainted with them for a longer duration, there will be a lesser intensity of attachment arising in this lifetime. So, the different degrees of attachment experienced in this life are said to be the result of acquaintance with desire in the past.

As mentioned in the teachings, the objects for the wise refers to, for example, contemplating the constituents and the different categories of phenomena. Contemplating the constituents and phenomena is said to be a particular antidote for overcoming the delusion of pride. The specific antidote for overcoming the discursive mind or distracting conceptual thoughts is focusing on the breath.

Applying this knowledge

It is good to be familiar with these descriptions of appropriate objects and try to apply them in our own practice. Then if someone were to ask what kind of Buddhist meditation will to help to settle down a very busy or discursive mind, we would be able to clearly explain from our own experience that focusing on the breath is a very good technique for overcoming the discursive mind. Likewise, if one were to be asked about specific antidotes for overcoming desire or pride, then we would be able to present them correctly to the questioner. If we practice ourselves we can confidently share our understanding with others, who rely upon us. So these points are really worth paying attention to.

Then being acquainted with the various types of meditation techniques will actually serve one very well when one has time to meditate upon them, particularly when one is affected by a particular delusion. At that time, we would be able to tap into our own resources to find the right technique for overcoming that delusion.

It is good to know the specific meditation techniques for specific delusions, otherwise our meditation technique may not work well. For example, meditating on love and compassion might not be the appropriate antidote for someone who is affected by a strong delusion of attachment. When we think about it, strong attachment for someone seems to induce a level of caring and kindness towards that person. Thus focusing on the attractive attributes, and the good and appealing aspects of a person in order to try to overcome attachment would not really serve much purpose. Thus meditating on love and compassion is said to be used specifically to help to overcome anger.

The antidote for overcoming ignorance, is meditating on emptiness. Of course by engaging in meditation on emptiness if one actually gains the realisation of emptiness, then that will definitely overcome all delusions within oneself. But in the mean time, specific antidotes for overcoming specific delusions may be more effective whilst one has not yet realised emptiness. So thus it is important to know the different kinds of antidotes. The instruction from the lineage masters is that dealing with the most prominent delusion in one's mind is the most important task; this is

said to be a really profound instruction for us beginners. So it is good to reflect upon this point when engaging in our practice.

The benefits of using the mind as an object

As another commentary on mahamudra explains, it is really appropriate to use the mind as an object for developing concentration, to achieve calm abiding, as there are many benefits from focusing on the mind.

The mind itself has three main attributes:

1. Its nature is clear and bright.
2. It is empty of all matter and forms and thus by its very nature it lacks any obstruction and rigidity i.e. it is not made of matter.
3. It is the basis for perceiving all phenomena.

Thus focusing on the mind itself helps to gain further realisations such as emptiness.

The three main benefits of focussing on the mind are:

1. Because of its very nature it will be easier to develop calm abiding.
2. It is also easier to gain the realisation of emptiness.
3. It is easier to sever all outer appearances.

Thus as we have done previously it is good that we now spend some time in actual meditation. Recall the earlier instructions and adopt the appropriate sitting posture, then acquaint yourself with the breathing technique. One can use the nine round breathing technique or just focus on the breath itself. Whatever technique one uses, just focus on the breath for a while, and when the mind is relatively settled, we can envision the gurus of the lineage. Visualise one's guru and the lineage gurus in front of oneself with one's own main guru in the centre. Then, as mentioned in the teachings, at a certain point one can dissolve that visualisation into oneself and thus generate the state of mind of being inseparable with the guru's mind, and remain in that state of mind without thinking about anything else, just focusing on that feeling. So now we will spend the next few minutes in meditation. *Pause for meditation*

In our attempt to focus on the mind in our meditation, we may initially, of course, not be able to see the mind as such. However, there is an aspect of the mind that we can relate to. As the teachings explain, after the preliminary practice, when one reaches a point where one is not focusing on an external object and remains focused internally within oneself, then we can conjure up an appearance of the mind, and we can just familiarise ourselves with focusing on that image of the mind. The subtle clear mind is within us at all times, even though we may lack the ability to recognise it. So if we can accept that fact, then even if we are not able to clearly recognise it right now, just focusing on an image, which is similar to the mind will help us to eventually reach the point of recognising the actual nature of the mind itself.

As I have emphasised previously, we really need to understand the point about the fact that when we focus on any object in our meditation, such as an external object, it is not the actual external object that we are focusing on. But rather it is the mental image of the object that we need to be focussing on. Even though we may firstly familiarise ourselves with the external object, when we actually meditate upon the object it is the image or the aspect of the object on which we are focusing to develop concentration. For example, one of the objects that helps to overcome strong attachment is said to be the visualisation of the surrounding area as being filled

with skeletons, and then developing a single-pointed concentration on that. If one were to ask 'Is the surrounding area filled with skeletons?' then clearly that is not the case.

However the fact is that developing concentration on that image is possible because the meditator has conjured the mental image. They then develop concentration by focusing on that mental image. Likewise, one could also focus on one's own body having one side consisting of bones and the other side as consisting of blood and puss. Now if one to ask if that were actually happening, then that would not be the case. Nevertheless, one can actually focus and develop concentration on that conjured mental image. It is important for us to recognise that this is the method to use to focus on an internal object.

1.3. Mindfulness

In explaining the mindfulness as a tool for developing concentration, the text explains developing mindfulness generally and in particular.

Developing mindfulness in general

The root text reads:

17. This does not mean, however, that you should cease all conscious attention as if you were asleep or had fainted. Rather, you should fix your unwavering memory firmly on the task of watching your mind from a distance [to see that it remains focused on its object, an unstructured state of mind].

The verse indicates that although all conscious attention ceases, it should not be as if one is asleep or unconscious. If one were to be asleep or unconscious then of course nothing will come to the mind on a conscious level, and one would not be able to focus on anything specifically. When applying mindfulness in developing concentration, it should be free from the condition of being like falling asleep or being unconsciousness.

Overcoming faults in meditation

One of the five faults of developing calm abiding, as explained previously, is forgetting the object of one's attention. If all conscious attention were to cease, then it would be like being asleep or unconscious and thus one would fall into the fault of **forgetting the object of attention**. So one has to be sure to be free from that state.

As mentioned in another commentary, if one falls into a state of where one's meditative state is similar to sleep or an unconscious state of mind, then that fault of forgetting the instruction will occur, which is a state that one must avoid.

Actually this point shouldn't be taken lightly and must be understood in all its profundity, because the object that is being used here is our own mind. Thus what is being indicated here is that when one uses the mind as an object, one might fall into the state of feeling that there is nothing to focus on, and because of that, a state similar to sleep or an unconscious state of mind can very easily be induced. That's why the specific instruction given here indicates that one must be really mindful of the object to focus on. When using the mind as an object, one must be wary of not falling into the pitfall of thinking that you just remain in the state of oblivion, with nothing coming into your mind, and the mind is blank. That can happen very easily, if you begin to think that there is nothing specific to focus on. Thus there is a warning against falling into that state.

What is specifically being explained in this commentary is that in order to overcome the obstacle of forgetting the

instruction, it is not sufficient to be in a state similar to sleep or being unconscious, where one is blocking out all other thoughts and other conceptions.

As mentioned previously **laziness** is one of the obstacles for developing concentration. Laziness prevents us from actually engaging in the practice of meditation altogether, and it is the initial obstacle to actually engaging in the practice of meditation. Overcoming laziness is something that we have discussed previously. Having then engaged in the practice of meditation, the obstacle that can arise is forgetting the instruction. So what is being indicated here is that when the obstacle of forgetting the object occurs, which in this specific case is the mind itself, then inducing a state that is similar to sleep or unconsciousness will not suffice to overcome that obstacle.

As it further explains in this commentary, when one has initially identified the object clearly, then one must use mindfulness to maintain a continuity of focus on the object. Mindfulness is not just used as a way to remind oneself once in a while when one begins to notice that one's attention on the object has lapsed. Rather, mindfulness is explained here as maintaining a continuous awareness of the object which is the mind. What is then being specifically indicated further in this commentary is that once one maintains a continuous awareness, or mindfulness, of the object of one's attention, then if the obstacle of forgetting the instruction occurs, one must apply the appropriate antidote.

Once one has continuous mindfulness and is able to maintain that continuous mindfulness by focusing on the object, then further obstacles to deal with are **excitement** and **dullness**. If either of these two occurs, then one must apply the appropriate antidote for overcoming those obstacles.

As mentioned previously, laziness is an obstacle preventing one from actually engaging in the practice. But actually laziness is in fact an obstacle that occurs at every stage of the practice. Initially it prevents us from engaging in the practice of meditation. Once we engage in the practice of meditation, if we don't continue with it and allow it to lapse then that would also be due to laziness. Even if we continue for a while and but don't reach a conclusion and then give up towards the end, then that too is because of laziness. So laziness serves as an obstacle in the beginning, in the middle and at the end.

The commentary then further explains that when one is able to maintain a continuous focus on the object with mindfulness, one further analysis to check whether one's focus or attention is being obstructed by either excitement or dullness. Thus one part of the mind works to check on one's focus to make sure that it is not being tainted with either excitement or dullness.

If one's attention is tainted with either excitement or dullness, then that is an obstacle to developing single-pointed concentration. One must use analyse and check whether these obstacles are arising, and if they are, apply the appropriate antidotes. When one is free from all of the immediate obstacles to focusing on the object (which is the mind itself) and one is able to reach a point where the clarity of the mind becomes more vivid, then at that point one holds onto that vivid appearance of the clarity of the mind, and just remains focused on that.

The commentary quotes the lines in the root text, which says '*you should fix your unwavering memory firmly on the task of watching your mind from a distance*'. As explained in the root text, one fixes upon that object, the clarity of the mind, and

just remains focused on that with ever stronger diligence. Although 'memory' is used here, it is actually referring to mindfulness.

As explained previously, it is important that we really identify very clearly what concentration is, and the nature of its specific attributes, which are that it has intensity and clarity and non-discriminative single-pointed concentration. When one develops concentration, the two attributes one has to develop are a very intense clarity and non-discriminative single-pointedness. Thus when the teachings describe dullness or laxity and excitement, one can see how that relates to these two attributes of the mind; specifically, that which prevents the development of intense clarity is called dullness or laxity, and dullness prevents the mind from having intense clarity. Thus dullness is one of the main obstacles to clarity, whereas non-discriminative single-pointedness is obstructed by excitement. When there is excitement it prevents the mind from having single-pointed concentration on the object. Thus the two main obstacles to be overcome in developing concentration are explained as being dullness or laxity and excitement. And the two main tools for developing concentration are explained as being mindfulness and introspection.

If one attempts to meditate on developing concentration without properly identifying the two main tools for developing concentration (which are mindfulness and introspection) and the two main obstacles to be overcome (which are laxity and excitement), and then claim to have developed concentration, then that claim would be merely based on one's words. Such a claim is based on not really having understood or achieved the main goal. Whereas someone who completely understands the main conducive factors, the tools for developing concentration and the obstacles, and who then attempts to meditate on developing single-pointed concentration, will be successful.

Making use of this knowledge

As explained in the *Prayer for the Flourishing of Lama Tsong Khapa's Teachings*², which is a praise to Lama Tsong Khapa's teachings, one verse indicates that the ultimate view is that which is free from the two extremes - nihilism and eternalism - and that the ultimate meditation is that which is free from laxity and stupor. Meditation that is free from the faults of laxity and stupor is said to be the ultimate meditation.

This is a prayer for one to meet with Lama Tsong Khapa's teachings, which incorporate all the instructions of the Buddha's teachings, showing that the supreme view is that which is free from both extremes; and supreme meditation is that which is free from laxity and stupor. The teachings endowed with these qualities are Lama Tsong Khapa's teachings, which one prays to be able to come into contact with.

So when one actually recites these prayers, it is of course important that we remind ourselves to engage in the actual practice of acquiring the knowledge for obtaining the ultimate view. We have of course gone through a lot of teachings explaining what that ultimate view is, so in our practice we need to work towards achieving that ultimate view with the aid of the ultimate meditation. Even making a prayer of wishful thinking along these lines is said to be really meritorious and very significant, and therefore really worthwhile.

² See page 61 in the prayer folder.

What one can also understand from these verses is that in striving to obtain the ultimate view, it overcomes the extreme views within oneself. When one has the proper technique of meditation and strives to achieve one's goal in meditation, then that helps to reduce and overcome laxity and stupor in one's mind. We can really see the benefit of the teachings if we can apply them in this way.

We should try to apply whatever we learn to our practice and our daily activities. The benefit of incorporating every aspect of the teaching into our daily life is that the mind starts to become less and less agitated in its dualistic views. Also through being more acquainted with developing a meditation technique to develop concentration, the mind will start to become clearer and clearer, and the positive energy in the mind will become more prominent. In turn that will also help to generate more faith in one's mind. With that faith then the aspiration to further engage in the practice, and to deepen one's understanding will naturally follow. From that, the mind will naturally become more subdued, and as the mind becomes more subdued, the qualities of loving and kindness towards other beings will naturally become stronger and stronger. So this is how we can connect with every aspect of the teaching and thus incorporate it in our life, seeing how it actually brings about a positive transformation within ourselves.

An example of being free from the extreme views is when we recite the *Heart Sutra*. The literal words say there is no tactile form, no sound and so forth, and if we were to take that literally and assume that there is no form, or no sound, then that would indicate that one is falling into the extreme view of nihilism. Whereas if one can immediately relate to that passage as indicating that there is no inherently existent form and no inherently existent sound and so forth, then that understanding will help to prevent one from having the extreme view of nihilism. When one has a complete understanding that form, for example, lacks inherent existence, but nevertheless does exist nominally or conventionally, then it helps one to be free from both of the extreme views of nihilism and eternalism.

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

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Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇིགས་པ་ལྷན་པུལ་གྱི་རྒྱ་ཆེན་པོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

17 March 2009

By not allowing the mind to be distracted externally, bring your attention inwards and contemplate the following motivation: 'For the benefit of all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment; for that purpose I will listen to the Dharma and put it into practise well'.

3. How to develop mindfulness¹

In accordance with the outline in the commentary composed by Kyiwo Tsang Lobsang Monlam, there is the general presentation of how to develop mindfulness and the particular explanation.

3.1. How to develop mindfulness in general

What is concentration?

As explained previously, the concentration to be developed here has two attributes: when focusing on the object it has intensity and clarity; and is able to unwaveringly focus single-pointedly on the object. It is explained that the two main obstacles obstruct the development of each of the two attributes of concentration. Excitement is the obstacle to developing unwavering single-pointed concentration, whereas laxity is the obstacle to the intensity and clarity of focus on the object.

As explained in Kyiwo Tsang's commentary, if one is to develop single-pointed concentration one must be able to clearly identify the two main obstacles. It would be totally misleading to assume that one is meditating to develop concentration without having properly identified these two obstacles. If one is not able to identify the two obstacles, it will not be possible to achieve the desired goal of developing single-pointed concentration.

As explained earlier, the two main tools for developing single-pointed concentration are mindfulness and introspection, (some translations use vigilance). It is important to identify these tools properly in order to apply them in meditation. As explained previously, it is very important to identify what concentration is as well, because it will be difficult to develop concentration without being specific about what kind of mental state concentration is.

Concentration is a mental factor. With every moment of consciousness or primary mind, there are five mental factors that accompany the mind at all times. These are called the omnipresent or ever present mental factors. They are feeling, discrimination, intention, contact, and attention, also translated as mental engagement.

The five omnipresent mental factors

It is quite important to identify these five omnipresent mental factors as they accompany the mind at all times;

which is to say that at every moment of awareness these five mental factors are simultaneously present as well.

So every time we have awareness of any object it is always accompanied by **feeling**. The feeling that is present when the consciousness comes into contact with any object is due to the mental factor of feeling.

The ability to recognise the particular features of an object is said to be the workings of **discrimination** (some translations use recognition). This is basically the mental factor that identifies the specific characteristics of an object.

Intention is a particular mental factor that serves as the initiator, which moves the mind, so to speak, to the object. Intention works on a subtle level and is present every time you come into contact with an object.

Contact is the mental factor that causes the object, consciousness and sense faculty to come together to be aware of the object that is being perceived. So contact serves as the basis for feeling to arise.

The last omnipresent mental factor is called **attention**, or in some translations, mental engagement. When focusing on an object, the ability to maintain one's focus on the object for a period of time is called attention.

These mental factors are present for every instant that we are aware of any object, so they are called the five omnipresent mental factors. It is really very important to understand this. In Tibetan the word 'omnipresent' also has the connotation of 'all-pervading', which implies pervading all awareness. The five omnipresent mental factors are thus simultaneously present with all awareness.

The five object ascertaining mental factors

The next set of mental factors is called the five object ascertaining, or determining mental factors. According to the Vaibhashika Buddhist school the five object ascertaining mental factors are also present in every instant of awareness or consciousness. However other Buddhist schools explain that these five mental factors are particularly associated with virtuous states of mind, as by their nature they have an element of being virtuous. They are called the five ascertaining mental factors, for these five mental factors occur every time a consciousness ascertains an object.

The five object ascertaining mental factors are aspiration, belief or faith, mindfulness, wisdom, and concentration. I have just given you the list from memory, so you need to check whether it is correct or not. In my old age it is possible that I leave out or add on one or two, as I learnt all this at the age of seventeen and I am now seventy-four!

Understanding these five object ascertaining mental factors is also crucial, as they are indispensable if we are to meditate on a virtuous object. For example, in order to actually engage in any meditation one needs to have a strong **aspiration**.

Likewise one needs to have **faith** in the qualities and benefits of focusing on the object of meditation, otherwise one would not continue with the meditation.

¹ The actual heading number is 2.2.2.2.3.

Likewise, in order to develop single-pointed focus on the object one needs to develop the mental factor of **mindfulness**, which has the particular function of not allowing the object of focus to be forgotten. So, mindfulness plays the crucial role of maintaining one's focus on the virtuous object.

Wisdom is also indispensable, particularly the analytical wisdom that identifies and discerns whether the object to be focused on is virtuous one or not. Wisdom also identifies and discerns whether any obstacles are arising within oneself or not.

Next comes the mental factor called **concentration**. It is important that we don't mistake other mental factors such as mindfulness for concentration. Although the other four ascertaining mental factors do focus on the object they are not concentration, as concentration is a specific mental factor that does the job of focusing single-pointedly on the object. So, in accordance with the definition given in the text, *concentration is a mental factor that by its own power has the ability to focus unwaveringly on the object*.

The other mental factors such as aspiration, faith, mindfulness and wisdom also ascertain the object but it is not done through their own power. Whereas the specific mental factor called concentration is the mental factor that 'by its own power' focuses unwaveringly on the object. So concentration is a specific mental factor that has its own particular function and it is important that we properly identify it.

How the mental factors are concomitant with the primary mind

As explained in the texts on mind and mental factors, another point to understand is that these five object ascertaining mental factors are concomitant with the primary mind in five ways: they have the same object, same aspect, same time, same substance and same basis.

Same object: whatever object the primary mind focuses on, the accompanying mental factor also focuses on that same object. The primary mind cannot focus on one object while the secondary mind focuses on a separate one - they need to be concomitant in focusing on the same object.

Same aspect: whatever the aspect of the object that appears to the primary mind, it is the same aspect that also appears to the accompanying secondary minds. There cannot be different aspects of the same object that appear separately to the primary mind and secondary minds.

Same time: that the arising of a primary mind is simultaneous with the arising of the accompanying secondary minds. The primary mind and secondary minds don't occur at different times.

Same substance: when a particular primary mind is present then only the same concomitant mental factor is also present at that time (with the exception of an enlightened mind). For example, within the consciousness of a sentient being, there couldn't be two separate mindfulnesses occurring at the same time. Likewise there couldn't be two different aspirations or

two different faiths and so forth occurring at the same time, because they are of different substance.

Same basis: the basis of a primary mind and the basis of the accompanying secondary minds are the same - the bases of both primary minds and secondary minds are the sense powers or faculties. It cannot be the case that the secondary minds have a separate base. So whatever the primary mind is based upon, the accompanying secondary minds also have that same basis.

This explanation can also give a further understanding as to why the mental factors are called secondary minds. It is because the mental factors cannot function by themselves without depending on a primary mind; when focusing on an object they don't function on their own. In order to focus on an object the mental factors have to be associated with a primary mind. The primary mind is the main factor that allows cognition of any particular object to occur at any given time, and the accompanying secondary minds function alongside with that primary mind with their particular functions to fully perceive the object.

As explained in the teachings, if, for example, the primary mind is a virtuous one, then the secondary minds that accompany that particular primary mind are also virtuous. If the primary mind is non-virtuous then the accompanying mental factors are also non-virtuous. This is yet another point to be understood from this explanation.

All these points are important to understand for our practice of meditation. When we are trying to focus on a virtuous object we will notice for ourselves that as soon as a distracting non-virtuous state of mind arises, we immediately lose the focus on the virtuous object.

That also leads back the explanation made earlier, about the same substance, where it was explained that only one type of any particular secondary mind functions in conjunction with the primary mind. If it were the case that two different kinds of mindfulness could function at the same time, for example, then when the mind becomes mindful of a non-virtuous object, it could still be possible to maintain a focus on the virtuous object with the aid of the virtuous mindfulness. However because of the fact that two different types of mindfulnesses cannot occur at the same time, when we become mindful of a non-virtuous object we immediately lose the virtuous mindfulness. Then we become distracted and lose focus on the object of our meditation.

The details of the mind and mental factors as I have just presented come from the explanation given in the *Abhidharmakosa*. The presentation of mind and mental factors is also found in the text called *Compendium of Knowledge*, which was composed by Acharya Asanga. The presentation in this text is slightly different, so it is good to know that there are slightly different presentations of the mind and mental factors, particularly in relation to ascertaining the object and so forth. It is good to be aware of the different presentations so that one does not get confused when seeing a different explanation in a text.

The slight differences in explanation relate to the different terminology that is used for the concomitant factors and

there are also differences in relation to the beings of the desire realm having different concomitant factors.

3.2. How to develop mindfulness in particular

Then Kyiwo Tsang's commentary goes into explaining mindfulness in particular. As explained in the commentary, mindfulness has three attributes.

The three attributes of mindfulness

The first attribute is the **object of focus**; it has the same appearance as the object with which one has earlier familiarised oneself. In relation to mahamudra the object of focus is the mind itself, or initially an aspect of mind.

The second attribute is **how the object is ascertained**; the object is held by the mind without forgetting it.

The third attribute is in relation to its **function**. The particular function of mindfulness is not to waver or become distracted by anything else whilst focusing on the object. In particular the attribute of function is for the mind to not waver and become distracted by another object; rather the focus of the mind is to be kept completely on the object. This shows the importance of mindfulness in the development of concentration.

As explained in the commentary the part of the mind that continuously and single-pointedly focuses on the object is called concentration. The method that assists that to happen is mindfulness.

As explained further, the aspect which investigates or checks whether distractions are occurring or not is called introspection (some translations use vigilance). To use an analogy, when we are driving our focus would be mainly on the road ahead. However while we maintain our focus of the road ahead, one part of our mind is looking out for signs and other traffic signals. That is similar to the mind of introspection. While the mind is focused on the object another part of the mind is looking out for other factors occurring.

It is also extremely important to identify the mental factor called introspection or vigilance. As explained earlier, while the mind is focused single-pointedly on the object, one part of the mind, which serves as a guard, analyses and checks whether the mind has remained focused or not, and whether other obstacles are arising or not. The part of the mind that looks out for this is the particular function of introspection.

Initial contentment with the aspect of the object

As the commentary further explains, which I mentioned in another session, when an aspect of the mind becomes apparent in one's focus then one needs to be temporarily content with focusing just on that appearance. As beginners it is initially not possible to be able to completely identify the mind clearly and have a vivid appearance of the mind itself. So in meditating on the mind the beginner practitioner first lets go of all conceptual states of mind, and then applies the proper prerequisites to come to the state where a certain degree of clarity is apparent. At that stage, where the aspect of the mind is apparent, the meditator is satisfied with that appearance, remains focused on that, and continuously tries to maintain focus on that appearance of the mind.

While holding full attention and maintaining mindfulness on the object of focus, which is the appearance of the mind, one part of the mind remains vigilant, which is introspection. This is where one part of the mind investigates whether one's attention or focus is starting to lapse, or whether excitement is about to occur while just maintaining whatever appearance one has of the mind. With that continuity then the object, which is the mind itself, will gradually become clearer and clearer. Maintaining a continuous focus on the initial apparent appearance of the mind is referred to as the general application of mindfulness. This manner of using mindfulness is said to be specifically important for beginners of the practice.

As the author of this commentary Kyiwo Tsang specifies, the initial application of general mindfulness is a specific sound instruction for beginners who are developing concentration using the mind as the object. As specified here, when one has an apparent appearance of the mind in whatever aspect, one holds that in focus, continuously maintaining that focus while one part of the mind just observes or checks whether distractions are occurring or not. The emphasis is to keep continuous focus on the object itself. That is general mindfulness.

The two obstacles to developing mindfulness

As the commentary further explains, of the two obstacles to developing concentration, excitement and laxity, excitement is easier to identify. There is a grave danger of mistaking laxity for actual meditation. If one falls into the pitfall of being in a subtle state of laxity while assuming one is meditating, then that will be a cause the mind to just become duller and duller, and for ignorance to increase. Thus it is very important that we pay utmost attention to not allowing laxity to overtake our practice of meditation. The author uses a particular term here that meaning 'to not mistake a mere comfortable relaxed state as being a very good meditation state'. There is a great danger of that happening if one is not fully aware of the obstacles.

There are some students who have commented to me that having attempted to meditate for some time, it seems they have become duller. Then there are others who say that by meditating they seem to have even more discursive thoughts. According to the explanation in the Lam Rim, when one begins to meditate it is not that there are more discursive thoughts that occur; rather one is more able to identify the discursive mind.

Then the author explains that having clearly identified the difference between the two obstacles of excitement and laxity, we need to apply the appropriate antidotes when each of these occurs.

Excitement

Then the commentary identifies and explains excitement. Although excitement is a form of distraction, it is not called a distraction. That is because there is a difference between excitement and distraction. Excitement is a state of mind that is tainted with desire. It is desire that influences the mind to focus on an attractive object and thus distracts the mind from the meditation object.

Excitement is associated with desire, which is one of the delusions. Seeing another object as being attractive

distracts the mind from the object of meditation, thus it is an obstacle.

One needs the mind to be internalised while focusing on the internal object, and when excitement occurs it obstructs that inner focus of the mind, leading the mind to waver and focus externally. So excitement is clearly an obstruction to focusing on the internal object. The internal object can be understood quite literally, because of the fact that here the mind is the chosen object of focus, and the mind is an internal object. So here, when we talk about the internal object that one focuses on, we can understand that quite literally.

Nevertheless, as explained previously many times, whatever object one uses, when it comes to the point of actually focusing on the object, it is an internalised object that one has to focus on. Even when using an external object, it is the image of that object that one needs to focus on, and thus it is an internalised object. There are those who comment that while trying to meditate on a deity such as Vajrasattva the mind seems to become quite distracted or the visualisation can not be held within. If the focus is Vajrasattva visualised on top of one's crown then because it is seen as an external object that of course can hinder the mind from becoming internalised. With a proper understanding of the internal object, that fault will not occur.

For those who experience an externalised focus, for as long as one imagines Vajrasattva on top of one's crown and tries to remain focused just on that, then the mind will focus outwardly. Whereas, using the explanation given earlier, if one were to have a mental image of Vajrasattva internally, within one's own mind, then the mind will be able to settle down.

However when it comes to the point where one visualises nectar descending from the union point of the father and mother then, as the visualisation indicates, the nectar flows down through the top of one's crown. Again a complication may arise, so here you can use the external visualisation to visualise nectar descending.

In identifying what excitement is, one comes to understand that in order for the obstacle of excitement to occur it has to have the element of being distracted by a particular object of desire. Thus, when the mind is distracted by other objects through the influence of other delusions, such as anger or jealousy and so forth, that distraction is due to other delusions rather than excitement.

When the mind is influenced by other delusions to become distracted, not allowing the mind to be focused on the object, then that is called a deluded distraction. Specifically, within the mental factors there are the six root delusions and the twenty secondary delusions, and one of the twenty secondary delusions is called distraction. So when the mind is not focused on the object due to other delusions it is that particular mental factor that is taking place.

Such influence by delusions is called deluded distraction. However the mind can also be distracted by virtuous objects. Then it is a distraction but it is not a deluded distraction. For example, when focusing on the object there might be times when love or compassion is

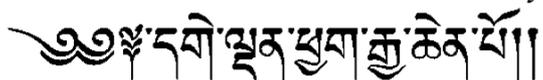
generated at the same time that one is single-pointedly focusing on an object, which would still be a distraction. However in this case it would be a virtuous distraction rather than a deluded distraction. It is called a virtuous distraction because the mind is diverted towards a virtuous object.

Having explained the particular obstacle called excitement, we can go into the details of the next obstacle called laxity in our next session. The earlier part of the session covered the five omnipresent mental factors as well as the five object ascertaining mental factors, so it is good for you revise and try to do your homework on these mental factors, and if I were to quiz you in the next session you will be able to indicate what they are. If in revising and doing your homework you find that there were any mistakes in the presentation then you can correct me. However if my presentation is correct, then you can comply as per the tantric commitment 'just as you have instructed, I accept it all'.

*Transcribed from tape by Judy Mayne
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version*

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Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

24 March 2009

As we had decided earlier, we can do some meditation, and so for that purpose let us sit in a relaxed position.

As explained in the Mahamudra teachings, the object of our focus is our mind. Even though there is an explanation of how to engage in the practice of meditation in the root text (parts of which we have already covered), the explanation that I will use now is from the *Lam Rim* or the *Graduated Path to Enlightenment* teachings. The essence, of course, comes to the same thing, even though it's a slightly different presentation. As we are going to do a few minutes of meditation, you need not look at me, but rather just follow the instructions while maintaining the meditative posture.

Having found a comfortable physical posture for meditation, first we mentally withdraw ourselves from all distractions; so try to spend some time in bringing your attention and focus inward. Initially we try to adopt a state of mind where we discard any hope for positive results and discard any sense of fear that something unpleasant may happen. Simply put, we discard any hope for good results and any fear of bad ones, and try to reach a point where we don't have any discursive thoughts arising in our mind.

We try to reach a point where there is just a general quietness of the mind itself; a still awareness that is not mixed with any discursive thoughts. When that awareness is apparent to some degree, then we try to maintain the vividness of that awareness within ourselves. Don't try to apply an analytical mindfulness right now; try not to focus on any attributes of the mind, but rather just focus on the vividness of that awareness or mindfulness.

If at any point discursive thoughts arise, then reinforce the commitment to maintain a focus on the mere appearance of the mind. By not allowing the mind to follow discursive thoughts, instead replace it with mindfulness. It's like applying a state of mindfulness to another state of mindfulness within our own mind: having initially applied mindfulness to our own mind, when discursive thoughts arise, re-apply another state of mindfulness to be aware of that initial mindfulness. *(Pause for meditation)*

Laxity

In explaining the two obstacles for developing concentration, we covered the obstacle of excitement in our last session, and now we come to the obstacle of laxity.

As laxity involves a certain amount of placement on the object it is not really noticed by beginner meditators. The Tibetan word for laxity, *jing-wa* has the connotation of sinking, like something sinking into water or into the

ground. That same connotation applies to the state of mind of laxity - while focused on the object a sort of mental sinking occurs.

While the mind remains focused on the object, there is a certain aspect of the mind that becomes dull, which sinks down. That is the implication of laxity - the mind losing its intensity on the focus. However the most apparent obstacle for beginners to meditation is the distraction where the mind wanders off. Every time we try to maintain some focus on the object the mind keeps scattering and wandering off. Of course, it is not the case that laxity doesn't occur for beginners, it is just that we are not able to identify and detect it at the beginning.

The lam rim commentary explains, that when laxity occurs, the intensity of apprehension is diminished, even though the brightness and clarity are still intact. Thus laxity has an aspect of slackness. It is also referred to as being an internal distraction.

Gross and subtle distractions

The teachings refer to gross distractions and subtle distractions. It may be useful to relate overcoming the grosser and subtler levels of distractions to the understanding of how the three higher trainings are a means to subdue the mind.

The three trainings

The first training, observing **moral ethics**, is a means of avoiding very gross distractions, which are mainly related to external distractions such as coming into contact with pleasurable sensory objects. The very training of observing ethics is a means for us to distance ourselves from sensory pleasurable objects, which then allows us to overcome the gross external distractions.

Excitement and laxity are internal distractions, and there are also grosser and subtler levels of laxity. These internal distractions are overcome by the second training, which is the training in **concentration**. When one develops concentration, one overcomes the internal obstacles of both gross and subtle excitement and laxity.

The most subtle level of internal distraction however is overcome by the training in developing **wisdom**. The subtlest internal distraction is the ignorance grasping at true existence, which is overcome by developing higher wisdom, particularly the wisdom realising emptiness. When one gains the direct realisation of emptiness, then that serves as an antidote to overcome the subtlest internal distractions.

It is both very meaningful and practical to understand how the three higher trainings serve as a means to actually subdue the mind. Some of the older students may remember that I have explained this before, however it's good to go over it again. We would have heard passages from the teachings about how the three higher trainings are a means for subduing the mind, so it is quite important for us to understand how it actually works as a technique. To summarise, the training of moral ethics is a means to overcome very gross distractions in relation to the external sensual objects. So, observing moral ethics will prevent us from being distracted in that way.

As we become free from the external distractions, the internal distractions become more apparent. So the

question is how to deal with internal distractions. As mentioned previously, there is both gross and subtle excitement and laxity. In particular, it is the gross and subtle laxity that needs to be overcome, which is done through the practice of concentration. Having overcome both gross and subtle levels of laxity, we still have the deep ignorance of grasping at true existence. So how do we overcome that obstacle? The means to overcome grasping at true existence, which is the subtlest level of internal distraction, is by developing the wisdom realizing emptiness.

Gross and subtle laxity

As the teaching explains, **gross laxity** causes the mind to slightly lose its clarity and brightness even though it is still focused on the object. It is as if some darkness has occurred in the mind, which affects the clarity and brightness of the object, and there is a slight decline of mindfulness. So, when both the clarity and the brightness of focus on the object are weakened, gross laxity has occurred. It is really important that we clearly identify gross and subtle laxity because, as we are still focused on the object, we could very easily mistake laxity for actual meditation,

With **subtle laxity**, the mind is of course focused on the object, and its brightness and clarity are also still intact, however the mind slightly loses its intensity of focus on the object. Brightness and clarity are there, but there is a very slight lapse in the intensity, which is identified as being the subtle laxity. Because the mind is focused on the object with brightness and clarity, it is a concentration. Thus subtle laxity is identified as a concentration and a virtuous state of mind. Within laxity there are the two categories of laxity, that which is virtuous and that which is neutral. Subtle laxity is referred to as being virtuous because it is a concentration, and concentration by its very nature is said to be virtuous, thus subtle laxity is a virtuous state of mind.

It is important that we clearly understand the difference between gross laxity and subtle laxity. As subtle laxity is a concentration, it is much harder for us to recognize it as an obscuration. Even though at a certain level we may be developing concentration, when subtle laxity occurs it will hinder the development of the sublime unmistakable concentration. To describe this in lay terms: when we attempt to meditate, it is good that we understand the obstacles that will arise during the practice of meditation. So with respect to laxity, when we reach a point in our meditation where we are able to maintain our focus, but where we lack the brightness and clarity of the object, then we should identify that as gross laxity and apply the appropriate antidotes to overcome that obstacle.

As we develop the practice of concentration further, we reach the point where our mind is single-pointedly focused on the object with clarity and brightness. However as part of the meditation technique and training, we need to check periodically whether we are applying a correct single-pointed focus on the object or not. If we detect that the intensity of our focus begins to slacken a bit, then at that point we need to identify that as being subtle laxity. If we are not able to clearly identify that as subtle laxity, then as mentioned in the teachings, a very relaxed state could easily be mistaken as being a

very good meditation state. Thus when Lama Tsong Khapa instructs us to be wary of a good relaxed state, and not mistake it for a good meditative state, he is actually giving us a very profound instruction.

Another obstacle to developing concentration in meditation is identified as **lethargy**. As explained in the teachings, lethargy is a derivative of ignorance that functions to make the mind and body become heavy and unserviceable. Thus when lethargy occurs, it makes the body and mind feel heavy and results in the onset of sleepiness. It is important for us to distinguish between laxity and lethargy, as they are not one and the same.

How to prevent laxity and excitement

In explaining the two main obstacles of excitement and laxity, it is good to get a really clear understanding of these obstacles. The specific instructions of how to help prevent them from occurring in one's meditation practice also include instructions as to how to visualise the object. It is explained that it would be good to imagine the object having brightness to it, and also to imagine that the object has a certain amount of weight in it. These two attributes of the object are actually ways of helping to prevent laxity and excitement from arising. The brightness in the object is to help prevent laxity from occurring in the mind, whereas the attribute of having some weight helps to prevent excitement from occurring in the mind.

Also in the instructions on how to develop concentration, there is an explanation of how to prevent the mind from becoming shaky. Sometimes there is an element of nervousness where the mind feels shaky. When that element is present, then the specific instruction is to imagine the meditation-object to be like a cap and one's own mind focusing on the object as being like the head that wears the cap. This visualisation is said to be a useful technique to prevent the mind from being shaky.

As the commentary further explains, it is extremely important that we clearly understand these obstacles, however having understood them, we should not leave it at just a mere intellectual understanding, but actually become familiar in detecting them prior to the actual meditation practice. The way to overcome the obstacles is to try to apply that understanding to one's own experiences. That is done by consistently familiarising ourselves with the details of the gross and subtle levels of the obstacles. Such a familiarisation means that we will be wary at the very outset, and so we will be fully prepared when they occur in our meditation.

If we familiarise ourselves in identifying the obstacles prior to our actual meditation sessions, then when we set ourselves to the meditation practice, we will be already equipped with the tools to be able to overcome those obstacles when they occur, particularly gross and subtle laxity. Otherwise we may not even be able to recognise or identify the obstacles when they occur. This is particularly true for subtle laxity, where we might fall into the state of subtle laxity and mistaking it for concentration, we might be in that state for a long time.

The particular antidote for overcoming laxity is introspection. Within a mindful state, adopting the wisdom that serves to always be on guard, checking whether the obstacles are occurring or not, is identified as

introspection. The commentary explains that one needs to apply the state of mind that acts like a watchful guard, so this explains why we need to have that watchfulness or vigilance, even in a deep meditative state. There may be those who claim that in a deep meditative state one should not be aware of anything, that one should not have a watchful or investigative mind and so forth. The explanation here relates particularly to being watchful of subtle laxity occurring, as without that state of alertness or watchfulness there would be nothing to prevent the obscuration of subtle laxity.

As explained previously, the particular description of introspection is that while the mind is focused on the object, being completely mindful of the object, another part of the mind is serving as a guard or a watchman. That element of being on guard is what is called introspection. Thus, as the commentary explains, the particular and unique instruction for developing the sublime unmistakable concentration is achieved through applying the watchfulness of the mind that is called introspection.

As the commentary further explains, even when one is able to identify obstacles at both the gross and subtle levels, if we don't exert ourselves to immediately overcome the obstacles, then the fault of **non-application** occurs.

The five faults

The five faults are laziness, forgetting the instruction, laxity and excitement, non-application and over-application. If laxity and excitement are listed as one fault then there are five faults, whereas if laxity and excitement were to be listed separately, then there would be six faults. We have already covered some of these faults before.

1. **Laziness:** In our earlier sessions we described what laziness is, and how to overcome laziness and so forth.
2. **Forgetting the instruction** or forgetting the precept: We also explained this fault earlier.
3. **Laxity and excitement**, which we have just been explaining
4. **Non-application** is not applying the antidote to laxity or excitement when they occur.
5. **Over-application** refers to the fault that occurs when one applies antidotes for overcoming laxity and excitement when in fact laxity and excitement have not occurred. If when developing concentration, laxity and excitement do not occur then to apply the antidotes is a fault in itself.

The antidote to laxity

The fault of non-application occurs when, say, either laxity or excitement occur and the antidotes to these obstructions are not applied. To overcome the fault, one has to apply the antidotes. As an analogy, when a magnet is placed near a metallic object, it naturally draws that object towards it without any effort. Likewise, the mental factor called application serves as a means to naturally bring the distracted mind away from the distractions, to naturally bring it inward again to focus on the object. But the mental factor called application clearly does not serve as an actual antidote for overcoming either laxity or

excitement. Thus one must understand that there are specific antidotes for overcoming laxity and excitement.

As mentioned previously, laxity is the element where the mind slightly loses its clarity and brightness and thus has an element of sinking. Then the appropriate antidote, which serves as a strengthening agent, has to be applied. Laxity induces an element of discouragement and if we allow the mind to just remain in that state, it could just become heavier and heavier and result in even more discouragement. So first of all, as mentioned previously, one tries to strengthen the mind, to try to prop up the mind so to speak. If those strengthening measures don't work, one can start to contemplate the virtues such as generating faith or joy in one's mind. These positive states of mind will then perhaps help the mind not to feel discouraged and to rise up again. If, after applying such methods, the mind is still in a state of feeling discouraged and is in a sinking state, it is advised in the teachings that one should stop one's session for the time being, and go out and look at bright areas such as looking up to the sky, or if there is a high place, to go on top of the hill and just look out so the mind can expand again, as having that expansive view will help to uplift the mind again. Of course these techniques have been explained many times previously in other sessions, so the older students will be familiar with them. When the mind has been uplifted to a certain degree, then one can come back to the meditation session and continue with one's meditation practice.

The antidote to excitement

Next the commentary goes into explaining the ways to overcome excitement. Excitement has an element of the mind scattering out and being a bit 'hyper' so to speak. When one first notices the obstacle of excitement occurring, one applies the initial techniques of trying to bring the mind inward again and trying to maintain focus on the object. If repeated attempts to bring the mind inward don't work, then in order to try to calm it down a bit, but without coming out of the meditation session, one can start thinking about the other virtuous points in the teaching, particularly impermanence and the pitfalls of the cyclic existence. Thinking about these topics may help the mind to settle down. Of course if, after a few attempts that doesn't work, then one may come out of the meditation session and try other means to try to overcome excitement. Then, when the mind is settled down to a certain point, one can return to the meditation session again.

Achieving a balance

As the commentary further explains, in brief one must be wary of distractions and excitement, and bring the mind inward. Having overcome the obstacle of excitement, and brought the mind inward so that it is focused on the object, one must be wary of laxity occurring and thus develop the intensity of the clarity and the brightness of the object. Always be wary of these two obstacles occurring - when there is no danger of laxity occurring then making sure that excitement isn't occurring, and when one is sure that there is no danger of excitement occurring, then be wary of laxity.

If the mind is too tight, then the danger of excitement will occur, and at that point loosen the mind a bit. However, if

the mind is too loose, then the danger of laxity may occur, thus one must tighten the mind a bit. So the idea is to achieve the balance of not being too tight or too loose.

Therefore as explained in the commentary, and also in other instructions given in teachings on developing concentration, it is specifically explained that when one masters the appropriate balance of tightness and looseness when focusing on the object, then concentration will be developed. Achieving that balance only comes about through experience. It is through practice that one comes to a point of being able to recognise 'if it mind is any tighter than this, then it will cause excitement to arise and if the mind becomes any looser than this, then laxity will occur'. Being able to detect that state is something that we really need to be aware of.

The measure of our progress would be a session where we are able to maintain our focus without it being too tight or too loose. If we have been able to maintain such a focus then, at an appropriate time we end the session; that will then prevent the danger of falling into the pitfall of excitement or subtle laxity. Otherwise, as mentioned previously, if one just arrives at a relaxed state and feels satisfied with that being a meditative state, then the fault of mistaking a very relaxed state for being a meditative state will definitely occur. So one need to be very wary of that.

The commentary further explains that initially avoiding the non-virtuous activities of the three doors of body, speech and mind is of primary importance for a beginner practitioner. Following that advice will help to avoid creating the causes for excitement or laxity. By continuing to follow that advice one will be able to eventually identify even the subtle levels of excitement and laxity, and thus definitely develop concentration.

The commentary further explains, the fault of over-application occurs when antidotes are applied even when the mind maintains a focus on the object; being free from either obstacles of excitement and laxity. If at that point the antidotes for overcoming either excitement or laxity are applied, then that will be an obstacle for maintaining our focus on the object. If one notices that one is applying the antidotes unnecessarily, then at that point one must recognise that as being the fault of over-application and bring the mind to a state of equilibrium or equanimity, where it's just remaining focussed on the mind in its own state, without applying the antidotes.

The commentary then further goes on to explain that the equilibrium or equanimity that is developed at this stage is still at a level where some effort is required to maintain that equanimity. Effortless equanimity is however developed only on the ninth stage of concentration. At that stage the real equilibrium or equanimity is developed, where the mind is naturally settled. Whereas, the equanimity that is an antidote to the fault of over-application still requires some effort. This can be explained in more detail later on.

The commentary has introduced the five faults and how to overcome these faults with the eight antidotes. At the point where one is able to overcome the five faults with the eight antidotes, one has reached a point of being able to maintain one's concentration on the object.

Next the text introduces how many levels of concentration there are prior to developing the actual state of calm abiding. Thus the text presents the nine stages of concentration. The nine stages of concentration are developed with the assistance of the six powers and four mental engagements. We will deal with this in our future sessions.

The next session, as people are aware, is the discussion session. As I have mentioned previously, which I don't need to emphasise again, you will be all aware of the fact that discussion is important, so please do attend and engage in the discussions well. Following the discussion session, the following Tuesday will be the test, and it would also be good for people to come to the test as well.

I cautioned in our last session that I would be quizzing you this time. What are the five ascertaining mental factors?

Students: The five ascertaining mental factors are aspiration, faith, mindfulness, wisdom, and concentration

What are the omnipresent mental factors?

Students: The omnipresent mental factors are feeling, discrimination, intention, contact, and attention

What are the five concomitant mental factors?

Students: The five concomitant mental factors are same object, same aspect, same time, same substance, and same basis

That is good!

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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DISCUSSION

NAME:

BLOCK:

1

WEEK:

5

31 MAY 09

MARK:

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 2. What is concentration defined as, and what are the two main faults that obstruct the development of this concentration? (From 2 December teaching) [3]
 3. List the seven-point posture of Buddha Vairochana. (From 1811 November teaching) [3.5]
 4. What causes us to be so overpowered by attachment upon first meeting an object of desire? [1]
 5. What are three main benefits of taking 'mind' as the object of meditation? [3]
 6. When taking your own mind as the object in meditation, should you try to just keep the mind 'blank' and think of nothing? Explain. [3]
 7. What are the five omnipresent mental factors, and the five object ascertaining mental factors? Explain how these fit into the topic of Mahamudra. [7]
 8. Describe the steps the beginner practitioner would need to take in the 'general application of mindfulness' [4]
 9. Why is the obstacle 'excitement' associated with desire and not other delusions such as anger and jealousy? Would generating love during a meditation session be considered a distraction? [2]
 10. How do the three higher trainings work as a technique to overcome the gross external, gross internal and subtle internal distractions? [3]
 11. What are some methods for overcoming both laxity and excitement? [4]
 12. What does keeping an appropriate balance of tightness and looseness during a meditation entail? [2]

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EXAM

NAME:

BLOCK: 1
WEEK: 6
ASSIGNED: 7TH APRIL 2009

MARK:

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