
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇམ་དགེ་ལུན་ལུག་རྒྱ་ཆེན་པོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

14 April 2009

We will spend a few minutes in meditation. If possible, find an appropriate posture that is in accordance with the seven-point posture of Buddha Vairochana. You will already be aware of the instructions concerning that posture. Likewise, as indicated in the teachings, one must have a most virtuous motivation, in line with the bodhichitta motivation. (*Pause for meditation*)

In our last sessions we have covered quite a bit on generating mindfulness and introspection in general. Then we covered how to use mindfulness and introspection in particular to focus on the object.

The manner of focussing on a chosen object

Now we come to how one actually focuses on the chosen object in order to develop concentration. As you would remember from an earlier session, the auto commentary on mahamudra presented the five faults by referring to Maitreya's *Distinguishing the Middle and the Extremes*, and explained that one must first overcome the five faults by applying the eight antidotes. Then, in reference to Maitreya's *Ornament of Mahayana Discourses*, the nine stages of concentration were presented. Thus, having overcome the five faults by applying the eight antidotes, one comes to the actual technique of developing concentration with the nine stages. According to Asanga's explanation in his commentary on Maitreya's *Ornament of Mahayana Discourses*, the sequential development of the nine stages is aided by the six powers and the four mental engagements.

The Five Faults

Even though we have already covered the five faults briefly earlier, we can go over them again:

1. **Laziness** is what initially prevents one from even having the aspiration to engage in the practice of developing concentration.
2. **Forgetting the instruction:** once one overcomes laziness and actually engages in meditation by focusing on the object, the next fault that arises is forgetting the instructions, which specifically means forgetting the particular object that one has chose to focus on.
3. Once one is able to maintain some degree of focus on the object, the next fault or obstacle that would arise is **laxity and excitement**, which are combined into the one fault. Laxity and excitement lure us away from the object.
4. The fourth fault is **not applying the antidotes** to laxity and excitement.
5. The fifth fault is **applying the antidotes** unnecessarily. There is no need to apply the antidotes when one is actually able to focus on the object adequately without any other obstacles occurring. If one actually applies the

antidotes at this point, then that would be an obstacle or fault in itself. What one should do at this stage is to apply equanimity, in other words maintaining the focus just as it is.

These explanations were given by Maitreya, who derived the essence of the Buddha's words from the sutras, and presented it in a clear way. Since we hold Maitreya in high esteem as an enlightened being with incredible love and compassion, becoming familiar with these instructions and relying upon them would be highly meaningful for us. Relying upon the words of such a great enlightened being is really worthwhile, thus we should take advantage of his clear instructions.

The antidote to laziness

If one is not so inclined to engage in the meditation of focusing single-pointedly on the object, then that would be the fault of laziness. Even after one does engage in the meditation practice of focusing on the object, that which prevents one from completing or continuing the practice is again the fault of laziness. So, the main point is that laziness prevents one from initially engaging in the practice, and then once one has engaged in the practice laziness also prevents one from maintaining the continuity of that practice.

It is also the fault of laziness when, even though continuity has been maintained for a while, one does not see one's practice through to the end result. Thus, if one wishes to obtain the end result of developing single-pointed concentration, one must definitely apply the antidotes for overcoming laziness.

Even though these instructions are mentioned in the Lam Rim teachings this particular passage to which I am referring is from the first chapter of Jetsun Chokyi Gyaltsen's commentary on the *Abhisamayalamkara* or *Ornament of Clear Realisation*. What is mentioned specifically on this point is that because of the grave fault of laziness, which prevents one from initially engaging in the practice of developing concentration, continuing and then completing the practice, one must definitely apply the antidotes to overcome laziness.

The measure of overcoming laziness completely is when one attains the state of physical and mental pliancy combined with the bliss and serviceability of both body and mind. As explained here, when one attains that serviceability and pliancy of the body and mind, and attains the ability to focus on the object for as long as one wishes without wavering at all, then that is when laziness has been completely overcome.

That stage is attained by applying continuous effort to developing the technique of developing concentration. When one develops concentration one actually achieves that stage. The antidote for overcoming laziness is applying joyous effort. What is being indicated is that one needs to apply continuous effort, and in order to apply that effort one must develop a strong wish and joy in applying that effort. That combination of joy and effort is the antidote to laziness.

What allows us to apply that joyous effort is the strong aspiration that one needs to develop concentration, which is one of the eight antidotes. The next one is aspiration. In

order to develop the aspiration for developing concentration one must have strong faith in the positive qualities of concentration. So faith is presented as an antidote.

Benefits of developing calm abiding

One will be able to generate faith in concentration by contemplating again and again the great benefits and qualities of concentration. The Lam Rim explains the many qualities that are obtained when one attains concentration. So what is being explained here is to think about the benefits of concentration again and again.

If one were to ask 'What are the benefits and qualities of concentration?' then, as the text explains, the actual qualities of single-pointed concentration are the same as the qualities of calm abiding. So, the qualities of calm abiding are explained next.

The qualities and benefits of achieving the state of calm abiding, is to obtain physical and mental pliancy, which induces great bliss and allows one to engage in all virtuous activities.

The criterion of having developed calm abiding

The criterion of having developed calm abiding is that when one's attention is applied to an object it can remain focused on that particular object as firmly as Mount Meru, and that one is able to apply that concentration to any virtuous object that one wishes to focus on. So, when the ability to that is obtained, then one has developed calm abiding.

Having developed calm abiding one furthers one's practice to analyse the object one is focusing on. One will then obtain special insight, or penetrative insight, which is the ability to analyse the object while maintaining single-pointed concentration.

Penetrative insight is specifically the insight that focuses upon ultimate reality - suchness or emptiness. When one attains the union of calm abiding and special insight focusing on emptiness, then through the process of having gained that special insight, the delusions and the seeds of the delusions are overcome. When one further applies that penetrative insight one is then able to overcome the very subtle imprints of duality, thus overcoming every imprint of every delusion in one's mind. In this way one attains the ultimate state of enlightenment, which is the ultimate goal that anyone can possibly achieve. So, all of these realisations are obtained based on having first obtained calm abiding, as one cannot achieve the further realisations on the path without first achieving calm abiding.

The eight antidotes

Having covered the five faults, the text then explains how the eight antidotes are applied to overcome the five faults. The eight antidotes are:

- 1. Faith**
- 2. Aspiration**
- 3. Effort**
- 4. Pliancy**

The first four antidotes, faith, aspiration, effort and pliancy are the antidotes to the first fault, which is

laziness. The actual bliss of physical and mental pliancy is obtained at the ninth stage, when one attains calm abiding. When one attains physical and mental pliancy one has totally overcome laziness.

Even though the actual pliancy is not attained until one attains calm abiding itself, one does experience some level of pliancy prior to obtaining the ninth stage of concentration. One may not, however, be able to detect it because it is a very subtle feeling.

5. Mindfulness

Mindfulness, as mentioned previously, is the antidote for overcoming the second fault, **forgetting the instruction.**

6. Introspection

Introspection is the antidote for overcoming **laxity and excitement.** If one has been following the earlier explanations, then one can see how they relate to each other. When either laxity or excitement occurs, it is mindfulness and introspection that enables us to detect them.

7. Application

Application overcomes the fault of **not applying the antidote.** Even though application is listed as an antidote, it should be understood that application does not serve as the actual antidote for overcoming the fault of non-application. What is specifically explained here is that while mindfulness and introspection serve as the actual antidote to overcome the mind wavering from the focus on the object, application is the particular mental factor of attention that keeps the mind focusing on the object.

When the mind is distracted by excitement or if it falls into the fault of laxity, then mindfulness and introspection serve as the actual antidote. Specifically, mindfulness and introspection detect when the mind wanders off and so that is the antidote to distraction. Application, which is the mental state of attention, is the factor that brings the focus back onto the object, thus maintaining that attention on the object. The factor of actually bringing the focus back on to the object is what is translated here as application. Then having placed the focus on the object again, that focus is maintained by continuous mindfulness and introspection.

8. Equanimity

The five faults and how the eight antidotes serve to overcome these five faults are really crucial instructions if we were inclined to actually meditate and develop concentration. Then, when we attempt to meditate, we can relate to these specific instructions.

The nine stages of developing calm abiding

Next the text explains the nine mental stages of developing calm abiding. The explanation of these nine stages is quite clear in the Lam Rim teachings. To present the nine stages, they are:

1. Setting the mind
2. Continuous setting
3. Patch like setting
4. Close setting
5. Subduing
6. Pacifying

7. Fully pacifying
8. Single pointed application
9. Setting in equipoise

Explanation according to Maitreya's Ornament of Mahayana Discourses

1. According to this text withdrawing the mind from all external distractions, bringing the mind inward and then actually placing one's focus on an internal object is the first stage, called setting the mind.
2. Having placed the mind on a internal object, the second stage, continuous setting, is maintaining the continuity of that focus.
3. The third stage, patch-like setting, can be understood from the literal meaning of patch-like, or like patches. A patch is placed on top of something to repair the gaps or holes. The implication of that, as the commentary explains, is that when due to forgetfulness and distraction the mind wanders away from the object, and it is brought back to focus again on the internal object. This is the third stage, patch-like setting.
4. There are different explanations given for the fourth stage, close setting. The Lam Rim text cites other sutras to explain the different presentations. However according to the commentary used here, close setting is explained as increasing whatever focus one has already developed. So, the ability to increase the focus further is close setting.
5. More specific details of these stages will be explained further in the commentary, however the general explanation of the fifth level, which is called subduing, is a genuine intense faith in concentration, and by seeing its qualities being totally immersed in the development of concentration.
6. Pacifying, the sixth level, is where one develops recognition of the fault of distractions specifically, and further develops an intense faith in concentration.
7. Reaching the stage of fully pacifying means that with the understanding of their nature one has completely overcome the faults of sleep, laziness, attachment and the like.
8. The eighth stage, single-pointed application, is where one develops a spontaneous, effortless focus on the object.
9. The ninth stage is setting in equipoise.

Explanation according to Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand

The explanation given in the Lam Rim text called *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* might make things clearer.

1. Just being able to place the mind on an internal object is the first stage of setting the mind. Because of the strong familiarity with the faults of excitement and laxity, it may seem at this initial stage, as if the mind is particularly disturbed by the faults of excitement and laxity. However what is actually happening is that one is more able to identify those faults. As I have explained before, others have mentioned that when they try to meditate their mind seems to become more agitated and more distracted. In fact, as explained in the teachings, the mind

does not become more distracted as the result of meditation, rather one is more able to detect the distracted mind. So although it may seem as if one is becoming more agitated or distracted, that is not actually the case.

2. The second stage is continuous setting. The indication that one is reaching the second stage of continuous setting would be where one is able to maintain one's focus on the internal object for a significant span of time, such as the duration of reciting a mala of OM MANI PADME HUM. If one does not waver from one's internal object for the duration of a whole mala of OM MANI PADME HUM then that would be an indication that one has reached the second stage.

Prior to the first stage of setting the mind, we would not have an inkling of what concentration is. Reaching the second stage means that one has an inkling of what developing concentration implies. By this second stage, as explained in the commentary, there would be periods of time when one seems to be free from the faults of distraction or excitement. Then at other times it seems that they manifest quite strongly. So there are certain periods of time when everything seems quite settled, but there are still periods of time when the faults such as distractions of excitement occur.

3. The term patch-like setting is used because while maintaining a continuous focus on the internal object there are periodic distractions that may occur. When those distractions occur it is not as if the mind is completely off the object, as it maintains some level of focus, but there is a part of the mind that becomes distracted. Thus reinforcing one's focus upon the focus one has already developed is the stage that is called patch-like setting.

in the analogy, we add patches to a cloth that is already there. Similarly with this mental stage there is a resetting on top of the setting one has already obtained. Thus it is called a patch-like setting.

As the teaching explains, there is definitely a difference in maturity from the first and the second stages, through to the third stage, as the mind is increasingly able to maintain its focus for a longer duration without being distracted. And if distraction does occur the mind is able to detect that distraction right away.

If we were to use duration of how long one is able to focus as a measure, in the first stage if we were to meditate for ten minutes then within that ten minutes there might be only one or two minutes where the mind is actually able to focus on the object, because the rest of the time it is continuously being distracted. Whereas in the second stage the mind progresses to the point of being able to focus for four, five or six minutes. At the third stage one is able to focus for even longer, and the distractions become less and less.

It is good to use these measurements of our progress in our meditation to actually check whether one has made any progress in developing one's focus. If one just sits blankly and tries to focus but does not pay attention to check if one is really progressing, then one will not really be able to advance much in developing concentration.

4. The fourth stage, which is close setting, is where the mind is able to actually keep the focus on the object, whereas in the earlier stage even though it is momentary there are still lapses of one's focus, where the mind can still get distracted. In the close setting stage, it is as if the internal object that one is focusing on is dominating the mind. However, as explained in the teaching, even at this stage one must still apply the antidotes to excitement and laxity. Even though one is focused very well on the object, there is still one part of the mind where the likelihood of being prone to excitement and laxity still occur, albeit slightly.

As further explained in the teaching, mindfulness is fully developed at the fourth stage. The teaching uses the analogy of a child becoming a youth, which is when they are fully developed physically into manhood or womanhood. So reaching the fourth stage is when one attains the full development of mindfulness.

5. Because of the fact that the mind has a more acute focus on the internal object, one is free from the immediate danger of gross distractions. However there is the danger of subtle laxity occurring. Thus at the fifth stage one applies an even more acute introspection to overcome the danger of the fault of subtle laxity. Thus alertness has to be heightened so as to detect subtle laxity.

6. Following the fourth stage when the mind has been withdrawn internally and focused inwardly, the danger of subtle laxity had to be dealt with in the fifth stage. This is done through heightening one's vigilance, and checking the mind to see whether subtle laxity is occurring, having heightened alertness in the mind. Due to having to apply heightened alertness at the fifth stage the danger of subtle excitement occurs. So at the sixth stage one has to apply the antidote to overcome subtle excitement, due to the mind becoming too alert.

7. At the seventh stage, called the fully pacifying stage, one has fully developed the power of mindfulness and introspection, so the danger of subtle laxity and excitement occurring is very slim. However there is still some slim chance because one has not completely mastered concentration. Here the concentration is at a much more advanced stage than the fifth and sixth stage, in terms of having fully developed powers.

On the seventh stage one obtains the fully developed power of joyous effort. As explained in the teachings, while there is the danger of subtle laxity and subtle excitement occurring on the fifth and sixth stage, at the seventh stage there is no danger of subtle laxity and excitement hindering one's actual concentration. That is because in the event that subtle laxity and excitement were to occur it would be immediately overcome with the power of joyous effort. So although there is just a slight chance that subtle laxity and excitement may occur, they would not be able to hinder the actual concentration at all.

8. On the eighth stage there is a continuous application of introspection and mindfulness, which is mastered to the point where there is not even the slightest chance for subtle laxity and excitement to occur at all.

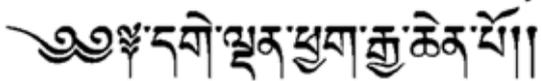
9. The particular qualities of the ninth stage are that in addition to there being no danger at all that subtle laxity or excitement occurring, one is able to effortlessly focus on the object for as long as one wishes.

Next there is the mention of how the six powers are applied. However we will be able to go over these in our next sessions. I have been referring here to *Lam Rim Chenmo* or the *Great Treatise*, and *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, but I have not however been able to give you a full detailed explanation as presented in those teachings. Thus, it would be good for those of you who have access to those texts to familiarise yourselves more with these explanations, from either the *Great Treatise* or *Liberation in the Palm of your Hand* to try to gain a better understanding.

Those of us who have an interest in understanding how calm abiding is developed need to begin by first gaining a good understanding, which comes by familiarising ourselves with the explanations in the text. So that is why it is very useful and important for us to familiarise ourselves with the explanations again and again.

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

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

21 April 2009

Sitting in an appropriate and relaxed posture, we set the mind with a good motivation, which can be along the lines 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, and so for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

3.1. HOW TO DEVELOP MINDFULNESS IN GENERAL (CONT.)¹

In our previous session, we covered the nine stages of concentration. As explained in Asanga's *Shraavaka* (or Hearer) *Levels*, the development of nine levels of concentration is aided by the six powers in conjunction with the four mental engagements.

The six powers

The six powers are:

1. The power of hearing
2. The power of thinking
3. The power of mindfulness
4. The power of introspection
5. The power of joyous effort
6. The power of complete familiarity

With categories it is usually sufficient just to know what they are, but here the particular sequence is significant as well. So it is good to remember them in their particular sequence.

For example we can relate the sequence of the first three powers to the procedure of engaging in the practice of meditation in general. Those of you who are familiar with the explanation given in the teachings will know that hearing and thinking have to precede the actual practice of meditation. It is the combination of hearing and thinking about the teaching that enables one to engage in the practice of meditation. That's also why mindfulness follows hearing and thinking in the sequence of the six powers.

You cannot put into practice something about which you have not received instructions. Also it is not as if one hears one set of instructions and puts something else into practice. It is the specific instructions that we receive in the teachings that we put into practice.

With respect to faith, there are two kinds of faith: that which comes about from external factors, such as faith generated merely based on what one has heard; and the faith that is generated from internal factors as a result of analysing and contemplating what one has heard. Internally developed faith is said to be a firm type of faith, whereas the other is less stable. Even though one develops some level of aspiration with the faith developed as a result of hearing the teachings, it is not as strong as the faith developed through the process of one's own thinking. Nevertheless the process of developing faith comes both from the external factor of hearing the teachings and the internal factor of thinking about the teachings. I may have side tracked a bit from the

immediate topic, but I mention this as it is useful for your general practice.

1. The power of hearing

The power of hearing aids the development of the first of the nine stages of concentration, **setting the mind**. As the commentary explains, one develops the first stage of concentration due to the power of accurately hearing unmistakable instructions, and then applying them in one's practice. The first level of concentration is not attained through the power of familiarity, for example, because one has not yet mastered maintaining focus on the object. It is good to actually relate this to our personal practice as well. Without having heard any teachings, we won't be able to actually think about them, because can thinking is based upon what one has heard earlier. So we understand why hearing precedes thinking about the teachings.

2. The power of thinking

The power of thinking is an aid to the second stage of concentration, which is **continuous setting**. Thinking about the instructions enables the mind to remain continuously set on the object. As explained last week, at the first level of concentration one basically practises setting the mind upon the object. Having attained the stage of being able to place the mind on the object, the next stage is when one is able to achieve some level of continuity of placing the mind on the object, and this is aided by the power of thinking.

3. The power of mindfulness

The power of mindfulness is an aid to the third and fourth concentrations, **patch-like setting** and **close setting**. Having reached the stage where one has some continuity of focus on the object, which is the second stage, mindfulness then enables the prolonged focus on the object. When the mind is distracted it is mindfulness that allows one to immediately bring the focus back to the object. Thus mindfulness is a tool to maintain the focus on the object for a longer duration. That is how mindfulness aids the third and fourth stages of concentration.

4. The power of introspection

The power of introspection is a particular aid for developing the next two stages of concentration **subduing** and **pacifying**. As the commentary explains, in the event that the mind is distracted by specific discursive thoughts, the power of introspection enables one to detect the faults of the distractions, and then bring the mind back to the focus. That is how introspection is the aid to developing the next two stages.

5. The power of joyous effort

The power of joyous effort is the aid to developing the seventh and eighth stages of concentration, **fully pacifying** and **single-pointed application**. Joyous effort enables one to persistently overcome the subtle faults that still occur at these levels, thus allowing the concentration to develop even further. Again, this can be understood more specifically by relating it to the earlier presentation of the nine concentrations.

6. The power of complete familiarity

The power of complete familiarity is the aid for developing the ninth stage, **setting in equipoise**. As the commentary explains, passing through all the eight levels of concentration makes the practitioner extremely familiar with concentration. So due to that power of familiarity, one obtains the ninth stage of concentration, which is setting in equipoise.

¹ This heading was introduced on 17 March 2009. The actual heading number in terms of the outline is 2.2.2.2.2.3. Unformatted headings used between March 17 and this week have been added for easy reference.

We can gain good advice for our practice by understanding this very practical presentation of the six powers. What is indicated here is that due to familiarity, one attains the ultimate result. So, we can understand that the more we become familiar with a practice, the more likely we are to achieve a result.

We may feel 'Why am I not able to meditate like I used to in the past?'. Initially we may have followed a proper meditation technique. But if we haven't really developed familiarity through continuous practice, then even though we may have been seemingly engaged in the practice of meditation for many years, we may find that we have not really progressed much. That is because we lack the power of familiarity with the real practice.

If we are keen to actually progress in our practice of meditation, it is important that we understand how to engage in the practice. Otherwise we may be seemingly engaged in some practice of meditation, but we don't really get any tangible good results. Thus it is important to become acquainted with the explanations given here and try to apply them to our daily practice.

Not gaining any substantial result from our practice of meditation could also be due to the fault of keeping the mind completely blank, or in a semi-conscious or sleep-like state. As explained in the auto-commentary, one should be very diligent in making sure that one is not in a state of semi-consciousness or sleep, with a blank mind.

This instruction is actually a refutation of some earlier wrong views, in particular from the Chinese master called Ha-Shang. His view was that meditation meant having no conceptual thoughts at all, keeping the mind completely blank. That sort of meditative state however doesn't bring any concrete results. Thus it is important that we rely upon the specific instruction as given in the auto-commentary.

The other methods of the practice of meditation that are refuted will be explained further on. However the reasoning the others give as to why one should keep the mind blank, free from every type of thoughts is because, they say, that even a virtuous thought is a discursive thought. They use the analogy of someone who has been bitten by a dog. It doesn't really matter, they reason, if it is a white dog or a black dog, the fact is that someone has been bitten. Likewise, they reason, whether it is a virtuous thought or a non-virtuous thought, both are conceptual or discursive thoughts that hinder the practice of meditation. Thus, they say, one must be free from all thoughts. These presentations will be refuted more specifically later. Actually, Kamalashila composed his treatise called *The Stages of Meditation* - the first level, the medium level and the last stages of meditation - to refute these presentations.

The ninth stage of concentration, setting in equipoise, is also referred to as being the stage where one's focus on the object is effortless. As Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains, initially there will be some effort, however as one progresses along the stages, one is able to maintain one's focus on the object continuously with less and less effort. The analogy given here is that when someone has memorised the Tara Praises for example, and recited them many times, they will reach a level where they are able to recite the full 21 Praises without any interruption, because of their familiarity. Even though there is some effort initially, the recitation becomes effortless with time. Likewise when one reaches the ninth stage, there is no effort involved. Besides the concentration not being distracted by any of the faults, a continuous mindfulness and introspection is present without any effort

being needed. Thus the ninth stage is attained when one reaches the quality of being able to effortlessly focus on the object for as long as one wishes.

What is to be understood from this analogy is that effort is needed initially in applying mindfulness and introspection. However having used effort to apply them again and again one reaches the point where no effort is needed and is continuously able to maintain the focus on the object. In relation to the analogy of the recitation of the Tara Praises, those who have memorised the Tara Praise well and who can recite it without any hesitation, can actually recite the Tara Praises while they are engaged in other household activities. It is very much a Tibetan tradition that fathers or mothers recite a prayer such as the Tara Praises while they are sweeping around the house.

What is being specifically explained here is that although the ninth stage is effortless, that doesn't indicate that one reaches that stage without any effort. So at the ninth stage 'effortless' means that due to the familiarity with having applied effort earlier one will reach the stage where one is able to maintain one's focus without applying any effort. That is the connotation of 'effortless' that is implied at the ninth stage.

The four mental engagements

Next, Kyiwo Tsang's commentary, presents the four mental engagements. As mentioned previously, the five faults, the eight antidotes, and the nine mental stages are specifically presented in Maitreya's *Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*. Asanga's *Shravaka Levels* explains the six powers and the four mental engagements in conjunction to developing the nine mental stages.

The four mental engagements are:

1. Forcible engagement
2. Interrupted engagement
3. Uninterrupted engagement
4. Effortless or spontaneous engagement.

1. Forcible engagement

Forcible engagement applies to the first and second stages of concentration, **setting the mind** and **continuous setting**, both of which require a forceful effort in order to achieve that state. So the mental engagement on these two levels is called forcible engagement.

2. Interrupted engagement

Interrupted engagement is applied to the next five stages of developing concentration, **patch-like setting**, **close-setting**, **subduing**, **pacifying**, and **fully pacifying**. At these five levels of concentration, one's focus on the object has reached a stage where there is a certain level of continuity, which is periodically interrupted by the two specific faults of excitement and laxity. Thus, as there are periodic interruptions, the mental engagement at these levels is referred to as interrupted engagement.

3. Uninterrupted engagement

Then on the eighth stage, **single-pointed application**, uninterrupted engagement is applied. As also mentioned in our previous session, even though there is still subtle laxity and excitement at the eighth level of concentration, it cannot disturb or interrupt one's focus on the object. Thus the mental engagement at this stage is called uninterrupted engagement.

4. Effortless or spontaneous engagement

On the ninth stage of concentration, **setting in equipoise**, spontaneous engagement is applied. The ninth stage is when

one is able to maintain spontaneous or effortless focus on the object without any interruptions. Thus it is called effortless or spontaneous engagement.

Mental Engagement, laxity and excitement

With the first two levels of concentration, one may have this doubt: don't the faults of laxity and excitement occur on the first two levels as well? If they do then, why isn't the mental engagement on these levels also referred to as interrupted engagement?

We also touched on this in our earlier sessions. At the lower levels the span of concentration is very short, and one does not have the ability to focus on the object for a long period of time. Thus, it is quite irrelevant to talk about the faults of laxity and excitement occurring on the first two stages, because one is not really able to maintain a significant continuous focus on the object. So laxity and excitement are not relevant as faults at the first two stages. Whereas on the next five levels, when one has the ability to continuously focus on the object for a significant length of time, laxity and excitement become specific faults to be overcome. Thus, the engagement that occurs on those levels is specifically referred to as interrupted engagement.

Likewise, there is the doubt as to whether one needs to apply some force or effort in maintaining focus at the third to seventh levels of concentrations. The answer is yes, as one needs to apply some effort in these five stages of the concentration. However, the mental engagement is not referred specifically as forcible engagement, because even though there is some effort applied, the effort is not a significant enough to be called forcible engagement. Thus during the first two stages there are interruptions, but the mental engagement is not referred to as interrupted mental engagement. Likewise with the next five levels, there is some effort applied, however the mental engagement is not referred to as forcible mental engagement.

In relation to the outline that we are covering now 'How to apply mindfulness in general', the auto-commentary reads:

While maintaining that frame of mind, one must be careful not to fall into a state of complete absence of mental engagement, like being unconsciousness or falling asleep. Rather one should maintain the stability of the mind that is free of distractions and safeguard that state of mind by deploying the guard of mindfulness.

Even when the object has been secured with the rope of mindfulness, if that mindfulness lacks intensity, the mind will begin to waver and will be prone to the dangers of becoming distracted with disturbing conceptual thoughts. Thus one must divert the strength of mindfulness towards introspection, just like a guard, always watching out to see if the mind is becoming distracted elsewhere.

Thus it has been mentioned in *The Essence of the Madhyamaka*:

When the elephant-like mind has been tamed,
It must be secured to the pillar-like object,
Bound by rope-like mindfulness,
And periodically apply the hook-like introspection.

Here the analogy used to describe the way the mind is trained is how wild elephants are tamed. It is actually quite good for us to gain a good understanding this analogy. Just as a trainer goes through different stages of taming the elephant, so too one needs to develop the different levels of concentration, in order to tame the mind.

- ∞ As specifically mentioned here, first of all the elephant has to be secured to a pillar or a strong post, and the post

is analogous to the object that we focus on, when we subdue our mind.

- ∞ Just as the elephant must be secured to the pillar, so too the mind must be tethered to the object, likewise mindfulness acts as the rope that ties our mind to the object.
- ∞ In order to fully tame the elephant, the trainer uses a hook to the elephant's ear to ensure that it is submissive and obedient. Thus the hook is an analogy for introspection. As it mentions in the quote we must periodically apply introspection in order for our mind to remain focused on the object.

This analogy is also a very significant analogy in that it illustrates the possibility of taming our mind. Initially a wild elephant may seem difficult to tame. However with the appropriate measures the wild elephant becomes submissive to the master's commands, and the master will then be able to put it to tasks such as carrying wood, and lead it anywhere he wants. Likewise, our mind might seem quite out of control right now, and we may wonder if it can ever be subdued and controlled. However the analogy of taming the wild elephant can encourage us - if a wild beast can become completely controlled and submissive, then our minds can also definitely be subdued.

The auto-commentary further reads:

In brief, there is no other way of developing faultless concentration without applying mindfulness and introspection. Within the two, mindfulness is the principal. As introspection has been explained to be the effect of mindfulness, it will come about naturally once mindfulness is developed. Whilst in meditation, you must stop all discursive thoughts and when you come to clearly identify the mind, just remain focused on that. By applying intense mindfulness, focus single-pointedly on the bare object...

Up until this point the auto-commentary has been referring to applying mindfulness in general. As explained here in the auto-commentary, one tries to apply mindfulness to one's practice of meditation and when mindfulness is developed, introspection develops naturally as a consequence of that mindfulness. Then as the auto-commentary further explains, when one reaches the state when one does not have any discursive thoughts in the mind, one is able to apply the mind to focus on the chosen object which is the mind. Then one must remain focused just on that, and apply intense mindfulness to focus on the bare nature of one's mind. The general application of mindfulness as explained here is a really sound instruction for beginners, thus we need to take this instruction to heart.

3.2. HOW TO DEVELOP MINDFULNESS IN PARTICULAR

According to Kyiwo Tsang's commentary there are five particular modes of maintaining mindfulness.

1. Maintaining mindfulness with new mindfulness
2. Maintaining mindfulness with old mindfulness
3. Maintaining mindfulness with the appropriate measure
4. Maintaining mindfulness with conventionally renowned techniques
5. Maintaining mindfulness with discursive thoughts subsiding naturally

The last line of verse 18 in the root text reads:

Whatever extraneous thoughts arise, either try to recognise them for what they are...

This is explained in the auto-commentary:

... and when any discursive thoughts or disturbing conceptual thoughts occur, recognise them for what they are. Being able to do this depends on applying introspection.

This is the only explanation of that line in the auto-commentary. What is being clearly explained here is that when discursive thoughts arise maintaining one's focus depends on applying introspection. It is introspection that enables the detection of the discursive thoughts as faults as they occur. That will then enable the mind to re-establish its focus on the object.

To understand the significance of the two outlines of applying mindfulness in general and how to develop mindfulness in particular, when one applies one's focus to the point where there are no discursive thoughts and one is able to identify the nature of the mind, then one applies the mindfulness of just maintaining one's focus on the object. When there is no danger of the faults of either excitement or laxity occurring, then one need do nothing but maintain mindfulness on focusing on the object. That refers to the general application of mindfulness. In the event that the faults of the excitement or laxity occur, then a specific type of mindfulness needs to be applied.

In explaining the line from the root text, 'Whatever extraneous thoughts arise, either try to recognise them for what they are', Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains that when either the inner or external distractions occur, the continuity of focus is maintained with the aid of mindfulness and introspection.

It is very significant that the commentary specifies either mindfulness or introspection, because both mindfulness and introspection are states of mind that can also be categorised as conceptual states of mind. But that does not imply that one needs to eradicate mindfulness and introspection. If one were to eradicate them then one would be getting rid of the two main tools for being able to maintain one's focus. Thus Kyiwo Tsang's commentary specifies that when outer obstacles such as distractions and excitement and the inner obstacle of laxity occur, in brief any conceptual thoughts that are not applicable to the meditation technique, one must be able to unmistakably recognise them for what they are - discursive thoughts - and apply the appropriate means to overcome them. So, having identified those discursive thoughts as being obstacles, one applies a new or fresh mindfulness in order to get rid of them.

To further clarify the explanation given here in the commentary, the object of meditation in this instance is our mind, so we focus on none other than the mind itself. Thus, if when focused on the mind other thoughts, even virtuous thoughts such as thinking about the suffering of other sentient beings and thus developing compassion (which is of course a virtuous and good thought) occur, then that would be a distraction. It is not called excitement because, as we recall from earlier explanations, there is a difference between excitement and distraction. Excitement has a particular element of desire, whereas even virtuous thoughts can be a distraction. What is being explained here is when excitement or distractions occur then one must apply a fresh new mindfulness. Even if virtuous thoughts occur, they are not appropriate at this stage. Although they are thoughts that we should generally encourage to develop, at this present time they are not applicable. That's why the commentary specifies that when distraction, excitement, and all other

non-applicable thoughts occur, they must be overcome by mindfulness.

1. Maintaining mindfulness with new mindfulness

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary then clarifies that the term 'maintaining mindfulness with a new mindfulness' that does not indicate that it is a completely fresh and new mindfulness that had not been developed earlier, because mindfulness has to be concomitant with concentration. One of the characteristics of the mind and mental factors is that they are concomitant, i.e. they are together all times. Thus what is being implied here is not that a new and completely fresh mindfulness that did not exist before is being applied, because mindfulness already existed when one developed that focus on the object. However when specific faults occur, the beginner has to re-affirm that mindfulness, and re-assess it to overcome the specific faults that occur. Thus the term new mindfulness is introduced here.

The commentary then further explains that for beginners it is a big hindrance if their focus on the object lapses for even a short time. To overcome that fault it is essential that mindfulness is re-affirmed when the fault occurs. What is being implied here in the commentary is that, as explained in previous sessions, it is important that we try to maintain our focus on the object even if it is just for a short time, rather than being a bit lax and focusing for a while, and then drifting off, and then coming back to focusing on the object again. If one falls into that habit, it can hinder the development of concentration because the mind gets used to just focusing for a short time, and then lapsing, and focusing for a short time, and then lapsing again. Also what is being implied here is that it is important that one tries to really maintain one's focus for whatever duration one has selected. Basically it means being very mindful of keeping one's attention or focus on the object for whatever time one has set to do the meditation.

Then the commentary quotes from the *Lam Rim* text to explain that when gross laxity occurs, it is an obstacle to maintaining one's focus, and so initially one must apply every measure to overcome laxity. Then one re-affirms one's meditation session by focusing on the object. Likewise with excitement: initially even strong excitement may occur and remain for a long time, so one must become a little bit more relaxed in one's practice of meditation, and think about the nature of samsara and so forth to develop a disenchantment with cyclic existence. Those sorts of measures can be helpful to get rid of the excitement. And then when very strong level of excitement is overcome, one can re-assess one's meditation and focus on the object again. This is how one goes about meditation practice according to the explanation in the *Lam Rim* text.

3.2.2. Maintaining mindfulness with old mindfulness

The beginning of verse 19 of the root text states:

Or, like your opponent in a duel, cut them off immediately as soon as they occur.

In relation to this line the auto-commentary reads:

Otherwise use the technique presented in the Vinaya scriptures with this analogy: 'just like a duel between archers and swordsmen'.

We can leave the details of this explanation for our next session.

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

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇམ་དགེ་ལུན་ལྷན་པུ་བླ་མེད་པོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

28 April 2009

We will spend the first five minutes in meditation. I have already covered the particulars of how to meditate before. (Pause for meditation)

The reason why we apply meditation to our daily life is so that we can gain the opportunity to have a more joyous and happy mind. So it would be good to do some meditation regularly.

Buddha Shakyamuni said, 'a subdued mind is a happy mind'. Thus we have to make an attempt to try to subdue our mind. We derive the greatest benefit from the teachings when we apply them in a practical way. As mentioned previously, the act of hearing the teachings needs to be followed by thinking about the teachings. Whatever understanding we gain from the process of thinking we then use for our practise of meditation. As the great Kadampa masters have said, the more extensive our hearing, the more our ability to do analytical thinking will increase. The more we are able to analyse and think about the teachings, the better we will be able to meditate on their meaning. Thus, we can gain the greatest benefit from the teachings if we follow the process of hearing, thinking and meditating in our daily life.

It is, as mentioned previously, really important that we take care of the state of our mind. It is our own responsibility to check on what is happening there, especially when there is distress or unhappiness in the mind. By looking into what is causing that distress, one can begin to detect the kind of attitudes or events that are causing it. Once we recognise the causes, then we will be able to deal with that situation better.

When we recognise that the causes lie within ourselves, then we will see that there is something that we can do about it. By changing our own attitude or state of mind we can begin to release ourselves from that distress. As the great master Atisha said, 'the best instruction is checking one's mind; the best companion is mindfulness and introspection'. Thus, as Atisha indicated, to secure positive attitudes it is essential in our daily life to check our mind using mindfulness and introspection.

It is essential that we really look within ourselves and find the internal factors that cause us distress. We know that we need to look at the internal factors, because we know that our feelings can change over quite short time spans, even within a day. When this happens, it is not as if the external conditions are changing radically. They may be exactly the same from morning till night, yet one can feel very elated to feeling very depressed and distressed several times during the day. The external conditions have not changed radically so what is it that causes one to feel happy at one moment and then unhappy in the next?

This indicates that the causes are internal. Thus it is worthwhile to check and investigate within ourselves. When we investigate we will find that the causes for our distress and unhappiness are due to the lack of positive attitudes within our mind. The lack of mindfulness is what causes a

negative state of mind to arise, and that in turn causes us to feel unhappy. On the other hand, when we are able to subdue our mind, then the opposite statement is true, 'a subdued mind is a happy mind'.

We can experience for ourselves that our mind is in a happy state when it is supported with positive attitudes, and in a distressed state when it is dominated by negative attitudes. That is quite clear. So it is important that we look into every aspect of our being to detect the causes for happiness and the causes for suffering. It is not sufficient to maintain just one point of view and have a very narrow mind. Rather we have to look within ourselves and be open-minded about finding the more subtle causes and conditions for our well-being.

As I regularly emphasise, it is important that we begin each day in a positive frame of mind. We can assist that by making this affirmation: 'when I wake up in the morning, I will do my best to be in a positive frame of mind'. For those who have already become Buddhist, it is good to remember that the first thing in the morning is to make supplications to the Buddha, one's guru or any aspect of the Three Jewels, such as Tara or any particular deity for whom you feel a strong affinity. The supplication can be, 'Please look upon me and bless my mind to ensure that I have a good day; a day that can be of benefit to myself and others. May the time I spent today be a virtuous and happy one.'

Developing that sort of mindset every morning will definitely bless one's mental continuum and definitely have a positive effect. This is something that should be done on a regular basis, over and over again, as the positive effect can only be experienced after some familiarity has been gained with this practice. If we actually adopt that practice of developing a positive state of mind on a daily basis, eventually we will have such a mind on a more regular or permanent basis. Every time we recall the enlightened beings and make that supplication, we receive a spontaneous blessing. Thus it is a really beneficial practice.

For those who are not yet capable of making a connection with the Buddha or making supplications, another way to ensure that one wakes up with a joyous and happy mind can be to just start the morning with some singing. Rather than maintaining a weighed-down mind and feeling bogged down by everything, you could sing, which will make you feel joyous! It is important to cultivate any method that helps make your mind feel more joyous.

In my own case, the first thing that I do in the morning is to recite the verse of cultivating bodhichitta: wishing the bodhichitta mind that has not risen to arise and grow, and that which has arisen not to diminish but to increase further more. With that state of mind I then make supplications to the Buddha and recite the name mantra; make supplications to Lama Tsong Khapa, to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other gurus. Following that I do my other commitments and so forth.

Starting the day in that frame of mind seems to be really beneficial and useful, as it secures a virtuous mind. Most of us here have been exposed to a lot of the points in the teachings such as bodhichitta, emptiness and renunciation. It is important that we maintain and increase our familiarity with these positive states of mind, and these important points of the teachings. The more we become familiar with them, the more they will naturally start to increase in our mind. The positive imprints of recalling those points will further strengthen their imprint in our mind and thus we

become more and more acquainted with those positive qualities.

We don't need to make any effort to think about negative things. They come to mind very easily and readily. Our only worry is how to get rid of them. Whereas we definitely need to make the effort to develop the positive states of mind. Nevertheless, it is really worthwhile putting the effort into developing and maintaining these positive states of mind because, as mentioned earlier, the more we familiarise ourselves with them, the stronger they become. It is good not to lose the positive qualities that we already have developed.

Having started the day in a positive frame of mind, then before we retire and go to bed, it is good to spend a few minutes recalling what we have done during the day. If we find that we have engaged in negativities then we need to purify them, along with all the negative karmas that we have accumulated in the past.

As we have been introduced to the purification methods, the four opponent powers come to mind; purifying the negative karma in the presence of the gurus and buddhas and all of the enlightened beings. Having done the purification, you lie in bed with the confirmation that the buddhas who are inseparable from our guru, reside just above our pillow. In that way we are reassured that the enlightened beings are right there beside us when we go to sleep. If we can sleep with that sort of attitude in our mind then it is said that our entire sleep will be virtuous. In that way sleep can become a meaningful practice.

Likewise during the day, in activities such as eating we can offer whatever we eat or drink to the buddhas. These are very significant ways for accumulating virtue on a daily basis. One should not underestimate the value of these practices, because it is these small practices that we do on a daily basis that, when accumulated, become great merit. Thus in our everyday life we have these opportunities to collect great virtue.

Confessing and purifying one's negative karma is, as mentioned previously, extremely important and beneficial. One may however have a doubt such as, 'what use is there in purifying negative karmas when I might actually create even more negative karmas soon?' This is the unfortunate reality for us ordinary beings.

However there is no reason at all for us not to make the attempt to purify our negative karma. Unpurified negative karma just increases in strength. Thus the attitude, 'as I might be creating negative karma again, there is no point in purifying it' is really losing a great opportunity to lessen the negative karmic imprints in our mind. As we are ordinary beings we might find ourselves creating negative karmas again, but it is still essential to purify our negative karmas now. As mentioned in the teachings, 'the one quality a negative karma has is that it can be purified'. This shows the relevance of purification practices.

Having doubts about the value of purifying negative karma, along the lines of 'I'm going to create negative karma again anyway so there's no point in purifying negative karma', indicates that one has not really developed a strong conviction in karma yet. If we have taken the teachings of karma to heart, then we could not leave the negative karma within us as it is. We will definitely feel compelled to purify the negative karma, because we know that every karma, big or small, has a natural consequence. Thus an accumulation of small negative karma, if not purified, is said to become a

negative karma for us to be re-born in the lower realms. When we really consider its grave negative consequences, we will not be able to just casually neglect purifying our negative karma, and we will definitely take purifying negative karma to heart. Thus an understanding of karma is essential for us in our practice. We can see that understanding and abiding by the law of karma in every aspect of our practice is absolutely essential, and we must take this to heart.

Developing a faith and conviction in karma is an impetus for us to really take practising the Dharma seriously. What does 'developing a faith and conviction in karma' mean? It means not leaving what one has heard about karma as mere words. It is easy to say 'if you create positive karma, you will reap positive effects, and if you create negative karma you will experience negative effects'. But leaving it as a mere words, and making no effort to prevent ourselves from creating negative karma, or not purifying the negative karma that we have already created, shows that we have not really developed a strong conviction and faith in karma yet. Even though we are able to repeat those words, they haven't really moved our mind.

Thus it is essential to really think about karma over and over again, contemplating its natural consequences – the cause and effect aspect of karma. The more we deepen our understanding of karma, the more our faith and conviction in karma will begin to increase. Then we will be naturally compelled to create positive karma for no other reason than because we want to experience happiness for ourselves.

When we ask the question, 'Do I want to be happy?', our answer is definitely yes. When we ask the question, 'Do I want to avoid suffering?', the answer will definitely be 'Yes I want to avoid suffering'. 'Do I want to experience suffering?' No. Thus, for the very reason of wanting to experience happiness and avoid any kind of suffering, we need to create the causes for our own happiness. As the Buddha explained, 'the cause for happiness is accumulating virtue; to avoid suffering one needs to abandon creating negative karma'. We also need to purify the negative karma that we have already created by using the methods of purification. It is said that a person naturally becomes a very good and honest person, just by virtue of abiding the law of karma.

Again, the Buddha's words are quite simple, and we might have a general understanding that positive karma or positive actions are the cause for happiness, and negative karma are the cause for suffering. When we really think about it these words are actually very profound. They are so profound that when we really go into the explanation of how negative actions become a cause for suffering and positive actions become a cause for happiness, it actually becomes quite difficult for us to fully comprehend. That is because of the profound nature of karma. Thus accepting it fully might initially be a bit difficult.

However we can rely upon aspects of the Buddha's teachings that we can verify for ourselves, from which we can experience positive results. One of these is the saying 'a subdued mind is a happy mind'. From our limited experience, we know that when we actually sit down and attempt to do a proper meditation, we experience an immediate relief from distress and mental pain, and we get a joyful happy feeling in our mind. We can use that small experience to affirm the Buddha's words, 'a subdued mind brings happiness'; it really becomes true since we can verify it from our own experience.

Likewise with the Buddha's teachings about karma - positive actions bringing positive results and negative actions bringing negative results - must also be true. By relying on the Buddha's words that ring true to us from our experience, we can begin to use inference to see that the other points of the Buddha's teachings, even though quite profound and difficult for us to completely understand right now, must also be true. We reason in that way to validate the Buddha as a valid omniscient being. When we are able to validate the Buddha as an omniscient being, then his teachings can also be taken to heart, even though we cannot completely understand and comprehend them right now. When we accept the Buddha as a valid being, then we can accept his teaching as being valid as well.

We can use reasoning to validate the Buddha's teachings and to understand the more profound levels of his teachings. Using the logic of debate as in 'Take the subject sound: it is not permanent, because it is produced', then when the reasons for sound being impermanent are presented, the wrong conception of sound being permanent is eliminated. When sound is explained as being an entity that is impermanent, then the wrong conception that sound is permanent is definitely eliminated from our mind. When the reasons why the self lacks inherent existence are presented, and we think about those reasons, then the strong conception of the self as existing inherently can be eliminated from our mind. That is something that can come about through reasoning. So with those reasonings we can confirm the Buddha's teachings, and thus develop more faith and conviction in the Buddha himself. This, of course, is the way an intelligent person develops faith.

There is also the type of faith that can be called blind faith, which is the type of faith developed, for example, just from what one has been told. Some say that blind faith in the Buddha and his teachings enables one to gain quicker results, because one doesn't reason about the validity of the Buddha and his teachings. Whereas those who develop the intelligent type of faith through reasoning can take much longer time to achieve their results.

An example of the way blind faith works, is the blind beggar in Sera who contracted leprosy. By reciting OM MANI PADME HUM every day he came to the point of being able to see again. He claimed, 'I couldn't see before, but having recited all these mantras, I can now see again'. His Holiness the Dalai Lama spoke recently in his teachings in India about the value of blind faith. He said that the faith that people have in God, for example, is actually very useful, as it makes their life very meaningful and can bring a lot of solace. Because of that strong faith they are likely to abide by God's commands. That kind of blind faith, His Holiness stressed, is not to be underestimated, as it can be of great value.

However the teachings explain that the faith that is acquired through intelligence or through reasoning is a firmer type of faith, even though it may take longer to generate. As it is developed through reasoning it becomes a personal experience, where one validates it through one's experiences. That type of faith is a really indestructible faith, because it is validated through one's own direct cognition. However do not underestimate the value of the blind faith, which is for many a way to make a strong connection with an entity such as God, and which helps them to shape their life. I've heard of instances of people who strongly believe in God and who as a result, don't have any fear of death. They know that God will take care of them, and they have no

hesitation about dying. This goes to show that blind faith does help the mind.

According to the explanation in the teachings, an example of the faith developed through intelligence is faith in the four noble truths. For example, with respect to the truth of suffering, first of all one contemplates suffering; because it is unwanted, one then goes further into looking into how suffering comes about. Can suffering be eliminated? Can one stop suffering? Then as one looks further and reasons whether or not the suffering has causes, one comes to understand that suffering does have causes. It is the karma, one's own actions, that cause suffering. But where do those actions come from? How do the actions that cause suffering come about? Then one goes further into understanding that even karma has causes, which are the delusions. So the delusions cause negative karma. Where do the delusions come from? One comes to realise that the main root of all the various delusions is grasping at an inherently existent self. It is that grasping at the self that is the main cause for all of our unwanted suffering.

When one develops that sort of conviction and understanding one then asks if grasping at the self can be overcome? At that point one comes to realise that yes, grasping to the self can be overcome when one gains the understanding of the exact opposite, which is selflessness or emptiness. Thus one strives to gain the realisation of emptiness.

In relation to grasping at the self, one first comes to understand that it is actually just a misconception. So because grasping at the self is based on a misconception, it does not have any valid basis to support it, and is therefore unsustainable. Because it is unsustainable it can actually be overcome, as there is no real valid basis to retain that misconception. That which opposes that misconception is the understanding of the reality of the lack of a truly inherently existent self. Thus that understanding of the lack of an inherently existent self becomes the antidote for overcoming that misconception.

When one reaches that point of understanding through logic and reasoning, then it becomes very firm and stable in one's mind. That is because it is no longer a mere conception, but actually based on sound reasoning. Thus, that type of developed faith becomes very firm and stable. This of course is just a brief account of the reasoning to overcome the causes of suffering. I have explained it more elaborately in other sessions, and so it is good for you to become more familiar with those reasonings.

The particular modes of maintaining mindfulness (cont.)

In relation to Kyiwo Tsang's commentary, we are at the second sub-division. In our last session we covered the first mode, which is maintaining mindfulness with new mindfulness.

2. Maintaining mindfulness with old mindfulness

The relevant lines from verse 19 of the root text are:

19. Or, like your opponent in a duel, cut them off immediately as soon as they occur.

With reference to these two lines the auto-commentary states:

Likewise the Vinaya scriptures have emphasised the technique with the analogy: 'just like a duel between archers and swordsmen'. Just as it has been explained, as soon as the disturbing conceptual thoughts arise, you must apply intense mindfulness and introspection, thus

by immediately applying the technique, you prevent the mind from becoming distracted.

The root text commences with the word 'or', and Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains why that word is placed there. It is indicating that there is a choice - either this or that. In this case when the root text presents these techniques, it is not as if you have to follow them in a sequence, but rather that you have a choice. You use whatever technique works best at a particular time. Then again, the commentary further clarifies that some might need the techniques that are presented here.

The text then further explains the analogy of a duel between an archer and a swordsman. One of the duellists was a very skilled swordsman who, when attacked by an archer was able to defend himself by blocking all of the arrows that were shot at him, until at last the archer had only one arrow left. The archer was feeling quite distraught by the fact that with only one arrow left, he had to be careful if he was to avoid losing. Then his wife said, 'Don't shoot that arrow yet. Wait until the swordsman can see me, and then shoot'. So the wife dressed in her best and most beautiful clothes and ornaments, and walked towards the swordsman and sat where he could clearly see her. When the swordsman saw the wife and was distracted, the archer took aim and fired off his last arrow. Because of his attachment to the beautiful lady the swordsman's mindfulness lapsed and he was not able to use his sword as well as he normally would, so then the archer released his arrow it hit the swordsman. As he lay dying, the swordsman said, 'I haven't been killed by the arrow but by my lack of mindfulness and introspection. Therefore anyone with some intelligence, you must definitely maintain mindfulness and introspection'.

Not blaming the archer or the arrow for causing his death, but rather the lapse of mindfulness and introspection is a very sound and profound piece of advice. The archer blamed his impending death on internal causes rather than external causes and conditions. Thus the advice that he was giving is that at all costs one must always maintain a sense of mindfulness and introspection.

As the commentary further mentions, when the swordsman was applying his mindfulness and introspection to its maximum capacity, he had the skill to block arrows coming from all ten directions. His life was not in danger for as long as he maintained that mindfulness and introspection. From this analogy, one learns that whenever conceptual thoughts arise from external appearances, we must completely block them out and overcome them without dwelling on them, just as the swordsman blocked the arrows.

As this commentary further explains, one needs to be able to distinguish between concentration and the conceptual thoughts that arise, and then maintain only the concentration, not allowing the conceptual thoughts to distract oneself at any time. That concentration should be maintained with the power of mindfulness from the beginning of the session, all the way through to the end. The mindfulness that is maintained throughout session is called old mindfulness. Thus one applies old mindfulness to overcome all conceptual thoughts.

The commentary further explains that this old mindfulness is similar to the ninth stage of the concentration. This point is made with a quote from the *Great Treatise* or *Lam Rim Chen Mo*. 'When applying mindfulness, one initially applies a firm focus upon the object and maintains that without having to apply a separate mindfulness'. Maintaining that intensity of

focus from the very start is a very profound instruction for developing concentration.

The text that we are studying now will take some time to complete, perhaps a few months. But in order to prepare yourselves, the next text that I intend to teach will be *Precious Garland*, which is a very significant and good text as it encompasses both the view and the practice. I have heard that there is quite a good translation. There are not that many commentaries, just the one Tibetan commentary, and an Indian commentary, which does not have very clear explanations. When we cover that text we will be covering every aspect of the path, as it encompasses a lot of details of the practice and the views contained in the teachings. So it really is a very significant text to study. As a point of comparison, Aryadeva's text has four hundred verses, and *Precious Garland* has five hundred verses.

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

© **Tara Institute**

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇམ་དགེ་ལུན་ལྷན་ཆེན་པོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

5 May 2009

As usual we can spend five minutes in meditation. The motivation for the meditation can be along the lines of the refuge and bodhichitta prayer that we have just recited. (Pause for meditation)

The particular modes of maintaining mindfulness (cont.)

3. Maintaining mindfulness with appropriate measure

We have now come to the third method of maintaining mindfulness. The corresponding verses from the root text are:

19 ... Finally when you have eliminated all external mental activity and your mind is in a clear state you should continue the meditation in a relaxed and natural manner, concentrating on the mind as a clear cogniser, without letting your memory slacken.

20 It has been taught, 'Tighten [your attention and memory] firmly and meditate in a relaxed manner. This is the way you should settle your mind'. Elsewhere it has been said that if your mind, which had previously been constricted too forcefully with the pincers of memory and alertness, were to be relaxed slightly, then there is no doubt that you will become free of mental agitation. As it has been explained then, you should relax your mind without any mental wandering.

In relation to these verses the auto-commentary reads:

Once the disturbing conceptual thoughts have been severed and one is able to maintain a focused attention without distractions, one must not lapse from mindfulness and introspection. One must tighten one's attention and loosen it when necessary, and ease into meditative equipoise.

Thus, as the auto-commentary explains, once the disturbing conceptual thoughts have been severed, meaning that they have subsided, and one is able to maintain one's focus, then one must be sure not to lapse from mindfulness and introspection, but maintain it and then ease into meditative equipoise.

The auto-commentary explains the sources of the quotes in the root text:

Just as Machig Labdron has said:

Tighten [your attention and memory] firmly and meditate in a relaxed manner.

This is the way you should settle your mind.

Likewise just as the great Brahmin Saraha has said:

If your mind, which had previously been constricted too forcefully with the pincers of memory and alertness, were to be relaxed slightly, then there is no doubt that you would become free of mental agitation.

Just as mentioned above one must tighten the depth of one's attention and loosen it appropriately.

This is actually a very significant instruction. It is quite hard to determine when mindfulness is being maintained with appropriate measure, but once it has been identified it needs to be maintained throughout the meditation session. Rather than being too intense in the beginning and then relaxing later, or being too relaxed in the beginning and then trying to tighten it later, one must attain an appropriate measure from the very start, and maintain that measure throughout.

The auto-commentary further reads:

When one notices that one's attention has become too tight, which causes desirous excitement to arise, one needs to slightly loosen it. When one notices that one's attention has become too loose, which causes laxity or mental dullness to arise, one needs to slightly tighten one's attention.

As explained here, one must really pay attention developing the right measure of focus so that there is no need to be constantly adjusting it. If the focus is too tight then that causes excitement, and if it is too loose then that causes laxity. So in order to be free from these obstacles one must maintain mindfulness with the appropriate measure. When through familiarity and experience one detects the right measure, then that should be applied from the very start of one's session and be maintained all the way through. That is the right way to focus on the object then the focus on the object will not be too tight or too loose.

Another specific instruction on how to focus on the object is that the focus on should be as if the object and the mind focusing on the object are one. Of course the mind and the object are not one and the same, but the focus on the object should reach the point where it is as if the object and the mind focusing on the object are inseparable. This is the appropriate way of applying mindfulness while focusing on the object.

As the auto-commentary further reads:

Within a balanced measure of attention, one withdraws one's mind from disturbing conceptual thoughts. Whenever one achieves some level of stability one must be cautious of laxity occurring. Just as Acharya Chandra Gomin has said:

If one applies effort, excitement will occur,

However when that is abandoned, faint heartedness occurs,

If it is so hard to find the correct measure between the two,

What shall I do, with my agitated and disturbed mind?

What Chandra Gomin is indicating here is that it is really quite difficult to find the right measure of mindfulness. If one applies too much effort then that causes excitement, and if one relaxes too much and does not apply a sufficient amount of effort, then faint-heartedness or laxity occurs. So it is really hard to find the correct measure between the two.

What Chandra Gomin is implying is that one must definitely find that right measure. He is explaining the fact that every time one needs to apply some effort it actually causes some disturbance to the focus on the object; and when the focus is too tight and one has think about relaxing it, then that too causes some disturbance

to the focus. Even though one's mind may not waver away from its focus on object, there is still a subtle disturbance to single-pointed concentration on the object. As explained earlier although from the fourth stage of concentration onwards one is able to maintain one's focus on the object, one must still be cautious about the faults of excitement and laxity occurring.

When the appropriate measure of focus on the object has been applied, then without lapsing from the mindfulness that has already been applied, one slightly relaxes the intensity of focus on the object

As explained in Kyiwo Tsang's commentary, initially some effort is needed to focus on the object, but on attaining the appropriate measure one relaxes the effort a bit in accordance with the technique.

Kyiwo Tsang specifically refers to the phrase, 'without letting your memory slacken' in the root text. Reaching the appropriate measure of mindfulness, involves reducing the effort that is involved in focusing on the object, while at the same time maintaining the same level of mindfulness. However, reducing the effort does not imply relaxing the sharpness and clarity of the focus on the object. As explained earlier, the two main attributes of concentration are that it has an intense sharpness and clear focus on the object. Thus, as one maintains mindfulness, the intense sharpness and the clarity of the object should increase.

With respect to 'Tighten [your attention and memory] firmly and meditate in a relaxed manner', Kyiwo Tsang explains that if one applies too much effort while in the process of maintaining focus on the object, then there is a danger of excitement arising, and that if one relaxes too much, there is the danger of laxity arising. So the right measure of mindfulness is where one is not applying too much force (because that would cause excitement), and not allowing the mind to be too relaxed (because that causes laxity).

The commentary further explains that when the root text says 'it had previously been constricted too forcefully with the pincers of memory and alertness', then 'constricted too forcefully' indicates that if there is too much force then excitement will arise. Thus one needs to apply the appropriate measure of relaxing to the right degree.

In summary, Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains that being able to relax one's focus to the appropriate measure, while maintaining the focus on the object (without mindfulness lapsing) is 'maintaining mindfulness with the appropriate measure'. Then Kyiwo Tsang quotes from the lam rim: 'When the meditator has reached a point in the meditation session where, in accordance to one's capacity, one reaches the appropriate measure of maintaining one's focus without the dangers of excitement and laxity, and is confident that excitement and laxity are under control, then while maintaining a continuous vigilance checking out for these two faults, one relaxes into the meditation'.

The explanation in the lam rim text is really a very profound instruction. What is being explained is that when the meditator is able to feel confident, say to meditate for 20 minutes without the faults of excitement

and laxity obstructing their focus, then that is how long their meditation session should be. Until one can comfortably increase the time span of one's meditation, it is best to stick to that limit. So, this is a really profound instruction.

The great master and scholar Chandra Gomin explains that the statement, 'a relaxed mind is a good meditation', does not apply to beginners who are trying to develop concentration. 'Rather', he says, 'it seems to apply to high-level tantric meditative practices, where a completely relaxed state of mind is a necessary condition of meditation'.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary then provides a summary:

- ∞ Of the nine stages to calm abiding, the first two levels of concentration specifically relate to developing and maintaining mindfulness in general, along with the first two of the six powers, and the first of the four mental engagements, which is forcible engagement.
- ∞ Maintaining mindfulness with new mindfulness, relates to the middle five mental concentrations, the third and fourth powers, and a part of the fifth power, and the second mental engagement, interrupted engagement.
- ∞ Maintaining mindfulness with old mindfulness, relates specifically to the eighth mental concentration, part of the fifth power, and uninterrupted mental engagement.
- ∞ Maintaining mindfulness with the appropriate measure, relates to the ninth concentration, with the sixth power and the fourth mental engagement, spontaneous engagement.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary concludes by saying that his presentation is in accordance with the instructions specified in the auto-commentary, as well as other texts such as Maitreya's *Ornament of Mahayana Discourses*.

We can conclude the session on the text here.

As the next session is a discussion session, it would be good for you to go over these points, and try to really understand the presentation of how to develop calm abiding.

In Mahamudra, the specific object presented for developing calm abiding is the mind itself. However that does not mean that the development of calm abiding only occurs when the mind is used as the object of concentration. Other objects can be used to develop concentration, and thus achieve calm abiding. The main thing is that we try to put some effort into gaining a good understanding of the technique.

The pre-requisite for any practice is a gaining a good understanding of the technique. Based on that understanding one can then engage in the practice. Even if one can't actually develop calm abiding in this life, then since we accept future lives, we will be at the very least preparing ourselves for developing calm abiding in our future life. Putting some time and energy into learning these techniques now will definitely place the positive imprints on our mind to develop calm abiding when the conditions are right in the future. The effort we put forth

now will definitely not go to waste, as it will be much easier for us to develop calm abiding in future lives.

As mentioned earlier in the Mahamudra text, the object used as a focus for concentration to develop calm abiding is the mind itself. I have of course explained many times before that in the lam rim the main object that is emphasised is the image of the Buddha Shakyamuni, while in the *Abhidharmakosha* the main object of focus for developing calm abiding is one's breath. Thus there are different objects that can be used.

The significance of using the image of Buddha Shakyamuni is that it will help us to purify our mind and receive blessings. Then due to our familiarity with focusing on an image of the Buddha, we will also be able to recall the image of the Buddha very easily at the time of death. The long-term benefit is that as one needs to practise tantra to achieve enlightenment, familiarising oneself with the image of the Buddha will assist tantric practices, so as to attain the realisations needed to achieve enlightenment.

In your discussion session, I encourage you to engage in discussion with a good intention, and really try to learn and share with each other. With that good intention the discussion will be much more meaningful. I also wish to emphasise the great benefit and importance of meditating regularly. Spending some time meditating regularly will definitely bring the benefit of soothing and calming the mind. That will make the mind a bit more joyful and happy, as well as developing a kinder mind.

A joyful, happy and kind mind is really the best state of mind that one can be in. Putting some effort into meditation helps to develop a mindfulness that assists in the maintenance of that kind mind, as well as maintaining one's Dharma practice.

Spending time and energy with external companions doesn't really seem to help us maintain a kind mind, or a mind that is encouraged in the practice of Dharma. In fact external friends can be more of a hindrance than a help.

I can share with you the fact that I feel quite joyful and happy on a regular basis. When I first noticed my feeling of happiness and joy, I was quite cautious and started to question why I was feeling happy. I thought that if it was because of external distractions then it wasn't a good sign that I was feeling happy. But when I checked the causes of that feeling of happiness and joy, I realised that it had nothing to do with the external conditions. In fact I felt happy and joyful even when external conditions were not so favourable. When I confirmed that, I began to rejoice and started to really appreciate that sense of joy and happiness within myself.

If you pay attention to what I am saying, and try to understand the point I am making, there is a great instruction to be found there.

What is to be understood here is that when feelings of happiness and joy come from external factors, then one should be a bit wary, because external factors can change at any time, and one can really become down and feel very depressed when they do.

Some people complain 'I was very happy and joyful when I went on a holiday with a friend. But when I came

back home I felt really down and depressed. Why is that so? I can only answer, 'You should be able to know what causes your distress'. That earlier joyfulness is because one may have been totally dependent on the other person. Then when they leave one feels empty and very down.

When the external factors that serve as a condition for a feeling of happiness are no longer there, it is very helpful if one has the inner conditions to feel joyful and happy. However if one lacks the internal conditions and loses the favourable external conditions as well, then it is like a double loss. A lack of external favourable conditions and internal favourable conditions results in feeling depressed and down. With appropriate inner conditions the feelings of joy and happiness are much more firmly established.

Meditation is the method for developing the inner conditions of feeling joyful and happy. Not only does it develop those positive feelings, but it is also a method for maintaining a kind mind. That is how meditation benefits us. If one lacks a sense of true joy and happiness within, then that is because no attempt has been made to transform and subdue one's mind. So it is worthwhile putting in some effort to try and transform one's mind by subduing it.

I regularly emphasise to all age groups that it is important to try to really maintain both elements of well-being. Of course some external conditions are necessary for survival, and to maintain stability in life. Neglecting the development of the internal condition of happiness and joy, while working so hard to acquire wealth and position, is only focussing on temporary stability and security in this life. What I'm emphasising is the importance of not forgetting future lifetimes. Even though it may be difficult to make a full time effort to acquire the causes for happiness in our future life, at a practical level it is worth maintaining some awareness of the well-being of our future life, and aim towards having a better rebirth. That will bring about good results even in this life, in particular it will secure stability in old age.

So trying to develop both inner and outer conditions really helps to maintain our well-being; otherwise there will be an empty feeling or a sense of loss. It is good to fill the empty gap and attain a sense of well-being.

It seems that those who spend all their time and energy developing external conditions reach a point where everything suddenly seems very meaningless. One has spent all that time and energy pursuing external goals, but to what end? Then a sense of a distress can arise. People who are not even Buddhists have told me of that sense of meaninglessness, even with the best external conditions. One very successful, well-to-do businessman said, 'I have a good business and everything is fine, but somehow I feel really empty inside. I don't feel any sense of joy. I have acquired quite a bit of wealth, however still have to go to work, which requires effort and energy. It tires me out and is very wearing. So I wonder what purpose my wealth and money has served, as I am still a slave to my work'.

On one occasion, I talked to a group in the north of the state and met a man who came from Wagga. He had

good health and lots of money, but preferred to get away from his work environment, business meetings, telephones etc, so he said that he would go into the bush. He said that he would walk for two hours to get away from everything.

These laments from even well-to-do people are the result of the fault of not having practiced meditation, and thus not having developed the inner conditions to be happy and joyful. What I'm emphasising here is that while we need external resources for ourselves, we also need to give an equal amount of time and energy to developing our inner resources.

When I go around different areas, of course language is a barrier, but it seems that many people just come up to me. I seem to have some sort of karma to just attract people who want to have a chat with me, and share their life experiences. I was at a restaurant in a nice hotel near the water in Geelong, and one man came up and spoke to me three times. Three times he came up! He said I'm not religious but if I were to choose then it would be Buddhism'.

What I wish to emphasise is the importance of really sharing whatever knowledge you have acquired from your studies in the past with the newer people on the discussion night. There is no danger of losing your knowledge if you share it, in fact your knowledge can only increase. It is really important that we are not miserly with whatever understanding we have. There are some who may feel that they don't want to speak too much. But it is actually good to open up and share your understanding and knowledge with others.

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

© **Tara Institute**

DISCUSSION

BLOCK: 2
WEEK: 5
ASSIGNED: 12TH MAY 2009

Week 1 (14th April 2009)

1. Why is laziness so harmful to a successful meditation practice? [2]
2. Without detailing each of the nine stages of calm abiding, explain the general idea of what occurs as one progresses through these stages? [5]

Week 2 (21st April 2009)

3. List the six powers and explain why their order is significant. What lesson can be taken from the order of the six powers into our everyday live? [5]
4. What are the four mental engagements? For each, explain the reason for their names. [4]
5. In *the Essence of the Madhyamaka*, the analogy of taming a wild elephant is related to subduing the mind. Link each part of this famous analogy [5]. i) the strong post, ii) the wild elephant, iii) the rope, iv) the hook, v) the master.

Week 3 (28th April 2009)

6. Why is it important to make a special effort in setting our mind-set at the beginning and end of each day? Give an example of a practice for each. [4]
7. What is 'blind faith'? Give an example. Is an 'intelligent faith' possible? Explain [3]
8. In the story of the duel between the archer and the swordsman, who did the swordsman blame for his death? [2]

Week 4 (5th May 2009)

9. What does the instruction 'relaxing the intensity of the object' **not** imply about the focus of the meditation object? [1]
10. What must be applied to the mind to reach the appropriate measure of mindfulness and why may the balance of these prove difficult to achieve? [4]

Tara Institute Study Group 2009 - 'Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness'

4. What are the four mental engagements? For each, explain the reason for their names. [4]

5. In *the Essence of the Madhyamaka*, the analogy of taming a wild elephant is related to subduing the mind. Link each part of this famous analogy [5].

i) the strong post _____

ii) the wild elephant _____

iii) the rope _____

iv) the hook _____

v) the master _____

6. Why is it important to make a special effort in setting our mind-set at the beginning and end of each day? Give an example of a practice for each. [4]

Tara Institute Study Group 2009 - 'Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness'

Bonus Question [12 x 0.5]

The Four Mental Engagements

1. _____

2. interrupted engagement

3. _____

4. _____

The Six Powers

1. _____

2. thinking

3. _____

4. introspection

5. _____

6. complete familiarity

The Nine Mental Abidings

1. _____

2. continuous setting

3. _____

4. _____

5. subduing

6. _____

7. _____

8. single-pointed application

9. _____