
Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

19 August 2008

As usual we sit in a comfortable position and adopt a positive motivation, which in this case means generating the bodhicitta attitude, a state of mind based on compassion. If you already have an attitude of love and compassion or bodhicitta, then maintain that and increase its intensity.

Checking one's motivation and cultivating a positive motivation makes sure that the motivation is not based on doing a practice, such as receiving the teaching, merely for some temporary benefit in this life. That would not be a suitable motivation. Nor is a motivation that is tainted with an attitude of achieving a good future life a suitable motivation. Furthermore a motivation tainted with an attitude of gaining self-liberation, i.e. freeing oneself from suffering and samsara just for one's own benefit, is also not a suitable motivation. The suitable and appropriate motivation for receiving the Mahayana teachings is to have an attitude of wishing to benefit all living beings, and creating the causes to achieve enlightenment in order to do so.

A statement in the teachings says that just as a teaching is a Mahayana teaching, so too the listener also has to have the Mahayana attitude. Even though the teaching may be a Mahayana teaching taught by a teacher with the proper Mahayana motivation, it will not be a full Mahayana teaching if the listeners don't also generate the proper Mahayana motivation. So it is important to generate the necessary motivation to secure the intended result.

As I normally stress when we talk about motivation and practice, the main point is that we make sure that our mind is imbued with a loving and compassionate attitude, and that we keep that in mind for whatever practice we do. The purpose of our practice is to increase the loving compassionate attitude within one's own mind.

As mentioned regularly in the teachings it is good to try to overcome any wrong attitudes about doing Dharma practice, in particular Mahayana practices. The wrong attitudes we need to overcome include grasping at one's own liberation and peace, and to overcome that one generates the bodhicitta attitude based on love and compassion. The bodhicitta attitude then secures us against clinging to one's own peace and liberation.

To overcome clinging to the pleasures of this life, the teachings recommend that we think of the transitory nature of phenomena, which is impermanence. So meditating on impermanence is the antidote for overcoming clinging to the mere pleasures of this life. Meditation on developing renunciation, which is seeing the faults of samsara, opposes clinging to a good rebirth in the future. If we are not mindful we could very easily fall into the grip of any of these attitudes, so we must really be diligent and mindful to ensure that our practice is an authentic, unique practice of the Mahayana. This means that we must check our mind continuously.

We can also relate generating a proper motivation to the essence of the lam rim teachings. Those who are familiar with the lam rim, or graduated path to enlightenment, teachings would know that it is divided into three main

points: the practices that are common to the small scope, the practices that are common to the medium scope and the practices common to the great scope. Techniques and methods for overcoming clinging to this life, as well as clinging to a good rebirth in the next life, are mentioned in the practices of the small scope. The practices presented in the medium scope are practices that overcome clinging to the pleasures of a good rebirth i.e. seeking a higher state for oneself, in the next lifetime; and the practices presented in the great scope are the practices that help to overcome clinging to personal liberation.

We can use the three scopes of the lam rim teachings to set our motivation, check our mind and remind ourselves. When we read the teachings of the lam rim or the graduated path to enlightenment, it will become very clear what our own level of practice is, and the appropriate practices that we need to adopt. That is something we should be able to detect.

Those of us who are familiar with the teachings, and those who are not too familiar with them, may have heard that the Buddhist teachings are divided into the Hinayana teachings and the Mahayana teachings, and it is good to know the differences between these two. What is the main difference between the Hinayana practitioner and the Mahayana practitioner? The practices are said to differ in respect of their goals, as well as the purpose of attaining those goals. The goal of the Mahayana practitioner is to attain great enlightenment, the omniscient mind, and the purpose for attaining that goal is in order to liberate all beings from all suffering.

In the Mahayana teachings the goal includes removing all obscuration and delusions as well as the very imprints of the delusions, in short every aspect of the negative states of mind. This is done with the practice of cultivating bodhicitta and engaging in practising the six perfections with the purpose of liberating all living beings from every type of suffering, and leading them to the ultimate state of peace, which is enlightenment. Whereas in the Hinayana teachings the ultimate goal is to merely seek personal peace, which is a state of being free from the sufferings by removing the delusions from the mind, and the purpose is solely to liberate oneself from suffering. Thus we can see the difference between the Hinayana and Mahayana in terms of the goals and the purpose. It is good to remember this and understand how they differ in practice.

This explanation is in order to make sure one has a proper motivation for receiving the Mahayana teachings. The main point that most of you will be familiar with is that it is necessary to cultivate bodhicitta (which is translated in English as the altruistic intention to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings) for one's practice to be pure Mahayana. We need to familiarise ourselves with that bodhicitta state of mind and try to cultivate it. For as long as we strive to adopt and cultivate that attitude, to that extent our practice becomes a meaningful, worthwhile practice.

The actual topic of the teaching is The Great Seal of the Mahamudra Teachings from the Gelug tradition.

As I have mentioned previously, in attempting to explain the teachings on this topic I am here to serve merely as a mediator for you to generate a virtuous state of mind, and to encourage you to gain more understanding for yourselves. By no means can I give an exhaustive and extensive explanation on this very profound topic. Even though you consider this a special occasion by offering an extensive mandala, that doesn't mean that I will be able to provide an

extensive explanation. So, even though you may take this as a special occasion, it doesn't ensure that I can provide you with something extraordinary from my side.

As I normally stress, the main important thing is to be mindful of the proper attitude within oneself, and at the very least to try to maintain the proper attitude when dealing with others, which is love, compassion and kindness. That attitude will be of assistance and benefit to oneself in whatever one does, in practice, study, at work or in relationships. Thus it is something that one needs to cultivate, nourish and protect.

The effort and diligence needed to generate a proper and positive attitude has to come from one's own side. If one waits around thinking that someone else will offer some kind of assistance to have a positive mind, then it will never occur. If someone could assist us to generate positive attitudes to gain realisations, then the buddhas of the past would have already done so and we would all be enlightened by now!

I stress the importance of protecting and securing one's own positive state of mind and attitude and what one has learned, because of the comments made to me by some who had gone to other teachings and searched around; they have said, 'Somehow I ended up doubting and losing what I had previously gained'. So, if one is not careful in securing what one has already learned and practised, then shopping around will not necessarily help our mind to progress.

The text that we are using to explain the Gelug tradition of Mahamudra was composed by Panchen Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltzen. Not only did he compose the root text, which is in verse form, but he also composed an auto-commentary to the root text. We will use these two texts as the basis for our explanation of Mahamudra.

NAMO MAHAMUDRAYA

I prostrate to Mahamudra, the Great Seal of Voidness,

The Sanskrit salutation NAMO MAHAMUDRAYA is translated into English as, 'I prostrate to Mahamudra, the Great Seal of Voidness'.

As is the case of the root text, the commentary also has a verse of salutation to the guru who is endowed with the three kindnesses. The opening verse of the auto-commentary reads:

The primordial wisdom of all buddhas in the entire universe
Manifests in the guise of one who wears saffron robes,
To you the venerable guru who is kind in the three ways,
With great respect I prostrate at your lotus feet.

The 'primordial wisdom of all buddhas in the entire universe' refers to the wisdom of all of the enlightened beings in the entire universe, which manifests itself in the guise of a human wearing saffron robes (meaning an ordained person). So the lama is in that aspect.

The lama, to whom the author specifically refers to in his salutation, is his own guru Khedrub Sangye Yeshe. Being kind in the three ways refers particularly to a lama in the Tantric tradition: one who bestows Tantric initiations, gives explanations of the texts and who imparts personal practice instruction. The lama, who benefits the disciple in these three ways, is known as a lama who is kind in the three ways.

The next verse in the auto-commentary reads:

Henceforth I will explain the lamp re-clarifying
Mahamudra,

That which is the innermost elixir of the buddhas of the three times,
The essential meaning of the oceans of the sutras and tantras
And the roadway traversed by all great masters of the past.'

The author first refers to the title of the auto-commentary, which is *The Lamp That Re-Clarifies Mahamudra*.

Then he explains Mahamudra as having these features:

- ∞ It is the 'innermost elixir', or the essential nourishment of all the buddhas of the three times.
- ∞ It explains 'the essential meaning of the oceans of sutras and tantras'. Here 'oceans' is analogous to the vast number of teachings on sutra and tantra. So the Mahamudra serves as the essential meaning of all these teachings.
- ∞ It serves as 'a roadway traversed by all great masters of the past'. This indicates that without the realisation of Mahamudra—voidness—one cannot gain the higher realisations to achieve the ultimate states. So therefore it is like the roadway traversed by all great masters of the past.

The auto-commentary further reads:

The explanation of Mahamudra, the unique tradition of the great scholars and meditators, is presented in three main categories:

1. The deeds done in order to engage in the composition
2. Presenting the actual material of the composition
3. Dedicating the merits derived from the composition.

As the commentary explains, the explanation of Mahamudra, which is the unique tradition of the great scholars and meditators, is presented in these three main categories:

1. The deeds done in order to engage in the composition
2. Presenting the actual material of the composition
3. Dedicating the merits derived from the composition of Mahamudra.

1. THE DEEDS DONE IN ORDER TO ENGAGE IN THE COMPOSITION

The author begins by saying:

In accordance with the tradition of past great masters, I first pay homage to the supreme object. Then in order to have success for completing the composition, I make the composition-pledge in the following verses:

When the author says, 'In accordance with the tradition of the great past masters', he is also being modest. He is saying 'before I go into the actual explanation I comply with the tradition of the past masters, in first paying homage to the supreme object'. Then in order to have success in completing the composition he makes a pledge about that composition.

Paying homage to the supreme object is paying homage to the guru as well as the three supreme objects, which are the Three Jewels. Doing this is, as the author explains, in accordance with the tradition of the past great masters.

Likewise whenever we engage in the practice we also keep the tradition of first taking refuge and then generating bodhicitta. Whatever our practice, the first thing we do is to take refuge and generate bodhicitta. That is our way of practising in accordance with the great tradition of the great masters of the past.

As the commentary will explain further on, the reason for taking refuge and generating bodhicitta in our tradition can be summarised into two points: taking refuge secures our practice as a Buddhist practice, and generating bodhicitta secures it as a practice of the Mahayana tradition.

It is good to understand this explanation, as it explains the method of securing the proper attitude. Taking refuge is indicated as a way to secure one's practice against becoming a faulty or non-Buddhist practice, and generating bodhicitta secures one's practice against the practice of the lower vehicle, the Hinayana practice.

Now we come into the actual root text, and in accordance with the outline that the author has presented in his auto-commentary, the prostration comes first.

I prostrate to Mahamudra, the Great Seal of Voidness.

1. *I prostrate to my peerless guru, lord of great and extensive attainments, who teaches in all its stark details the diamond-hard voidness of the mind, beyond all words—Mahamudra, the Great Seal of Voidness, the all-pervasive nature of all things, the indistinguishable single nature of both objects of voidness and voidness itself.*
2. *Combining the essence of ocean-like oral teachings of both the sutra and tantra traditions of Mahamudra with the well-explained teachings of the Gelug and Kagyu traditions transmitted orally from successive guru to disciple, I shall write here specifically about the Mahamudra oral tradition teachings of the spiritual father and his son of highest attainment, Dharmavajra.*

In the first verse the author pays homage, prostrating to the supreme objects, and in the second verse he pledges to 'write specifically about the Mahamudra oral tradition teachings'.

The auto-commentary says, 'as the meaning of these two verses are not difficult to comprehend I have omitted elaborate explanations'. However even though the author says that, I think we ought to go into a bit of explanation in order to understand the meaning of the verses.

The opening line in the text is NAMO MAHAMUDRAYA. 'Namo' is the Sanskrit word for homage or prostration. Mahamudra is 'Great Seal' (of Voidness) and the syllable 'ya' has the connotation of 'to'. Thus, the translation is 'To the Great Seal of Voidness, Mahamudra, I pay homage, or make prostrations.

As this is a Tibetan translation, one may wonder why the opening line is in Sanskrit. Why does the author write that? There are three reasons:

1. As other masters have explained, Sanskrit is considered to be a very holy and noble language. So having the opening line in Sanskrit leaves an imprint for those who study the text to be able to become familiar with this holy language.
2. Using Sanskrit also has the purpose of indicating that this teaching is an authentic teaching coming from an authentic source – the great Indian masters of the past.
3. And finally it has the purpose of leaving a blessing on the mental continuum.

We believe that Sanskrit is not just a mundane language, but that it is actually the sacred language of the gods. Regardless of that belief, it seems that on a factual level, Sanskrit is indeed a unique language. It is said that even if one understands the literal meaning of a word in Sanskrit, one may not know its implicit hidden meaning. This indicates that each word of Sanskrit has very subtle meanings.

Having paid homage to Mahamudra, the first verse in the root text offers prostrations to one's root guru. The purpose of making prostrations to the guru can be understood from the manner in which the prostration is offered:

I prostrate to my peerless guru, lord of great and extensive attainments, who teaches in all its stark details the diamond-hard voidness of the mind,

This salutation to the guru also explains the actual meaning of **subject Mahamudra**, as 'the diamond-hard voidness of the mind'.

The first line of the Tibetan verse, which doesn't correspond with the order of the English translation, is the line that includes *Mahamudra, the Great Seal of Voidness, the all-pervasive nature of all things*. This line presents the **object Mahamudra**, which is voidness or emptiness itself—the pervasive nature of all things. As presented here, emptiness pervades all existence, and so it is the nature of all things. This is the same way that it is presented in other teachings. For those of you who remember, within the four categories of *Prajnaparamita* or perfections, one is the natural perfection, which is emptiness. It is presented here in the same way: the nature of all things is voidness or emptiness.

The all-pervasive nature of all things is Mahamudra, literally translated as the great seal of voidness. The connotation of 'seal' is that phenomena cannot exist other than in the nature of voidness, and therefore voidness is ingrained in all existence. The word 'great' has the connotation that by seeing or understanding the nature of all phenomena, which is the voidness or emptiness that is prevalent in all phenomena, one achieves great realisations, and great states. That is why it is called 'great'. So the literal translation of Mahamudra is *maha* meaning great, and *mudra* meaning seal.

The second line in the Tibetan verse relates to *indistinguishable*, and *beyond all words*, which is the *diamond-hard voidness of the mind*. This line presents **subject Mahamudra**. Of the two, subject Mahamudra and object Mahamudra, the primary is subject Mahamudra, which is the wisdom realising emptiness, which is presented in the second line as 'the diamond hard voidness of the mind'.

Using 'indistinguishable' in the second line indicates that both the object and the subject are indistinguishable in single-pointed concentration on emptiness. The diamond hard voidness of the mind is the direct perception or realisation of emptiness within the mental continuum of an arya being who is in meditative equipoise. In the state of meditative equipoise, the object (emptiness) and subject (wisdom realising emptiness) is said to become indistinguishable, just like pouring water into water. The wisdom realising emptiness within an arya being in meditative equipoise is further referred to as 'diamond hard' as it is indestructible. That state, is also *beyond all words*, meaning that that the bliss of realising emptiness is beyond all words, or inexpressible.

A mundane analogy to illustrate how it is inexpressible is the sensual, pleasurable taste of the sweetness of sugar or molasses. We can say that molasses or sugar is sweet, but it is hard to describe that sweetness. We cannot really comprehend the experience of sweetness unless we actually taste something sweet ourselves, nor can we impart that experience to someone else unless they also taste it. Likewise the immaculate bliss experienced by an arya being in meditative equipoise focusing on emptiness is beyond all words, or inexpressible.

To summarise the main point, diamond-hard voidness of the mind refers to the direct realisation of emptiness within an arya being in meditative equipoise. That wisdom is diamond-hard and thus indestructible, and its experience of bliss is beyond all words.

The word *voidness* in the second line of the Tibetan verse, corresponds to the meaning of third line, *lord of the great extensive attainments teaches in all its stark details*, and it refers to the qualities of the guru, who not only has the understanding of voidness, but is able to teach it to others in its finest detail.

The last line, the words *I prostrate at the feet of my peerless Guru*, are paying homage. The Tibetan word *da me*, means incomparable. Thus the lama is referred to as the 'incomparable lord'; in the translation here the word *peerless* is used, which has the same meaning. The lama is peerless or incomparable because he has the qualities of having the wisdom realising emptiness or voidness, and the ability to teaching it to others in great detail. Illustrating the qualities of the guru in this way also shows the reason why the guru is worthy of homage.

Another commentary, it explains that the indistinguishable single nature of both the subject of voidness and voidness itself is a further illustration of what Mahamudra is. That indistinguishable nature of voidness—the diamond-hard voidness of the mind, or the subject Mahamudra, is categorised into three: the **basis** indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind, the **path** indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind, and the **result** indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind.

Basis

The basis diamond-hard voidness of the mind is the nature of mind at an ordinary level, which has the potential to separate itself from the defilements or the delusions. Even an ordinary being with an ordinary state of mind has the nature of mind that carries the potential of a mind that is separable from the delusions.

The potential that the mind has of being separable from the delusions or defilements is the **basis** diamond-hard voidness of the mind. It is of course, essential for us to understand that we have this potential, even though it is hard for us to really identify, understand or experience it right now. However we always carry that potential in our mind, which will become indistinguishable with subject and object voidness. The teachings also refer to that potential, as the subtle mind and wind that is within us at all times. Although it may be hard for us identify it right now, it is nevertheless part of our nature.

Path

It is essential for us to comprehend that the basis indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind is a potential that we already have. Then as we further devote our time and energy to develop and transform our mind to the point where we actually enter the path, we first gain the conceptual realisation of emptiness. As we further develop our conceptual realisation of emptiness and gain the direct perception of emptiness, then we have attained the path of seeing; both the conceptual realisation and the direct realisation of emptiness, are **path** diamond-hard voidness of mind.

Result

The **result** indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind is the Dharmakaya, or the truth body of the Buddha.

Developing an understanding of the basis indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind is really essential, because it gives us the reason to study and practice. Buddha nature is another term that is used in the teachings to identify the basis indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind. Having buddha nature, means that our mind has the capacity to completely separate itself from the defilements or delusions, and we always carry that potential within ourselves. When we utilise that potential and actually put an effort into engaging in further practice, that initial potential matures into an actual realisation of emptiness. That is what is referred to as the path indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind. When that path further matures and develops then it eventually transforms into the Buddha's omniscient mind, the Dharmakaya, which is the resultant indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind.

The explanation of buddha nature is presented in the Buddha's own teaching. In the *Eight Thousand Verses sutra*, the Buddha explicitly mentioned that 'the nature of mind is clear light; the defilements are adventitious', which means that the defilements can be overcome.

In summary the first verse of the root text is a salutation or homage to the lama. In presenting the qualities of the lama the verse also presents the two categories of Mahamudra, which are the object Mahamudra and the subject Mahamudra. The object Mahamudra is explained as the all-pervasive nature of all things, which is emptiness. It is mudra or seal, because there is nothing that exists, any compounded or un-compounded phenomena, which does not comply with the nature of voidness. The realisation of that emptiness is what makes the mudra great (maha).

The subject Mahamudra is the indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind. As specifically presented here, the subject Mahamudra relates to the wisdom realising emptiness within the mental continuum of an arya being who is in meditative equipoise. The guru is endowed with that direct perception of emptiness (the subject Mahamudra) and who is able to explain emptiness (the object Mahamudra). The guru is called lord, because of being the holder of all the secret instructions and attainments. Not only does he have extensive attainments, but he is able to teach them in stark (meaning the finest) detail. So the author pays homage or makes prostrations to the lama who embodies these qualities.

What we can derive from these explanations to use on a personal level is that having understood that there are three levels of Mahamudra, we can identify with the basis diamond-hard voidness of the mind that we already have within us. We may not possess the realisation of the indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of the mind yet, but we do possess the potential for realising that. In understanding that we have the basis indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of mind within ourselves, our work is to develop it further so that we reach the level of the path indistinguishable diamond-hard voidness of mind, which is the actual realisation of emptiness. That is something that we need to exert ourselves to achieve it.

© Tara Institute

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

26 August 2008

As is normal we generate a positive motivation for receiving the teachings such as, 'In order to benefit all sentient beings, and liberate them from all suffering, I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

It is important to ensure that our mind is imbued with that motivation, and that we remind ourselves of it before engaging in whatever practice we do, and also during our practice. Finally we make sure that at the end of our practice we dedicate it with that motivation. Even though we may not actually have a proper motivation at all times, if we secure our practice with a proper motivation at the beginning and cultivate it periodically, then our mental continuum will be imbued with that motivation. Then, indirectly, whatever activity we engage in will be consistent with our motivation.

The technique of engaging in the practice of listening to Dharma, and so forth, is presented along with the importance of generating a motivation, so it is good to take note of the significance of this motivation. The mere fact of generating a motivation also helps to calm down and settle the mind, which would otherwise be very agitated. If we don't make sure that our mind is settled when we engage in an activity or practice, then our mind will be constantly familiar with a busy, agitated, troubled mind. Thus generating a motivation is significant, even for the mere fact of initially settling down the mind.

As I mentioned in the first session, all I can do is help to motivate you to engage in study and practice—that is as much as I can do. The combination of a proper motivation developed from both the teacher's side and listeners' side will actually make our time together worthwhile. When you set the proper motivation for listening to the teaching, your act of receiving the teaching will be in a more subdued manner. Likewise, when I try to generate a positive motivation from my side, it seems to make the teaching become more effective. So, beginning with a proper motivation seems to be really significant in every aspect.

One's motivation, as I usually stress, is not only significant for engaging in practices such as listening to the teaching, or meditation and so forth, but it is also important on a practical level, for example, for good communication with others. If one ensures a motivation based on a proper attitude before one engages in communication, then the outcome of that communication will also be fruitful. Whatever communication you have with others will be much more fruitful with a proper motivation; it will be easier to communicate, easier to settle things, and easier to come to agreements and so forth. In that way we can see that even on a practical level one's motivation is really useful and beneficial. So to that extent I stress the importance of generating a proper motivation.

In our previous session we covered the meaning of the verse that includes the salutation first to mahamudra, then specifically, prostration to the guru, including the reasons why one prostrates to the lama.

Pledge in composing the treatise

The author's pledge in composing the material is found in the following verse:

2. *Combining the essence of ocean-like oral teachings of both the sutra and tantra traditions of mahamudra with the well-explained teachings of the Gelug and Kagyu traditions transmitted orally from successive guru to disciple, I shall write here specifically about the mahamudra oral tradition teachings of the spiritual father and his son of highest attainment, Dharmavajra.*

The pledge for composing this treatise is made in accordance with the traditions of the masters and scholars of the past. When a treatise was composed in ancient India it had to be initially submitted to a gathering of learned scholars, who would thoroughly check the treatise to make sure that there were no flaws or errors. Only when it passed the scholars' scrutiny and found to be free from flaws, was it accepted as an authentic worthwhile treatise. It would then be placed on a high seat and prostrations made to it, and then the king would present a gift to the author. In that way, both the author and his work were honoured. If there were any mistakes or flaws in a treatise, they would mark it and send it back, dismissing it as a treatise worthy of study and debate. Thus, following that tradition, it was considered to be very inauspicious to mark the texts that we studied in the monasteries.

In this verse the author pledges to compose the treatise by 'combining the essence of ocean-like oral teachings of both the sutra and tantra'. This means that he combines the essence of the entire teachings of sutra and tantra, including specific instructions in relation to those teachings. In explaining the essence of the mahamudra in accordance with the Gelug and Kagyu tradition, he says, 'I shall write here' in accordance with the 'oral tradition teachings of the spiritual father and his son of highest attainment, Dharmavajra'.

Here 'sutra' refers to the small, medium and extensive versions of the *Prajnaparamita*, or the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, while the tantric teachings refer specifically to the teachings from the deity Guhyasamaja, which is regarded as the king of the tantric teachings. As explained in a commentary, this also includes the root text as well as the commentaries on the Guhyasamaja tantra.

In the [first line](#) *combining the essence* refers to the treatises that combine the essence of the sutra teachings, which as mentioned previously relates to the small, medium and extensive *Perfection of Wisdom* teachings of the Buddha. The treatise that explains the essence of these teachings, is Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realisations*; it gives a very clear and concise explanation of the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, and is a highly reputed treatise that is studied in all four traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. The treatise that explains the essence of the tantra, particularly in relation to the Guhyasamaja tantra is a commentary by the Indian master Chandrakirti, which is translated into English as *Clear Explanation of Guhyasamaja Tantra*. So the author combines the essence of these two treatises which is mahamudra, and explains it in his text.

The [second line](#) of the Tibetan verse, *the well-explained teachings of the Gelug and Kagyu traditions*, refers to those treatises studied and practised in the Gelug and Kagyu tradition that combine the essence of sutra and tantra. In the Gelug tradition, all the monasteries commonly use *The Ornament of Clear Realisations*, which combines the essence of all the sutras in a very concise and meaningful way. So it is

the main treatise for studying the explanations of sutra. Tibetan masters have also composed many commentaries on this text. The Tibetan commentaries from the Gelug tradition on the Guhyasamaja tantra are based on a commentary composed by Chandrakirti, which elucidates the meaning of Guhyasamaja tantra very precisely. In the Gelug tradition the commentaries based on these treatises are treatises and specific oral instructions that combine the essence of both sutra and tantra. Thus 'Combining the essence' means presenting these vast teachings in a comprehensible way that makes it easy for an individual to study and practise them. That is what comprises 'the well-explained teachings of the Gelug and Kagyu traditions'.

What one also derives from this explanation is the fact that these teachings and instructions that combine both sutra and tantra are the treatise that are studied and practised in the Gelug and Kagyu traditions. Thus studying mahamudra, which combines the essence of the entire range of the Buddha's teachings on sutra and tantra, is the unique tradition of the Gelug and Kagyu. As mentioned previously, sutra refers to the small, medium and extensive *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, which are teachings by the Buddha himself, and the most renowned commentary on this is Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realisations*. Of course that's not the only commentary, but it is the main one, and many other commentaries have been composed based on the explanations found in *The Ornament of Clear Realisations*.

The tantric side of the Buddha's teachings are based on the specific tantric teachings on Guhyasamaja tantra, the main one of which is Chandrakirti's commentary, and there are many other commentaries based on that. Guhyasamaja tantra is specifically referred to here because it extensively explains the unique grounds and paths of tantra, which are the basis for understanding all other tantric teachings. When one has a good understanding of the grounds and the paths of the Guhyasamaja tantra, one can use that as reference and relate that understanding to all of the other tantric teachings.

In the third and fourth lines the author says *I shall write here specifically about the Mahamudra oral tradition teachings of the spiritual father and his son of highest attainment, Dharmavajra*. Here 'son' specifically refers to the heart disciple of Dharmavajra, Gyalwa Losang Dondrup who is renowned for having obtained enlightenment in one lifetime. The treatises by Gyalwa Losang Dondrup are considered to be very explicit and clear in explaining the meaning of mahamudra. Thus the author states that he will write here specifically the oral traditions of the spiritual father and son' referring to these two great masters. In relation to the oral teachings of the spiritual father and his son, another commentary explains this to be the general teachings on mahamudra in both the Gelug and Kagyu traditions, as well as the specific instructions that are gained by an understanding of the relationship between interdependentness and emptiness. The unique teaching of these masters is that emptiness and interdependentness are explained in such a way by gaining an understanding of one enhances the understanding of the other. So, it is this unique tradition that the author proposes to write about.

2. PRESENTING THE ACTUAL MATERIAL OF THE COMPOSITION

Presenting the actual material of the composition is presented in three categories:

- 2.1. Preparation
- 2.2. Actual
- 2.3. Conclusion

2.1. PREPARATION

This material is presented in the following three verses from the root text. Actually there is one line that seems to be missing from translation we are using, but we can adopt it from the other translation of the root text

For this there are preparatory practices, actual techniques and concluding procedures.

3. *First is the preparation. In order to enter the gateway and framework of Buddha's teachings in general, and specifically those of the Mahayana, it is essential for you to take refuge and develop an enlightened attitude of bodhicitta sincerely from your heart, not merely from your mouth.*
4. *As the realisation of the void nature of the mind is completely dependent upon your collection of merit and elimination of obstacles, you should despatch ahead of you as many prostrations as possible, made while reciting The Declaration Before the Thirty-five Buddhas, as well as hundreds of thousands of repetitions of the one hundred syllable mantra of Vajrasattva.*
5. *Then you must make repeated heartfelt requests to your root guru, whom you recognise as inseparable from the buddhas of the past, present and future, to be able to realise voidness.*

The four instructions on preliminary practices

Even though these verses explicitly mention only three instructions, what is actually being presented here are the four instructions on preliminary practices.

1. **Taking refuge and generating bodhicitta** is the first of these instructions. It is referred to as being the 'gateway' and the very central pillar of the Mahayana. What confirms one as a Buddhist is taking refuge. Generating bodhicitta serves as a gateway and central pillar for the Mahayana practices, as without it one cannot practise the Mahayana tradition. All the different schools in Tibetan Buddhism accept these and combine taking refuge and bodhicitta into one specific preparatory practice.

2. Verse four of the root text refers to 'your collection of merit'. From that one derives the second preliminary instruction, which is that a way of **accumulating extensive merit** is the practice of offering mandalas. Thus offering a world mandala is the second preliminary practice.

3. As mentioned specifically in verse four the third preliminary practice is to engage in **extensive purification** practices by receiving instructions, and meditating on and reciting the Vajrasattva mantra.

4. In order to receive extensive blessings, and to engage in the successful practice, the most effective way to receive extensive blessings is to **rely on one's guru**. Thus engaging in guru yoga practice, is the fourth preliminary instruction.

To summarise, the four preliminary instructions, they are taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, offering mandalas, engaging in the purification practice of Vajrasattva, and engaging in guru yoga practice.

TAKING REFUGE

In his auto-commentary the author explains the meaning of these verses as:

Many great scholars and realised masters of India such as the great pandit Shantipa, Lama Suvarna-dvipa and the great master Atisha and so forth, have confirmed that the demarcation between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist, is whether one has developed genuine refuge

or not. Likewise the Venerable Sakya Pandita has said, 'without refuge, one is not a Dharma practitioner'.

In this explanation, the author is clearly stating that the demarcation between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist is having developed refuge in one's mind. Other explanations state that the demarcation between Buddhists and non-Buddhists is whether one adheres to the four seals. However, it clearly mentions here that the actual demarcation is whether one has developed refuge in one's mind or not.

As the author further explains:

Just as these masters have proclaimed, one must be sure to develop a sound refuge in one's mental continuum. Furthermore the great master Padampa Sangye has said, 'people of Dingri, blessings will flow naturally, when you have entrusted your mind, heart and chest to the Three Jewels'.

When he said 'people of Dingri', Padampa Sangye was referring to the area he came from in Nepal, which is near the border of Tibet and Solo Kumbu (where the Sherpas live). As mentioned here, taking refuge is the foremost of all the Buddhist practices. Thus taking refuge is the first thing that one needs to do. As specifically mentioned here, to take refuge wholeheartedly one must entrust one's 'mind, heart and chest to the Three Jewels'. This is a way of emphasising how much trust or reliance one must place in the object of refuge. Entrusting one's heart, mind and chest to the refuge will allow the blessings of the object of refuge to flow naturally into one's mind.

When we have a strong sense of reliance upon a deity such as Tara, then during our practice we seem to actually feel some sort of shift, or positive experience in our mind. This indicates that the stronger our sense of reliance on the deity, the easier it is for our mind to transform and develop, which is an indication of receiving the blessings. In the auto-commentary, this reliance subsumes the importance of taking refuge.

This is a brief explanation is on the importance of taking refuge, so it is good to rely on other teachings, such as the Lam Rim teachings, where Lama Tsongkhapa explained the topic of refuge under four headings:

1. The cause for taking refuge
2. The objects of where one takes refuge upon; identifying the object
3. Identifying the manner of how to take refuge
4. Instructions to be followed after having taken refuge.

With these four categories one gets a broader and more complete understanding of the need to take refuge.

Our translation of the root text says 'not merely from your mouth', but the literal translation is 'not merely relying on the words from your mouth'. There are two implications here. Relying merely on the words means that one may have some understanding of the words, and even if the refuge formula is recited very well that does not actually develop the actual feeling in one's heart, and so it does not suffice as a genuine act of refuge. In order to gain a sound broad understanding of taking refuge, it is good to rely on the explanations given in texts, such as in the Lam Rim teachings.

TAKING REFUGE IN THE GURU/BUDDHA

The manner of taking refuge is to visualise the object of refuge in the space before oneself in accordance with the explanations given in the Lam Rim teachings. There is also a

version in the *Guru Puja*, which is appropriate for those of us who can relate to it.

One visualises the object of refuge in the aspect of the guru. As explained in the guru yoga practice, the *Guru Puja*, the aspect of the guru is Lama Tsongkhapa. In the centre of Lama Tsongkhapa's heart, one visualises Buddha Shakyamuni, and at the centre of Buddha Shakyamuni's heart, one visualises the ultimate tantra deity, Vajradara. At the centre of Vajradara's heart one visualises the seed syllable HUNG, which is blue in colour. That visualisation becomes the focus point for the visualisation of the object of refuge.

Then one can engage in the practices of the six preparatory rites, which include the seven limb practice. These preparatory rites are done in order to accumulate extensive merit and purify negative karma, and they can be done in accordance to those explanations. Envisioning the object of refuge as Lama Tsongkhapa, with Shakyamuni at his heart and then Vajradara at his heart is a part of many of the practices that we do, including the extensive mandala offering. It is good to relate the lines 'I offer the mandala offering to the guru' (lama lozang t'up-wang-dorje chang to the above-mentioned visualisation.

1. Causes for taking refuge

This section explains why one needs to take refuge. Before seeking refuge or protection from any source, one first has to see the need for taking refuge, or seeking protection from that object.

As presented in the teachings, the causes for taking refuge are fear of the sufferings of the lower realms, and of cyclic existence in general. When one genuinely thinks about how one could very possibly experience the sufferings of the lower realms, the more one thinks about the details of these sufferings, the stronger the desire not to experience them. The stronger that sense of wishing to avoid the sufferings of the lower realms and the sufferings of cyclic existence, the stronger the wish to be free from them will become. Then one seeks a way of being free from the suffering of the lower realms and of cyclic existence. When one sees the qualities of the refuge, and that the refuge has the ability to protect oneself, then the strong feeling of seeking refuge or protection in the Three Jewels develops in one's mind.

2. The objects of refuge

With a strong sense of fear and the wish to be free from the sufferings of the lower realms and of cyclic existence, one investigates who or what has the ability to provide refuge. One comes to realise that the objects of refuge are the only objects that have the full potential and ability to free oneself from the sufferings of cyclic existence and the lower realms. One then develops a strong conviction that protection and guidance is to be found in the Three Jewels. This conviction that the objects of refuge have the ability to protect and free oneself needs to be based on reason rather than blind faith.

The Buddha

The Buddha, or an enlightened being, has four qualities:

1. The Buddha is free from all fears himself. If the Buddha were not free from all fears of the sufferings of the lower realms and cyclic existence, then clearly he would not be in a position to help free us from all those fears. So the first point one reflects upon is how the Buddha himself is free from all fears
2. The Buddha has the skilful means to free all other beings from all fears. If the Buddha didn't have the ability to

free others, then he would not be in a position to help us. Thus, he not only has the quality of being free from all fears, but he has the complete ability to help others to be free from fears.

The Buddha has great love and compassion for all beings without discrimination. If the Buddha didn't have love and compassion for all equally he might help only some while neglecting others. But because he has great love and compassion for all without discrimination, he is a suitable object of refuge.

3. The Buddha benefits all sentient beings, whether they have helped him or not. This quality of impartiality towards all is the fourth reason why one seeks refuge in the Buddha.
4. When we reflect on why the Buddha can free us from all sufferings then we naturally generate a strong sense of reliance upon his advice, i.e. the Buddha's teachings.

The Dharma

The Buddha himself is a supreme being, full of love and compassion and his speech, which is clear and sound advice, instructs on how we can free ourselves. Thus one naturally develops refuge in the Dharma, which is the Buddha's teachings.

The Sangha

Having seen the value of the Buddha himself and his teaching, one will then naturally take refuge in those who have gained insight and realisations from the Buddha's teachings — the Sangha.

3. The manner of taking refuge

In the Lam Rim teachings there are extensive explanations regarding the manner of taking refuge, such as taking refuge by having received the lineage from a master, and taking refuge by not uttering it to others and so forth. We don't need to go into these details right now, but an important point is to actually check whether one has refuge in one's mind. What is the measure of having taken refuge? That is important to understand. As explained in the teachings, taking refuge is not just by merely reciting the refuge formula. The indication of having taken genuine refuge is when one develops a state of mind based on understanding the causes of taking refuge, i.e. developing the fear of the sufferings of the lower realms and of samsara in general, plus a keen wish to be free from suffering. On top of that one needs to have the understanding of the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. When one has a strong determination to entrust oneself solely to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha because they have the ability to free oneself, then one has developed genuine refuge.

4. The instructions to follow after having taken refuge

The real benefit of taking refuge lies in following the instructions and engaging in the practices associated with taking refuge. These instructions or practices are explained quite extensively, and we won't go into detail right now. But it is necessary to understand that if one does not follow the instructions, then there will be no benefit.

Of course, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, are all equally essential objects of refuge. However, the actual refuge that protects oneself is explained as the Dharma refuge because, it is said, that is what gives us the actual protection. When we really think about it, the way one is protected from the sufferings and so forth is by following the guidelines and engaging in the practices as presented in the teachings.

That's why the Dharma refuge is referred to as the actual refuge that protects oneself.

The real Dharma refuge is the path and the cessation within arya beings. However we can possess an actual Dharma refuge within us right now, which is something that we need to relate to for our personal practice.

At our level the actual Dharma refuge would be, for example, the morality of observing the ten virtues. That ethical basis of observing the ten virtues becomes the basis, or the cause that frees us from the lower realms. As the teachings explain, if, as a result of having taken refuge, we promise not to engage in the ten non-virtuous deeds, and observe the ten virtues, then that very observance of the ethical code becomes the way to free ourselves from the lower realms. We can thus relate to something that is within us, which is within our capacity, and understand how that serves as the actual refuge at our level.

The teachings on refuge are, as mentioned previously, explained in great detail in the Lam Rim and when we refer to those teachings, we can see how refuge is common to all levels of the path. In relation to the three scopes of the Lam Rim teachings, there is the refuge of the small scope, the refuge of the medium scope and the refuge of the great scope. In this way we can see that everything is subsumed into taking refuge.

At our level, as mentioned previously, it is good to identify the Dharma refuge within our mind, which is our decision to follow a moral and ethical code, such as adopting all or some of the ten virtues and make sure that we abide by this moral code. Due to past habituation we might still have the tendency to engage in some non-virtuous deeds, but once we recognise them, see their faults and disadvantages, and identify them as non-virtues, we can then try to overcome that negative state of mind. Even if we do engage in negative deeds, we can slowly increase the intensity of the Dharma refuge within our mind by engaging in a purification practice, and slowly and gradually perfect ourselves.

It is essential that we understand how the Dharma refuge that we have now serves as the basis, and the source, of obtaining the actual Dharma refuge within the mental continuum of a higher beings, and the ultimate Dharma refuge that is in the Buddha's mind. It all starts at the level that we are at now. It is good to remind ourselves again and again that it is not as though the enlightened beings and noble beings just suddenly materialised out of nowhere! These great beings were once ordinary beings like us, with all the faults and negativities that we are battling and challenged with right now.

However the gradual process of cultivating a virtuous state of mind, living by a moral and ethical code, and then slowly perfecting their mind allowed them to reach the level of noble beings and enlightened beings. Likewise, if we continuously put effort into practising even one virtuous state of mind, and try to cultivate and perfect it further, we will build up our stock of merit and realisations within ourselves, which will lead to the ultimate states. It is good to know that at our level, we can use the actual refuge that is within ourselves now as a basis to transform ourselves.

You may now have an inkling of how refuge serves as the gateway to entering the Buddhist path.

According to the root text the next point is the benefits of bodhicitta, which will be explained in our next session.

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

2 September 2008

As usual, it is good to set the proper motivation for receiving the teachings, a motivation that is free from a self-cherishing mind, and which focuses on the welfare of all sentient beings. So generate the motivation that 'for the purpose of liberating all sentient beings from all suffering I need to achieve enlightenment, and for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put it into practice'.

The text is divided into three main sections: preparation, actual and dedication. Within the preparation section, in our last session we had covered the part on taking refuge.

As the text explains, we should take refuge not merely with words from our mouth, but rather with a deep sense of commitment from our heart. If we make some effort in generating the right attitudes within our mind then it is possible for our practice to become a genuine practice. Whereas leaving it as a mere recitation, or mere wishful thinking, does not make the practice really authentic.

Relating refuge to the lam rim

Neither the root text nor the auto-commentary explains refuge in detail, so in the last session I gave some extra explanations to complement the basics covered in the commentary. However it is important that we do some further research in order to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of refuge. In our last session refuge was explained as having two causes and, in order to gain a broader understanding of refuge, it is good to relate these two causes to practitioners of each of the three scopes of the Lam Rim teachings.

Refuge and the small scope

The first cause for taking refuge for the practitioner of the small scope is fear of the sufferings of the lower realms. When, as a result of contemplating on the sufferings of those realms, that fear of the lower realms becomes strong, one seeks the means of protecting oneself from that. Thus relying on the three Jewels to protect one from those sufferings is the second cause for taking refuge. One will then understand that the Buddha jewel serves as the supreme guide—he who presents the unmistakable means of freeing oneself and others from the sufferings of the lower realms. The Sangha jewels are those who assist us on the path that frees ourselves from the lower realms.

The Dharma jewel is the actual refuge, as practising the advice given in the teachings, such as engaging in the ten virtuous deeds and observing morality, is the actual cause for freeing one from the sufferings of the lower realms. Thus, entrusting oneself in the Three Jewels with that understanding is the refuge that is generated within the practitioner of the small scope.

Refuge and the intermediate scope

For the practitioner of the medium scope, refuge is generated through developing the fear, not merely of the sufferings of the lower realms, but every type of suffering from the entire cyclic existence. The second cause for taking refuge is to understand that the objects of refuge, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha have the full ability to free oneself from the suffering of cyclic existence. As a result of this conviction, one entrusts oneself to the Three Jewels.

This conviction arises when one develops a genuine understanding that the objects of refuge have the ability to protect one from all suffering. That protection comes as a result of practising the Four Noble truths. Thus gaining a genuine understanding of the Four Noble truths and practising accordingly is the means to free oneself from the suffering of cyclic existence. That is how the practitioner of the medium scope goes for refuge in the Three Jewels.

Refuge and the great scope

There are two ways of explaining the refuge of the great scope practitioner. One way is by developing a fear of the suffering of both cyclic existence and personal peace, i.e. liberation. With a fear of both these states, one develops the conviction that the objects of refuge, the Three Jewels, have the full ability to free oneself from both of these extreme states, and then one strives to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all living beings.

Another way of presenting the refuge of the great scope is by developing a keen wish to free not only oneself, but all living beings. Then one develops the conviction that the objects of refuge, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, have the full potential to lead oneself as well as all other sentient beings to the ultimate perfection of enlightenment. The way to generate refuge for a practitioner of the great scope is to engage in the practices by developing love and compassion and bodhichitta, and in that way taking refuge.

Relating refuge to the four noble truths

To gain further deeper understanding of how refuge works, it is significant to also relate refuge to the teachings of the four noble truths. In fact it is good to relate the four noble truths to every aspect of the teaching, as they serve as the basis for all teachings. To a practitioner of the small scope the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, relates to generating a sound understanding of the suffering of the lower realms. The Buddha taught the truth of suffering in the context of 'that which is to be understood', so one needs to understand the suffering of the lower realms.

When one sees that engaging in the ten non-virtuous deeds is the cause of going to the lower realms and so avoids engaging in those non-virtuous deeds, that is practicing the second noble truth, in accordance with what the Buddha said—'the truth of origination is to be abandoned'.

One practises third noble truth, the truth of cessation by actualise the cessation, which is in accordance with the explanation, 'cessation is to be actualised'. The fourth noble truth is practised by abiding in the ten virtues, and

abandoning the ten non-virtues in accordance with the explanation 'the path is to be cultivated'. Doing that is the cause to free oneself from the lower realms in the future life.

The way the objects of refuge protect us relates to the teachings of the Buddha, who said that adopting virtue and abandoning non-virtue is the means of freeing oneself from the suffering of unfortunate rebirths in the lower realms. The sequence of how one actually develops a conviction in the Three Jewels is that the more one reflects upon the suffering of the lower realms the stronger the fear of the lower realms becomes in one's mind. And the stronger the fear of the lower realms, the stronger the determination to be free of that suffering will become.

By understanding the Buddha's detailed explanation of the method to free oneself from the lower realms, one develops a strong faith in the Buddha's words and the wish to adopt his advice. So in that way, we can see how developing strong faith in the Buddha by understanding his teachings is the method for freeing oneself from the sufferings.

The main point is that one needs to understand how the objects of refuge work to protect one. The actual refuge that protects oneself is the Dharma refuge. Firstly, one identifies the Buddha as being the one who has accomplished both his own purpose as well as the purpose of others, i.e. the Buddha has reached the final stage of perfection that enables him to benefit all living beings.

The actual or true Dharma is the truth of cessation and the truth of the path, and the actual Sangha are the noble beings, who have actualised true cessation and the true path in their own mind. Having identified the objects of refuge in this way, one comes to understand how they actually protect us from suffering.

Even though true paths and true cessation may not have been developed within one's own mental continuum right now, there is a facsimile of them, which are the virtues and the ethical codes that one has already adopted. So that level of Dharma refuge is in one's mind right now. Maintaining and further developing what one has already cultivated will slowly increase to become the actual Dharma Refuge.

In summary, the Buddha is the one who guides us by showing us the correct method for cultivating the actual dharma refuge; the Sangha are the assistants who help us to cultivate the Dharma refuge within ourselves; and the one that actually protects and frees us from all sufferings is the Dharma Refuge within oneself. With that basic understanding, one will develop a deeper understanding of how the objects of refuge actually protect oneself. It is not as if the objects of refuge are external entities that come forth to protect us, rather they are a protection that has to be developed within ourselves.

At our level, we can assert that with the accumulation of each quality, and the elimination of each negativity, we are strengthening the basic Dharma refuge within us right now. Each virtuous mind that we generate is a basic Dharma refuge that protects us. Each time we identify a

negative thought and generate the wish to eliminate that by applying the antidotes, we are strengthening the basic Dharma refuge within ourselves. This provides us with a base on which to acquire more qualities and to eliminate deeper levels of negative states of mind. This very process will eventually lead us to develop the actual Dharma refuge

When one has cultivated the actual Dharma refuge, which is gaining the realisations of the path and obtaining the cessation within one's own mind, then one becomes an actual Sangha. When one further develops oneself on the path, one eventually will become enlightened buddha. The actual Sangha that we are to become, the actual Dharma that is to be achieved within our own mental continuum, and the enlightened being or buddha, that we are to become in the future, are all called the resultant refuge.

When we talk about the Buddha, we generally refer to Buddha Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha. It is not as if we will become Buddha Shakyamuni himself; we cannot become Buddha Shakyamuni as he is a separate entity from ourselves. Nevertheless we will become an enlightened being, a buddha, which is a state of being free from all faults and attaining every possible quality. Each one of us, has the potential and ability to become a buddha, so it is as if each one of us has a resultant refuge, a future buddha, waiting for us. It is good to relate to the objects of refuge in terms of both the causal refuge and the resultant refuge. Seeing how the causal refuges are protecting, and guiding us to the resultant refuge right now, makes it more personal for us. In this way we should understand that the causal refuges are an aid for us to become the resultant refuge.

THE BENEFITS OF BODHICITTA

According to the explanation in both the auto-commentary and the root text, the second aspect of the preliminary practices is developing bodhichitta. Why do we need to develop bodhichitta? The auto-commentary quotes from the great master Shantideva:

Likewise Lord Shantideva has said,

The moment an awakening mind arises,
In those fettered and weak in the jail of cyclic
existence,
They will be named 'a son of the Sugatas',
And will be revered by both human and gods of the
world.

This is verse 9 from the first chapter of *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, which explains the benefits of the awakening, or bodhichitta, mind. This verse is presented as a brief summary of the chapter that explains the benefits of bodhichitta, while the remainder of the chapter is an extensive explanation of the verse.

This verse presents two main points about the benefits of an awakening mind or bodhichitta: from the instant that anyone develops bodhichitta one obtains a great name or status, and secondly one obtains a great purpose.

The first three lines present the first result, great status or name. *The moment an awakening mind arises in those fettered and weak in the jail of cyclic existence* refers to ordinary beings who are gaoled in cyclic existence. From

the moment such a being develops the awakening mind, *they will be 'named a son of the Sugatas'*, meaning a child of the Buddha. That is the name that they obtain when they become a bodhisattva. The fourth line shows that from the moment of having generated that awakened mind *one will be revered by all humans and gods alike*, which is a great achievement.

The term 'a buddha's son' comes from the moment bodhichitta or the awakening mind is developed in one's mind. The word 'Sugata' in Shantideva's text is actually a Sanskrit word that has the connotation of having completely gone to the state of the greatest bliss. The word Tathagata has the same meaning. In brief this verse identifies a bodhisattva, who is named as the son of the buddhas, or enlightened beings from the moment the awakened mind is developed within their mental continuum. It is good to understand that point.

Referring back to earlier studies, I ask the Study Group, can bodhisattvas be the sons of the Buddha?

Students: Buddhas are actually born from bodhisattvas.

As you have pointed out it is normally said that the buddhas are born from bodhisattvas, which is explained in the opening verse of the *Madhyamaka* text. So one has to explain the difference between the meanings in these two texts. Of course a detailed explanation was presented earlier, but briefly, when a bodhisattva is referred to as son or child of the buddhas, then that refers to how the bodhichitta mind is developed within the practitioner. The bodhichitta mind is developed and one becomes a bodhisattva by receiving and practising the teachings of the Buddha. It is in relation to the result of that practice that the bodhisattvas are referred to as the buddhas' children.

If one just insists that a bodhisattva is a buddha's child, without any further explanation then one will be defeated easily in debate with the quote from the *Madhyamaka* text, and be asked 'How could bodhisattvas be children of the buddhas when buddhas are actually born from bodhisattvas?'

As you would recall from your earlier studies of the *Madhyamaka* text (which I encourage you to revise) hearers and solitary realisers are born from buddhas, whereas buddhas are born from bodhisattvas, and bodhisattvas themselves are born from the practices they engage in prior to becoming a bodhisattva. That explanation is given to point out the cause and effect sequence in relation to practices.

The essential point to understand, which is being specifically presented here, is that any individual who develops the awakening, or bodhichitta mind becomes a bodhisattva, and one also enters the Mahayana path at the point when one develops the bodhichitta mind, i.e. bodhichitta is the entry point of the Mahayana path. That is why bodhichitta is also referred to as the gateway to the Mahayana; it is only when bodhichitta has been developed in the mental continuum that one becomes an actual Mahayana practitioner by entering the Mahayana path.

The auto-commentary quotes another great master:

Also the great master (Atisha) has said,

For those who wish to engage in the Mahayana practice,

It is possible to generate, the sun and moon-like bodhichitta,

That dispels the darkness of suffering.

When effort is applied for many eons.

Thus he asserts bodhichitta as the gateway of the Mahayana vehicle.

It is possible to enter the path and actually become a Mahayana practitioner by generating bodhichitta, which is explained here with the analogy of being like the sun and the moon. Just as the sun dispels darkness and the moon brings a cooling effect, so too bodhichitta is like the sun that dispels the darkness of suffering, and brings the coolness of the elimination of suffering. It is implied that it is possible to develop bodhichitta by making an effort over many eons. Even if it takes a long time it is possible to develop bodhichitta, so isn't it worthwhile to engage in the practice of developing bodhichitta now?

Then the auto-commentary quotes another text:

Abhisambodhi of Vairochana says,

Holder of the secret (Vajradara)! The root and cause of omniscient - primordial wisdom, is compassion; it is caused by bodhichitta, and is the perfected state of method.

Holder of the secret indicates the holder of the secret tantra lineage. Both *the root and cause of omniscient-primordial wisdom, is compassion* and furthermore the primordial wisdom *is caused by bodhichitta and is the perfected state of method*.

The auto-commentary does not give an extensive explanation on bodhichitta, so it is good to refer to other teachings to get more detailed explanations, in order to get a deeper understanding of what it is. In accordance with the definition of bodhichitta, it is good to understand that there are two main points. It consists of two aspirations: the aspiration to achieve enlightenment and the aspiration to benefit other sentient beings. The first aspiration is for oneself, and the second aspiration is to benefit other sentient beings.

The way to train in the two aspirations is by first training in the aspiration to benefit others, thus cultivating and developing bodhichitta within one's mind. Then, based on that, the aspiration to achieve enlightenment is developed, in order to benefit other sentient beings.

To develop the bodhichitta attitude one first trains in the aspiration to benefit other sentient beings. This is done by first cultivating the view that all other living beings are appealing. This instruction, by the way, is in accordance with both traditions—developing bodhichitta by the sevenfold cause and effect method, and the technique of developing bodhichitta by exchanging self with others. Both techniques share the need to perceive all beings as appealing. So it is good to understand that if you don't see other beings appealing, you won't develop the wish to help and benefit them. Thus, the first step is to train one's mind in seeing all beings as appealing.

Sevenfold cause and effect technique

With the sevenfold cause and effect technique of developing bodhichitta, one first develops equanimity in relation to all beings, where one goes beyond the perception of others as friends, enemies or strangers.

Equanimity is developed in order to overcome our normal attitude of discriminating between friends, enemies and strangers, and adopting a different attitude in relation to each. With friends you have a sense of wishing to benefit and help them, because they appeal to you; with enemies there is an attitude of wishing to neglect or ignore them, because they do not appeal to you, and thus you don't wish to benefit them; with strangers there is a sense of indifference. For as long as one has that kind of attitude, one will always discriminate between friends and enemies, and be indifferent towards strangers. The best way to develop bodhichitta is to first develop an attitude of equanimity, which to see all beings as being equally appealing to oneself.

1. Based on having developed equanimity, one develops the first cause of bodhichitta, which is to recognise that all living beings have been one's mother. One develops the attitude that all beings have equally been one's mother. At this stage, sentient beings will be even more appealing to oneself. So the sense of equanimity is strengthened when one develops the recognition that all beings have been one's mother.

2. Based on that recognition, the second cause, is to recall and remember the kindness of all beings as ones mother.

3. Having remembered the kindness of your mothers, the third cause is to generate the wish to repay their kindness. When one develops a very strong sense of how all beings have been kind to oneself, the wish to repay their kindness will naturally develop.

4. Then one develops the next cause, which is great love, a love that is imbued with the sense of the appeal of all beings.

5. Based on that great love one develops the fifth cause, which is great compassion.

6. Then one develops the sixth cause, which is called special intention.

5. The result is bodhichitta.

Generating equanimity is the first step, and the next six steps are causes for developing the bodhichitta attitude, which is the result. The six causes are the means of training one's mind to develop the aspiration to benefit other sentient beings.

When you recognise your own mother's kindness, the wish to relieve her of any suffering will be generated naturally. Why does one generate that state of mind? It is because she is your mother. So, you extend your feelings of love for your mother of this life to all living beings, who have been kind to you in the past, just as your mother of this life has been. Then the feeling of wishing to relieve the suffering of all beings can be generated.

In order to develop the state of mind that recognises all beings as having been one's mother, one must first relate

to the fact that there is no beginning to cyclic existence. When one comes to that understanding, then one should further contemplate how there is no beginning to one's own mental continuum. When one comes to accept that, then one will begin to accept the fact that one cannot count one's rebirths in previous lifetimes, as they are beginningless.

Understanding that there is no beginning to cyclic existence will be enhanced with the understanding that there is no beginning to one's mental continuum. In order to establish that there is no beginning to cyclic existence, one needs to first establish that there is no beginning to the mental continuum. In order to establish that, one refers to the present mental continuum, and understands how it is a continuity of the mental continuum of the previous day. The fact that we can remember what we did yesterday proves that our present mind is a continuity of our mind of yesterday.

So we can see that there is a continuity of our awareness, or mind. If the present mind wasn't a continuity of yesterday's mind, then we wouldn't be able to remember what we did yesterday. Thus, we can track our mental continuum back to when we were in our mother's womb, back to the time when the foetus was first created. As the mental continuum at that time is of the same substance that we have now, it must also have a preceding mental continuum.

So we come to the point of accepting that the mental continuum in the foetus would have to have had a preceding moment of mental continuum too, which could only be in a previous lifetime. That is the stage where one accepts that there has been a previous existence, and the immediate previous existence is the intermediate state right after death. And prior to that is the existence in a past life. That is how the existence of past lives is established through reasoning.

Developing the recognition the mental continuum goes back to the moment of conception in this life, and that there has been an intermediate stage, and beyond that a past life, one goes back even further to the past life before the time of conception, and a prior existence to that, and a past life before that. So in that way when one tracks back, there is no point when one can determine 'that is the time when I first began'. In this way one will be able to recognise that one's past lives are beginningless.

When, through mental analysis and meditation, one comes to the point of accepting that one's past lives are beginningless, then one further considers how, in each of one's previous lives, one would have had a mother as well. So in that way one can accept the fact that each and every being must have been one's mother many times over. When one recognises that all beings at one time or another, have been kind just as one's mother has been kind to oneself in this life, then there is a realisation that each and every being has been kind to oneself.

When one contemplates in this way and develops a sound understanding, then the kindness of all beings will become quite strong, and the wish to repay that kindness will also become very strong.

Based on recognising all beings as one's mother, then remembering the kindness of all beings, and wishing to repay that kindness, one develops great love followed by great compassion. When developing love and compassion, one generates the attitude, 'How wonderful it would be if all beings were to be free from all suffering and could obtain all happiness'. At that stage one has a keen wish for beings to be happy and free from suffering, but one has not yet reached the stage of taking the personal responsibility of freeing all beings from suffering. It is as though one is still in the negotiating stage of a business – no contract has been made yet, so the deal has not actually been finalised.

When one meditates further and develops a sense of responsibility within one's heart, then that will lead to the state of mind that is developed just prior to developing bodhichitta, which is called special intention. Here one develops a sense of personal responsibility to bring about happiness for all living beings and free them from all suffering. When one develops that special intention then that is the point where one has fully developed the causes for actually developing bodhichitta within oneself. The stages of developing great love, great compassion and the special intention are called the practice of aspiring to benefit other sentient beings.

Within the six causes the first three, (recognising all beings as having been one's mother, remembering their kindness and wishing to repay that kindness) are the basis for developing the later three causes, which are great love, great compassion and special intention. And developing great love, great compassion and special intention is the way of practising the aspiration to benefit all other sentient beings. When one has reached the stage of special intention, one takes the responsibility of bringing about happiness for all sentient beings and freeing them from all suffering. Using the earlier business analogy it is like signing the contract.

At this stage one takes full responsibility for doing whatever is needed to bring about happiness for all beings, and free them from all suffering. When one actually thinks about the reality of one's present situation, one will come to realise that 'even though that is what I intend to do, I don't have the ability to free all beings from all suffering, and lead them to ultimate happiness right now'. When one further looks at who has that ability, one comes to realise that a being who has achieved self liberation, an arhat, does not have the ability to free all beings from suffering, and neither do the numerous noble bodhisattvas have that ability. When one investigates further one finds that only a fully enlightened being, an omniscient buddha, who has completely fulfilled the two purposes, has the full capacity and ability to do that.

When one sees that achieving the enlightened state of a buddha is the only way to gain the full capacity to help other living beings, one will then develop the keen determination to achieve enlightenment. That is the stage when one develops the second aspiration, the aspiration to achieve enlightenment. Thus, the aspiration to benefit other sentient beings is first cultivated within one's mind, with the cultivation of great love, great compassion and

special intention. Then, based on that one develops the aspiration to achieve enlightenment. So as a sequence, the aspiration to benefit other sentient beings is developed first, and the result, the aspiration to achieve enlightenment, is cultivated later.

The result, enlightenment, is obtained first, and then actually benefiting sentient beings occurs later. As explained in the teachings, leading other beings to enlightenment is the ultimate way to benefit sentient beings. Therefore one needs to achieve enlightenment first in order to gain the full capacity to lead other sentient beings to enlightenment as well. The state of enlightenment, or becoming a buddha, is a state of being completely free of all negativity and obtaining all supreme qualities, thus one gains an omniscient mind. As a buddha one can then actually lead other sentient beings to that state as well. It is good to understand these sequences.

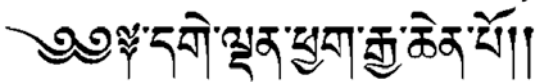
Bodhicitta is a primary mind, whereas the aspirations are secondary minds, which are concomitant with the main mind. This can be explained in more detail later.

Through the practice of developing bodhichitta and engaging in further practices, one will eventually attain enlightenment and become a buddha. So one aspires to obtain the resultant state of enlightenment, or buddhahood, in order to benefit all other living beings.

*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

9 September 2008

Sitting in a relaxed posture, and withdrawing our minds from all distractions, we focus our mind on receiving the teachings with the following motivation: 'In order to benefit all sentient beings by relieving them from all suffering, I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

PREPARATION

Four instructions on preliminary practices

TAKING REFUGE AND GENERATING BODHICHITTA (CONT.)

We have come to the point in the auto-commentary that reads:

This confirms that bodhichitta serves as the central pillar of the Mahayana vehicle.

Thus amongst all the various traditions of the Land of Snow, whatever profound teaching may be presented, when it comes to the practice of meditation, there are no contradictions in the need for it be preceded by the preliminary practices. These are presented as the four instructions, which are: taking refuge and generating bodhichitta, offering world mandalas, doing Vajrasattva practice, and engaging in guru yoga practice.

This was explained earlier.

THE PRELIMINARY PRACTICES OF MILAREPA

The auto-commentary further explains:

In particular the foremost disciple of highest yoga tantra, the great adept and yogi Milarepa...

When the auto-commentary refers to Milarepa as *the foremost disciple of highest yoga tantra*, we have to understand that this specifically indicates that Milarepa is a disciple who, through the practice of highest yoga tantra, obtained enlightenment in one lifetime. As we seem to need to go through many lifetimes to achieve enlightenment, we are not considered foremost disciples - we are more like the least of the intelligent disciples!

The auto-commentary continues:

...the great adept and yogi Milarepa, engaged in the preliminary practices of developing love, compassion and bodhichitta, and meditating on renunciation, karma and its effects, as well as death and impermanence.

Here the auto-commentary explains the preliminary practices of the great yogi Milarepa. In order to develop love and compassion and bodhichitta, one must first meditate on renunciation. So bodhichitta is based on first having developed renunciation. And in order to develop renunciation, one has to first contemplate karma and its effects, and for a sound understanding on karma and its effects, one needs to first contemplate death and impermanence. The practices that are described here are exactly as presented in the lam rim teachings, and the sequence can be understood in the reverse order - in order to develop the later realisations one needs to first engage in and develop the former practices.

The auto-commentary continues:

Thus he said:

Having repeatedly feared the eight unfavourable circumstances,
I meditated on impermanence and the faults of samsara
I was diligent in observing the laws of karma and its effects,
And entrusted myself whole heartedly to the Three Jewels,

In the first line, Milarepa says that he initially developed the fear of *the eight unfavourable circumstances*, which refers to the eight unfavourable circumstances of cyclic existence. *Having repeatedly feared* these eight unfavourable circumstances, he *meditated on impermanence and the faults of samsara*. Milarepa further asserts that he diligently observed the *laws of karma and its effects*, which means abiding by the law of karma and effect. Then he *entrusted* himself *whole-heartedly to the Three Jewels*, which indicates that he had taken refuge in the Three Jewels.

It is good to reflect on Milarepa's own words, in which he explains what he practiced, and the manner in which he practised. The great yogi Milarepa is renowned as having achieved enlightenment in one lifetime. But we can see that it is not as though Milarepa suddenly became a buddha. Rather it was on the basis of his preliminary practices that he started moving upwards along the path. It is good for us to reflect upon that. We often say 'yes, it would be good to achieve enlightenment', but if we don't pay attention to actually engaging in the practices, there is no way that we can proceed along the path.

As Milarepa mentions, the way to observe the law of karma and its effects is by entrusting oneself in the Three Jewels. In the next verse he states:

I trained my mind in cultivating bodhichitta - the method,
I severed the continuity of the imprints of obscurations,
And I perceived all appearances, as illusory.
Now, I have no fear for the three lower rebirths!

From this we must understand that even though Milarepa was a renowned adept at tantra, it is not as though Milarepa practised tantra right from the beginning. Rather, he initially engaged in the preliminary practices, and as he mentions here, *I trained my mind in cultivating bodhichitta*, which is the actual method.

When he says, *I severed the continuity of the imprints of obscurations, and I perceived all appearances, as illusory*; What this indicates is the practice of gaining the realisation of emptiness. This line includes the basis, which is the two truths, and the path, which is method and wisdom. Within method and wisdom, *seeing all appearances as illusory* refers to the wisdom realising emptiness. This then serves as the cause to achieve the two results, which are the form body and the primordial wisdom body of an enlightened being.

In the last line he says, [Having practised in this way] *Now, I have no fear for the three lower rebirths!* Here Milarepa confirms that having practised in the way he described earlier; he has now reached the stage where he has no fear of being reborn in the three lower rebirths. It is good to reflect upon this.

As the auto-commentary then reads:

He also said:

In relation to virtuous and non-virtuous karma,

If you don't contemplate the certainty of its effects,
You will surely experience the unbearable suffering
of the lower rebirths;
Therefore, fearing the ripened effects of the subtlest
of actions,
Seek to develop a conscientious mind, imbued with
mindfulness.

This again is a very profound instruction. Milarepa explains that by contemplating the certainty of the effects of both virtuous and non-virtuous karma, one will realise that, without applying this knowledge one *will surely experience the unbearable suffering of the lower rebirths*, and *therefore the fear of the ripened effects of the subtlest of actions* will develop. This refers particularly to one of the four characteristics of karma – that karma will multiply greatly, which is the case for even the subtlest of actions.

Even the subtlest non-virtuous karma, if left unattended or not rectified, will become a cause to experience the great sufferings of a lower rebirth in a future lifetime, because of the increasing nature of karma. Likewise, even the subtlest virtuous karma is not to be neglected by thinking, 'Oh, this is a very insignificant good deed'. Again because the characteristic of karma is that it increases, one must adopt even the smallest virtuous karma, as that will become a cause for good results in the future.

We can see how these few lines relate to the extensive explanations of karma found in the lam rim teachings. The first two lines explain the certainty of karma, which is the first characteristic of karma, and the second characteristic, which as mentioned previously, is the increasing nature of karma i.e. it multiplies greatly. We can immediately relate these few lines to the more extensive explanations in the lam rim. By virtue of having studied the lam rim and having reflected upon it periodically, the meaning of even these few lines becomes evident and very powerful.

If we can reflect upon and relate to these few words they really jump out as the essential points of what is explained extensively in the lam rim. It is really good for us to see how meaningful these explanations are for us. The essential point being explained here is that one must observe karma. If you don't abide by the law of cause and effect, or karma, the result will definitely be an unfortunate rebirth in the next lifetime. So the main point being explained here is the need to abide by the law of cause and effect, or karma.

What does abiding by the law of karma mean? As explained in our last session, it means really cultivating the Dharma within one's own mind, by accumulating virtue and avoiding non-virtue. The way to protect ourselves from a lower rebirth is to adopt the ten virtuous actions and avoid the ten non-virtuous actions. As explained in our last session, the actual protector is the Dharma and that is developed within our own mind. When we contemplate on how the objects of refuge protect us, it becomes clear that cultivating the Dharma refuge within our own mind, is the most essential practice.

The ultimate Dharma refuge, as explained previously, is the true path and true cessation, and that of course is only found within the continuum of the arya beings. However at our level, the level of Dharma that we have within our mind now is the virtues that we adopt and the non-virtues that we avoid, so securing that will protect us. Observing the law of karma by adopting the virtues and avoiding the non-virtues is the means to protect ourselves from an unfortunate rebirth in the next lifetime. When we think about it in this way, and

really go over the meaning of these lines, then we can really taste the flavour of the practice.

The auto-commentary continues with more of Milarepa's advice:

And again:

By not seeing the faults of the sensory pleasures,
If you don't cultivate a deep sense of disgust within,
You will not be freed from the prison of samsara,
Thus, by perceiving all existence as an illusion,
Seek the antidote to sever the origination of suffering.

Here again, Milarepa clearly explains that if one does not see the faults of sensory pleasures, which are the pleasures of samsara, and cultivate a deep sense of disgust of samsara, then there will be no freedom from the prison of samsara. *Perceiving all existence as an illusion* indicates the actual antidote, which is the realisation of emptiness. Existence is referred to as an illusion, because even though things appear to be inherently or truly existent, they do not exist in that way. Things are void of true existence, or inherent existence, and thus they are like an illusion.

With that understanding Milarepa mentions that one should *seek the antidote to sever the origination of suffering*. Here, 'the origination of suffering' refers to the second of the four noble truths. The origination of suffering means the cause of suffering, and if one does not see samsara itself as having faults arising from attachment to the sensory pleasures, then one will never be free from the truth of suffering. Thus, the way to overcome the truth of suffering is to apply the antidote to the origin of suffering, which as explained here is done by perceiving all existence as an illusion, meaning developing the realisation of emptiness.

These lines by Milarepa relate to the teachings of the four noble truths. The first two lines refer to the pleasures of samsara as a truth of suffering. The third line refers to the cessation of suffering, which in this case is the cessation of all cyclic existence. The fourth line refers to the path, and the last line refers to the truth of origination.

In this way we can derive the meaning of these lines with the understanding gained from studying texts such as the lam rim. We can derive the actual meaning of these lines as a result of our earlier studies, and in this way see how essential it is to have done extensive study.

Then the auto-commentary continues:

He further said:

If one doesn't repay the kindness,
Of all mother and father sentient beings in the six
realms,
One will incur the fault of straying towards the lower
vehicle;
Thus, seek to cultivate and practice great compassion,
Followed by the development of bodhichitta.

Here, Milarepa explains that having recognised the kindness of all beings by seeing them as fathers and mothers, one needs to repay that kindness to all sentient beings. If one does not do so then *one will incur the fault of straying towards the lower vehicle*, meaning that one's practice will only be a practice of the lower vehicle. So in order to not incur that fault one must seek to cultivate and practise great compassion, followed by the development of bodhichitta.

The auto-commentary concludes that:

In this manner, Milarepa imparted the instructions according to the lam rim teachings.

Then the auto-commentary says:

The foremost follower of Lord Milarepa, Dagpo Rinpoche (the founder of the Kagyu lineage) also proclaimed the renowned Four Dharmas of Dagpo.

Make sure that your mind turns into Dharma,
And that the Dharma is taken as the path,
And that the path clarifies mistakes,
And that the mistakes appear as primordial wisdom.

These points are to be taken as explained extensively in the mind-training texts of the Kadampas.

THE FOUR CLINGINGS

The auto-commentary states:

The Great Vajra Holder—Dargpa Gyaltsan has likewise said in his mind training text called *Parting from the Four Clingings*.

Dargpa Gyaltsan is one of the masters of the Sakya tradition. Those who are familiar with the Heruka and Vajrayogini practices will have recognised the name as one of the lineage masters.

As quoted in the auto-commentary Dargpa Gyaltsan advised:

If you have attachment to this life, you are not a religious practitioner,
If you have attachment to cyclic existence, you don't have renunciation,
If you are attached to your own welfare, you don't have bodhichitta,
And if you have grasping, you don't have the correct view.

These are called the four clingings, which are also described by Lama Tsongkapa in the *Three Principles of the Path*.

1. Attachment to this life

The auto-commentary further explains:

Thus through the elimination of the four erroneous states, the four correct practices are established. These are:

1. The antidotes for overcoming attachment to this life are the practices common with the small scope, such as meditating on the precious human life, on death and impermanence and the sufferings of the lower realms.

As explained in the first line you need to understand that if you are attached to this life, you are not a religious practitioner. As explained in the auto-commentary, in order to overcome attachment to this life one must overcome clinging to this life. Clinging to this life is overcome by the practices that are presented in the small scope, which are meditating on the precious human rebirth, then on death and impermanence, followed by the suffering of the lower realms. By contemplating these topics one will start to overcome focussing entirely on this life, and develop an interest in the next life. Thereby the focus on our welfare in future lifetimes will become stronger. Then our practice is said to become an authentic Dharma practice.

Dargpa Gyaltsan's first line literally says, *if you have attachment to this life, you are not a religious practitioner*. What this indicates is that if you don't have an interest or regard for your future life, then whatever you do is not an authentic Dharma practice. What we need to understand here is that according to the Buddhist teachings, for any Dharma practice to be an authentic Dharma practice, it has to be accompanied with an interest, at the very least, in the benefiting a future life. However, we do have to accept that even without an interest in a future lifetime, practices such

as generosity and being kind to others are Dharma practices because they are virtuous. However it is not an authentic Dharma practice if it is not accompanied with an interest in a future life.

When we relate to these explanations further, we can understand that clinging to this life is actually a big obstacle to our practice. One could say that all the problems we face in this life come about as a result of clinging to this life. Do you find that to be true? Does being preoccupied with the concerns of this life bring about a lot of problems or not?

Students: Yes!

If you accept that the strong clinging to this life is actually a cause for a lot of problems, then that is a good start! In fact, from our own experience, we can see that a lot of the things that we identify as being problems relate to this life, such as attachment, or strong clinging to the outcome of our career, one's job, studies, family, relationships, or the welfare of our children. If we look into it, everything that we consider to be a problem actually concerns this life. We don't seem to have much concern for our future life, but rather are totally immersed in the welfare of this life.

If we actually start to develop a sense of not giving such importance to the mere welfare for this life and actually start to focus on the future, then the big problems will actually start to decrease. So reversing clinging to the welfare of this life will actually begin to bring immediate benefit in this life, because the problems that appear to be so big and solid will actually start to subside. Thus we can see that overcoming clinging to this life does have a practical benefit in this life, doesn't it?

One must not misinterpret these teachings to mean that one must neglect the welfare of this life. That's not what is being indicated. In fact, as mentioned previously, the practice of reducing clinging to this life actually benefits this life. One must understand that in focussing on a future life by way of reducing clinging to this life, one indirectly benefits in this life. So there is no need to focus entirely on this life, as we will indirectly derive the benefit by focusing on the future life. That is the great advantage of practising in this way.

If a practice is stained with mere interest of this life then it will not be a cause for a better future life. The lam rim teachings explain that with the practices of generosity and ethics, one must make stainless prayers in order for them to become a cause to obtain a precious human rebirth in the next lifetime. It is, of course, clear that practices like generosity and ethics are virtuous. However observing ethics in order, for example, to merely become renowned as a very ethical, good person would be an instance of practising ethics with a mere interest for this life. Practising generosity is, in itself, a virtue, but if one practises generosity with the intention that others will be appreciative or that one would be renowned and liked by others, then again that practice is soiled with the stains of concern for this life.

It is said that such practice of generosity and ethics is not a cause to obtain a precious human rebirth in the next lifetime. But when the practice of ethics is combined with stainless prayers, then it becomes the cause to obtain a sound body with all the sense faculties intact, which can become the cause to practise Dharma in the next life. When generosity is practised with stainless prayers, then it becomes the cause to obtain wealth, meaning sufficient resources, in a future lifetime, which will also enable one to practise the Dharma with sufficient resources. Without stainless prayers these

results will not be obtained in a future lifetime. Motivating and dedicating one's practices for a good rebirth is what 'stainless prayers' means, in accordance with practices common to the small scope.

2. Attachment to cyclic existence

The auto-commentary reads:

2. The antidote for overcoming attachment to cyclic existence is to engage in the practices of the three trainings, with the understanding that the nature of cyclic existence, is suffering.

Again, this is very much in accord with the explanation given in the lam rim teachings - without understanding that the nature of cyclic existence is in the nature of suffering, the wish to overcome cyclic existence will not occur. Then attachment to cyclic existence will not be reversed, and so one cannot develop renunciation. In order to develop renunciation one must reverse attachment to cyclic existence, and in order to reverse attachment to cyclic existence, one must meditate and contemplate the sufferings of cyclic existence.

3. The wish for personal liberation

The third of the four clings is that if you are attached to your own welfare, you don't have bodhichitta.

3. The antidote for overcoming the wish for personal liberation is meditating on love, compassion and bodhichitta.

As explained here, if one has an attachment to one's own welfare then one cannot develop bodhichitta. Thus to develop bodhichitta, one must overcome the wish for personal liberation.

4. Self-grasping

In relation to the fourth clinging, if you have grasping, you don't have a correct view the auto-commentary reads:

4. The antidote for overcoming self-grasping, the root of cyclic existence: is meditating on the selflessness of persons and phenomena.

Panchen Lozang chokyi-gyeltsen then adds his own advice:

In this manner all learned scholars and accomplished practitioners of India and Tibet have praised these practices in their genuine treatises on sutra and tantra. Thus even though these practices have been explained as preliminary practices, you must not think that these are merely preliminary [but practise them in conjunction with the actual meditation practice.]

PURIFICATION

The fourth verse of the root text reads:

4. *As the realisation of the void nature of the mind is completely dependent upon your collection of merit and elimination of obstacles, you should despatch ahead of you as many prostrations as possible, made while reciting The Declaration Before the Thirty-five Buddhas, as well as hundreds of thousands of repetitions of the one hundred syllable mantra of Vajrasattva.*

The auto-commentary states:

In general, the ability to perceive the ultimate nature of mind directly is dependent on having accumulated extensive merit and purified negative karmas, therefore one must strive in accumulation and purification practices at all time during the breaks from meditation sessions.

What is the ultimate nature of the mind? Is it emptiness?

Students: Yes

What does 'to perceive the ultimate nature of mind directly' mean? What are the criteria for realising the ultimate nature of the mind directly?

Student: It is to directly perceive the emptiness of mind, with a non-conceptual and non-dual awareness that is within an arya being who is in meditative equipoise.

So what does non-conceptual and non-dual mean?

Student: Non-conceptual means to perceive the object - emptiness - without the generic image being in the way, as if the subject (the wisdom realising emptiness) and object (emptiness) become one and indistinguishable, like water mixed with water.

That is correct. Directly perceiving the ultimate nature of the mind is realising the emptiness of mind without perceiving it through a generic image, but just as it is. Perceiving emptiness directly means seeing it as it is, without any other factor obscuring it.

So, who has the direct perception of the ultimate nature of the mind?

Students: An arya being who is in the state of meditative equipoise.

If your answer is specifically an arya being who is in meditative equipoise, then that would seem to imply that an arya being who is in post-meditative equipoise does not perceive emptiness directly. So in a debate you would lose a point, because all arya beings are said to have the direct perception of emptiness. So, when you answer the question you must be clever not to lose a point in debate. Therefore, 'arya beings' would be the correct answer. An arya being who is engaged in the activity of teaching is not in meditative equipoise on emptiness, but nevertheless they have already obtained the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness.

Why is an arya being who is engaged in the activity of teaching not in meditative equipoise on emptiness?

Students: Because they have the perception of conventional phenomena.

But an arya being who is in meditative equipoise, also has the perception of conventional phenomena too, doesn't he? Doesn't an arya being in meditative equipoise have the realisation of impermanence, bodhichitta and so forth?

So to be specific, one needs to first understand that the wisdom of meditative equipoise and wisdom of the post-meditative state of a sentient being are distinct and separate. You cannot be in meditative equipoise and the post-meditative state simultaneously. The only exception is for an enlightened being, a buddha, who is simultaneously in meditative equipoise and post-meditative state. An arya being, who is in meditative equipoise cannot engage in the activity of teaching and so forth, as that activity is reserved for arya beings who are in the post-meditative state. While you're engaged in meditative equipoise, there can be no activity other than focussing single-pointedly on emptiness. So for a sentient being, the activity of teaching and so forth can be undertaken only after coming out of meditative equipoise.

When an arya being engages in meditative equipoise they have a set time in mind. If they were to remain in that state for eternity then of course they would never be able to teach again. So when an arya being goes into meditative equipoise, they do so with the intention of staying in meditative equipoise for a set time, which is determined prior to going into meditative equipoise.

When that period of time is reached, the arya being will come out of meditative equipoise and engage in other activities, such as teaching and helping beings in various different ways. Whereas enlightened beings are in a constant state of meditative equipoise, for eternity. However while in the state of meditative equipoise on emptiness, an enlightened being can benefit sentient beings by teaching and so forth. So therefore there is a big difference in the virtuous activities of enlightened beings and that of arya beings.

Certain buddhas are depicted with the teaching mudra to symbolise their great achievement. The mudra of placing the hand on the lap indicates being in meditative equipoise, and the mudra of the index finger and the thumb touching is the mudra of preaching the Dharma. That particular mudra is an indication of an enlightened being, as only an enlightened being has the ability to simultaneously be in meditative equipoise while also teaching the Dharma.

For us sentient beings, leaving aside meditation on emptiness, we are not even able to maintain a single-pointed focus on our breath when we start talking to someone else. Far from being able to talk while we are meditating, the sound of others talking disturbs us, and we might even get angry.

What the auto-commentary indicates is that in order to gain the direct perception of the ultimate nature of mind, which is emptiness, one must accumulate extensive merit. Without the accumulation of extensive merit, one will not be able to gain that realisation. That is the main point that is being presented.

As mentioned previously, when the auto-commentary refers to perceiving the ultimate nature of mind, it is referring specifically to the emptiness of the mind. However according to other references in the text, it is necessary to first perceive the actual nature of the mind, which is its clarity. The teaching further explains that one must first develop single-pointed concentration followed by calm abiding on the basic nature of the mind, which is its clarity. Using that as a focus, one can then gain the realisation of the ultimate nature of the mind, which is emptiness. To be more specific, perceiving the ultimate nature of the mind begins at a basic level, which is to focus on the clarity of the mind. Gaining calm abiding on that, one then uses that clarity for gaining the realisation of the ultimate nature of the mind, which is its emptiness. This will be explained in more detail further on.

The auto-commentary explains that perceiving the ultimate nature of the mind depends on the *accumulation and purification practices at all time during the breaks from meditation sessions*. The next part of the auto-commentary explains the benefits of engaging the practices of the 100-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva.

As mentioned particularly in the text *The Essential Ornaments*:

To engage in the 100-syllable mantra,
With each twenty one recitations,
The downfalls will not increase;
Through the blessing of the mantra
If a hundred thousand were recited,
A complete purification takes place.
This is proclaimed by the supreme practitioners.
Thus practice this during the breaks.

If the 100-syllable Vajrasattva mantra is recited twenty-one times, it stops the increase of any downfalls, which refers to breaking the commitments that we have made. When we

take vows and initiations, we make certain commitments. If we break a commitment today and then don't purify it, then by tomorrow the negativity of that broken commitment will increase. And if we don't purify it tomorrow, then by the next day it will increase even further. It's like placing money in the bank: the more you leave it there the more interest you will receive. Here, it is as if we are getting interest on our downfalls; if we don't purify them, the negative karma will just increase further and further.

It is explained here that if we recite the 100-syllable mantra twenty-one times, then that actually stops the downfalls from increasing. Thus in the practices in the *sadana* you will find that the minimum recitation of the Vajrasattva mantra, is twenty-one times.

In relation to the analogy of interest, I've heard of someone who borrowed about \$5.00 some years previously and had to pay back \$15,000, because they were unable to repay it earlier. Similarly it is worthwhile to be mindful of any commitments that we have failed to meet. At the very moment that we engage in some non-virtue in relation to our commitments, it is good to immediately feel a sense of regret which will help to minimise the intensity of the negativity. Then at an appropriate time it is worthwhile to recite the Vajrasattva mantra twenty-one times to stop that negativity from increasing. The mantra will purify any immediate negative karma, and also stop that negative karma from increasing. A further means to purify the negativities of broken commitments is to repeatedly take the bodhisattva vows, and in relation to tantric initiations, to do self-initiations. That would be really worthwhile.

When the verse says, 'If a hundred thousand are recited, a complete purification takes place', that refers to the fact that even root infractions can be purified with one hundred thousand recitations of the Vajrasattva mantra.

Just as it has been explained, if this mantra is recited twenty one times daily, it stops the increasing of the downfalls. If recited a hundred thousand times, even a root infraction is completely purified. Thus with the four opponent powers intact, engaging in the practice of Vajrasattva through meditation and recitation, and likewise engaging in the practice of prostrations to the thirty five buddhas, must be taken to heart.

Following our normal schedule, the next session will be a discussion session, and it is good to prepare for this by reading not only the transcripts, but also the book on mahamudra by His Holiness. Those who don't have sufficient funds might find difficult to purchase this book, but if you can afford to purchase the book then that would be good.

You should read that book to see how my explanation relates to it. If you read that book well, you can check out whether my explanations have been consistent with the text, and whether there are any faults in my teaching! I don't know if you will be able to see any qualities, but its okay if you see the faults! Actually it will benefit me if you bring to my notice any points that may be inconsistent.

The test follows discussion week, and it is also good for you to do take the test conscientiously.

When we come to the explanation of calm abiding in the text, then I will begin the sessions with some meditation as well. That will be a way for many to gain the attainment of calm abiding. It is possible.

Addendum to teaching of 2 September 2008

This material was not translated on the night.

In the technique of 'equalising and exchanging oneself with others', first one meditates and develops equanimity towards all living beings, then by using various reasons, one meditates on the disadvantages of cherishing oneself, then again using various reasons, one meditates on the advantages of cherishing other beings, in this way the perception for all beings to be appealing is developed. So, even though both techniques of developing bodhichitta are based on first developing equanimity as a means to perceive all beings to be appealing, the actual manner of developing equanimity is quite different.

In the 'seven cause and effect technique', equanimity is developed based on perceiving all living beings equal, by virtue of having overcome attachment towards some and feeling hatred towards others. Based on that, one cultivates the recognition of all beings kindness as one's mother and the wish to repay their kindness, which is followed by great love and compassion towards all living beings. In the 'equalising and exchanging oneself with others' technique however, the equanimity is developed based on developing the understanding that all beings are equal in wishing for happiness and not wishing to experience any suffering just like oneself. Then based on that, one develops the understanding that all beings are kind to us not only when they have been our mother but at all times, which is developed with the recognition that every type of happiness that we have now comes from the kindness of other sentient beings. Thus by meditating on the disadvantages of cherishing just oneself, and the great advantages of cherishing others one develops great love and compassion towards all living beings which becomes the cause to then develop bodhichitta within our mental continuum.

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

© **Tara Institute**

DISCUSSION

Week 1 (19 August 2008)

1.Explain:

- a) Object Mahamudra
- b) Subject Mahamudra
- c) 'Indistinguishable'
- d) 'diamond hard'
- e)' beyond all words'

2. Explain:

- a) Basis
- b) Path
- c) Result

Week 2 (26 August 2008)

3. What is the unique teaching of Gyalwa Dondrup and his spiritual son Dharmavajra?

4.What are the four instructions on Preliminary practices?

5. a) What is the actual refuge?

- b) At our level what would this involve?

Week 3 (2 September 2008)

6.Explain the cause for taking refuge for the practitioner of:

- a) The small scope
- b) The medium scope
- c) The great scope

7. How are Hearers, Solitary Realisers, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas born?

3. a) What are the two aspirations of Bodhicitta?

- b) How does one train in them?

8. Give the Seven Fold Cause and Effect Technique.

Week 4 (9 September 2008)

9. Name the four clingings.

Exam

Name:

Block: 5

Mark:

Week: 6 (22 September 2008)

1.Explain:

a) Object Mahamudra

b) Subject Mahamudra

c) 'Indistinguishable'

d) 'diamond hard'

e)' beyond all words'

2. Explain:

a) Basis

b) Path

c) Result

3. What is the unique teaching of Gyalwa Dondrup and his spiritual son Dharmavajra?

4. What are the four instructions on Preliminary practices?

5. a) What is the actual refuge?

b) At our level what would this involve?

6. Explain the cause for taking refuge for the practitioner of:

a) The small scope

b) The medium scope

c) The great scope

7. How are Hearers, Solitary Realisers, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas born?

8. a) What are the two aspirations of Bodhicitta?

b) How does one train in them?

9. Give the Seven Fold Cause and Effect Technique.

10. Name the four clingings.