
apprehended object or conceived object, one cannot abandon the grasping at a self.

What has to be clearly identified here is the focal object of the view that apprehends or conceives grasping at a self of person. What type of person does the view of the transitory collection actually focus on? Is it a conventionally existent person?

Student: The object of observation is a conventionally existent person, and the view of transitory collections superimposes inherent existence on the mere 'I', and grasps the 'I' as existing independently.

The main point being made here is that without identifying the 'I' that is being apprehended as an inherently existent 'I', one cannot negate it. The wrong view is apprehending or perceiving an 'I' that is inherently existent. Without first understanding the distorted implications of such an 'I', one cannot possibly negate it. Thus, what has to be specifically understood here is how the 'I' appears to the view of the transitory collection and how it is then apprehended. Without understanding these two factors, one cannot possibly negate or refute an inherently existing 'I'.

What also has to be clearly understood here is that if asked, 'Does an 'I' exist?', then of course the answer is, 'There is definitely an 'I' that exists'. However, the 'I' that appears and which is apprehended by the view of the transitory collection, does not exist. So, even though an 'I' or a person does exist conventionally, the 'I' or person which appears and which is apprehended by the view of the transitory collection does not exist.

The reason why this is being specifically clarified now is because there is the danger of mistaking the conventionally existent 'I' as being the 'I' that is to be negated. It is the 'I' that is viewed or apprehended by innate self-grasping which is to be negated, and not the conventionally existent 'I'. Thus for a meditator, it has to be very clear that it is not the conventional 'I' that is to be negated or refuted, because the conventional 'I' does exist; rather the object of negation is the 'I' or person that is apprehended as existing by the view of the transitory collection or innate self-grasping. If you don't recognise that clear distinction at the outset, then there is a danger of making the assumption that they are the same.

How to identify the object of negation

One way of clearly identifying and recognising the 'I' or the self that is to be negated is to recreate how that 'I' is viewed by innate self-grasping. We can gain a sense of the false 'I' if we recreate a time when, for example, we had a very strong opinion, or times when we either felt very happy and elated, or very sad and unhappy. So, in meditation, one can intentionally recreate any of these times and investigate how that 'I' appears to oneself at that time. How does the 'I' appear then? When investigated, it will be clear that that it is the misapprehended independent 'I' or self that appears to one's mind. When we are engaged in normal worldly activities, we are not really aware of how the misapprehended 'I' is viewed by our innate self-grasping. Thus, without careful investigation, there is a danger of mistaking the conventionally existent 'I' as the 'I' to be negated, and thus fall into the extreme of nihilism.

In relation to the appropriate time for us to investigate the misapprehended 'I' would be, for example, when one has a strong opinion about something, as in when one says, 'I want this', or 'I don't want that', or 'What you say and do, doesn't accord with *my* feelings'. How does the 'I' or 'me' appear when one has such a strong opinionated mind? If we

were to actually investigate how that 'I' appears to us at that time, we will begin to notice that it appears to us as being independently existent, which means that it does not depend on anything else and exists self-sufficiently. It is as if there is a solid and independently existent 'I' somewhere within us, which 'I' does not appear as being connected or inter-related with the aggregates. or as a mere label or name given to the collection of the aggregates. Rather the 'I' only appears to us as being independent and self-sufficient.

When one recognises this false appearance clearly, then that is called identifying the object of negation. The reason it is called the object of negation is because an independent 'I', does not actually exist. When one is clear about how the 'I' that appears to us is completely fabricated and non-existent, then we will get a sense of selflessness in relation to the 'I'.

In the process of investigation, we might initially have a sense of being able to locate the 'I' somewhere in our body, perhaps within our head or chest. But when we investigate further, we come to realise that a self-sufficient, independently existent 'I' or an inherently existent 'I' cannot be found anywhere, thus it does not exist anywhere. At that time, one also gets a sense of how the 'self' or 'I' is a merely imputed 'I'; thus it is dependent on a label and imputation rather than existing independently by itself. When one has a clear recognition of the 'I' that seems to exist independently and inherently, then that is what is called identifying the object of negation.

The necessity of identifying the object of negation

It is very important to understand what identifying the object of negation means, because without clearly identifying and then refuting the object of negation, one cannot possibly realise selflessness, which is its opposite.

What the auto-commentary specifically explains is that without identifying the object of negation, one cannot possibly refute it. Referring back that earlier quote from Nagarjuna, the auto-commentary also quotes Dharmakirti:

As The Great Logician (Dharmakirti) says:

Without refuting its object,
It is not possible to abandon it.

The auto-commentary further explains:

The determined object of perceiving a truly existent being, truly existent 'I', and truly existent person are respectively a truly established being, truly established 'I' and truly established person, and these are to be refuted. The manner of refuting them is none other than by gaining the view of their lack of true existence. Having ascertained a person's lack of true existence and meditating on that, one will overcome the grasping at a truly existent person.

So as explained here, the object of negation, that which is to be refuted, is a truly established person, being, or 'I'. An inherently or a truly established person is what is being apprehended by the wrong conception of innate self-grasping. In order to overcome the wrong conception then, one must gain the right view, which is the view of the lack of a truly established or inherently existent 'I'.

The point that is to be understood here is, as mentioned in other texts that it is the case of having the same focal object, but apprehending it in completely opposite way. The meaning of this is that the focal object of both the view of grasping to a self, and the view of selflessness is the same, but the modes of apprehending the object are complete opposites. We need to understand that even though both

views focus on the same object, their mode of apprehension is completely different.

To explain this further, what is the focal object of the view of the transitory collection? It is a person. Likewise, what is the focal object of the view that perceives the selflessness of a person? It is also a person. So, as far as the focal object is concerned, there is no difference, as for both views the focal object is a person.

However the mode of apprehending the person is different, because the view of the transitory collection or grasping at a truly existent personal self apprehends the person as being inherently existent. Whereas, the view that perceives the selflessness of a person apprehends the person as lacking inherent existence. That is how the apprehended object of these two views are complete opposites. By understanding that while the focal object is the same, the mode of apprehension is different, one can understand how one can directly oppose the wrong view. That is the main point that needs to be understood here.

The more one familiarises oneself with the view of selflessness of a person and actually begins to gain the realisation of the selflessness of a person, the more one can understand and see how that directly overcomes, or negates, the wrong view of grasping at a truly existent person. What one can understand from this explanation is that the view of grasping to an inherently existent self is a wrong consciousness.

To be more specific, the more understanding we have of the view realising selflessness, the more we one will be able to develop the wisdom realising selflessness. One must understand that the person actually exists in the way that is apprehended by the wisdom realising selflessness. So the more one becomes familiar with the view that apprehends the person as lacking an inherently or truly existent self, the weaker the misconception or wrong view of an inherently existent self naturally becomes. So as one view becomes stronger, its exact opposite naturally becomes weaker and weaker. Do you see this relationship?

That is the point clarified by Dharmakirti when he said 'Without refuting its object, it is not possible to abandon it'. So if one gets that clear understanding, then one has understood the main point, and anytime that this is explained in the teachings, one will be able recall this point.

The reason why the text specifically goes into great detail about identifying the object of negation and how that object appears, and then cultivating the wisdom that refutes that, is because it is extremely crucial in gaining the profound and unmistakable understanding of selflessness. Understanding this approach is very important, because if we were to just explain that a truly existent person is an object of negation and leave it at that, without really understanding how the inherently existent person appears, we may not get very far in actually overcoming that misapprehension. If we just sit around and repeat 'grasping at a truly existent self is the object of negation', that in itself will not really help us much. We need go further into analysing how the person is actually apprehended by that misconception.

So that explains this comment in the auto-commentary:

Having ascertained a person's lack of true existence and meditating on that, one will overcome the grasping at a truly existent person.

In meditation this is what we have to attempt to do: first ascertain a person's lack of true existence and then meditate on that lack of a truly existent person.

The auto-commentary then goes on to further explain:

For these reasons, the experiential explanation of how the object of negation appears and how it is apprehended is presented first in the following verse.

Again this is referring to identifying the object of negation. The author is explaining how that object of negation appears and how it is apprehended. The author describes it as an experiential explanation, which means that it is not just a fabricated or an assumed explanation but one that is based on personal experience. This also goes to show the extent of the realisations of the author.

HAVING MEDITATED ON SELFLESSNESS ESTABLISHING IMPUTED EXISTENCE.¹

29. In the same state as the previous settling of your mind [in single-minded concentration], you should, like a small fish swimming through clear undisturbed water, examine with very fine consciousness the nature of the self-identity of just who it is who is meditating.

We can leave the explanation of this verse for our next session. So what I would like you to do as preparation for the explanation is to try to gain an understanding of the verse itself by referring to the commentaries that explain the meaning of this verse. I will then check and quiz you about what understanding you have gained next time. In particular, this verse brings to light the explanation of finding the view from within the meditative state, which is particular to the explanation of mahamudra.

To summarise the main points that are to be reflected upon: we have covered the definition of the view of the transitory collection, and how the view of the transitory collection actually apprehends the 'I'. Also how the 'I' or the person appears to it.

Rather than trying to get a lot of information at one time and having it all jumbled up in one's mind, it is better to have a correct understanding of even one point. That is far more worthy. A jumbled or mixed-up understanding of many points will end up not being really useful anywhere, whereas having a good understanding of even just one point can be applied at any time when it comes up, in readings, discussions or teachings. That is a far better way to further enhance one's understanding.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnnett
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Edited Version
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¹ Described last week as 'having meditated on selflessness establishing designated phenomena'.

Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇིགས་པ་ལྷན་ཕུག་ཀྱི་ཆེན་པོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

18 August 2009

With the motivation of bodhichitta, we can spend a few minutes in meditation. (*Pause for meditation*)

HAVING MEDITATED ON SELFLESSNESS, ESTABLISHING IMPUTED EXISTENCE (CONT.)

Last week we left off at these lines of the auto-commentary:

For these reasons, the experiential explanation of how the object of negation appears and how it is apprehended is presented first in the following verse.

This is pointing out the two sub-divisions of the experiential explanation.

The relevant verse of the root text reads:

29 In the same state as the previous settling of your mind [in single-minded concentration], you should, like a small fish swimming through clear undisturbed water, examine with very fine consciousness the nature of the self-identity of just who it is who is meditating.

As the auto-commentary explains:

To further explain the meaning of this: with the previously acquired single-pointed concentration of calm abiding and within the state of meditative equipoise, just like tiny fish swimming about in a pond full of clear water will not disturb the water, similarly with a fine or subtle consciousness the meditator investigates the nature of the 'being', 'I' or 'self' who is meditating in single-pointed concentration, without the slightest disturbance. This fine consciousness also investigates how the 'I' appears to the mind and how it is apprehended.

This relates to the earlier explanation that the system here is one that attempts to find the view from within a meditative state.

The root text uses the example of a pond filled with clear water, which is analogous to calm abiding, while the tiny fish moving about, is an analogy of the investigation. That is, just as tiny fish that move about quite rapidly at the bottom of a pond of clear water do not disturb the surface of the pond at all, likewise investigating the object (the 'I' of the meditator, in this case) within the state of calm abiding should not disturb the single-pointed concentration.

Then the manner of investigation is explained: while remaining in a meditative state of single-pointed concentration one part of the mind investigates the object with analytical wisdom, which is an intelligence that is able to differentiate between what is to be adopted and what is to be discarded. This is the subtle consciousness that the auto-commentary is referring to.

Two modes of appearance

This subtle consciousness investigates how the 'I', the self, or the being appears to the meditator. There are two modes of appearance of the 'I', being, or person: the mode of appearance of an 'I' or person to an ordinary being, and that which appears to an arya or noble being.

The 'I' or 'person' that appears to an ordinary being is that which does not accord to its appearance. It's false and not true because the way the person appears is not in accordance with reality. Whereas the appearance of the 'I' or the individual person to a noble being is in accordance with reality - it exists just as it appears to them.

Mode of appearance for an ordinary being

The particular investigation that is indicated here is identifying the mode of appearance of a person or 'I' to an ordinary being and, as mentioned earlier, it is the subtle or fine consciousness that undertakes this investigation by looking at the appearance of the person and how it is being apprehended. How does the person appear to the ordinary being's mind, and how does an ordinary being apprehend that appearance? That is what one should investigate.

The personal instruction that we can derive from this is that even though we may not have obtained the meditative state of calm abiding right now, it is nevertheless worthwhile for us to really investigate the individual 'I', and look into how it appears to us, using whatever degree of focus that we have developed. How does our 'I' or ourself as a 'person' appear to us? How do we actually apprehend our 'I'? Thus, we investigate the two modes of person - how it appears to us, and how we apprehend it. When we do that sincerely, it can be really very meaningful for us and will enhance our understanding.

Merely labelled phenomena

As the auto-commentary states:

When investigated in this way, the nature of the being, 'I' or person, (and likewise all other phenomena), is seen to be merely labelled, and merely imputed by conception, which is similar to labelling a striped rope a snake, or a heap of stones and a tall girl a person.

This is explaining how a person actually does exist. When we investigate the mode of existence or the nature of the being, or whatever other phenomena we choose to focus on, we will come to the same conclusion, which is that it is merely labelled and merely imputed by conception.

When we thoroughly investigate how the person exists, and what conception we have of its mode of existence we will come to notice that the 'person' or 'I' is actually just a label placed upon the collection of the aggregates. The label 'person' or 'I' is placed upon the collection of the physical body and the other aggregates, and so it is nothing more than that mere label. What is being explained here is how the person, the individual being, as well as all other phenomena, are merely labelled or merely imputed by conception. Thus, what is being established here is the imputed existence of all phenomena.

What one needs to understand from the explanation here is that term 'merely' is used for a particular purpose. The terms merely labelled and merely imputed negate the slightest existence from its own side. Besides being a label or an imputation by the mind, there is no existence from the object's own side. This becomes clear when we refer to the analogy used in the auto-commentary.

The analogy that is used here is labelling a striped rope a snake. When one sees a striped rope at a particular time of the day, one may at first glance, think 'there is a snake', and thus label the rope as a snake. But in fact a snake does not exist upon the rope even the slightest bit; a snake is not found in any of the parts of the striped rope nor the collection of the parts of the rope, and so referring to a striped rope as a snake is a mere label or mere imputation by

conception. It is the same with the other analogies given in the auto-commentary as well. Apart from the label, none of them exists from their own side.

Likewise, it is similar to how a person is merely labelled upon the aggregates. One needs to understand that a person or 'I' is a mere label placed upon the collection of the aggregates. However if you were to search within the aggregates, you would not find the person or 'I'. Thus, besides being a mere label or a mere conceptually imputed extent, there is no 'I' or person that exists within the aggregates. Establishing all phenomena as imputed existence is the unique explanation of the Prasangika, which is the highest Buddhist school. This presentation differs from the Svatantrika-Middle Way school, which also uses the term 'merely labelled', but it has a different connotation for them.

This reminds me of the time when I was sitting for my final geshe exam. In debate this point was raised by the prominent master, Lati Rinpoche. I explained that even though both the Prasangika and the Svatantrika-Middle Way schools use the same term 'merely labelled', what it implies for the Prasangika is that the existence of phenomena is dependent solely on the label given from the side of the conception. Whereas for the Svatantrika-Middle Way school, 'merely labelled' doesn't negate something as existing from the side of the object as well. Lati Rinpoche said, 'Well, you do seem to make a point here', and he didn't contradict my explanation.

After the geshe exam, it is traditional that the monks come and greet you with *khatags* (white offering scarves) and a monetary offering. Rinpoche actually came over to see me after I completed the exam to offer me a *khatag* and an offering, and he said 'Your geshe exam went very well, it was very good'. He asked me where I was staying. At that time I was teaching at Kopan and had come from there specifically to do the exam, and was going to return to Kopan. Rinpoche said, 'So I suppose you will be starting to get an iron wing soon' [*laughs*], indicating that I would be flying off to the west. When he actually said 'So, you have plans to go to the west?', I responded by saying 'Well, I don't have any specific plans, but it may be possible'.

I said that I didn't have any specific plans, but that Lama Yeshe had already requested me to go to the west on a few occasions, and initially I had not accepted. I explained that there were some who kept telling me that it was a good idea. Physically I wasn't too healthy, so some were suggesting that if I went to the west it might be beneficial for my health. Also on a practical level, others said 'you don't really have much wealth, so if you go to the west you might find some good conditions for yourself as well'. Then Lati Rinpoche said, 'Oh well, maybe those are reasons why some would go to the west'.

That debate occurred some twenty-seven years ago, and I hadn't had any contact with Lati Rinpoche since then. Then last year when I went back to India, I noticed Lati Rinpoche at Singapore airport. He was in a wheelchair with some attendants and, thinking 'He won't remember me anyway', I didn't really want to bother him. But apparently he did remember me. We were on the same plane and when we landed in Bangalore, he recognised me, put his hands together and said 'Oh, so are you back in India now?' He seemed to have known that I was living and teaching in Australia. So he actually knew all about me even though we hadn't met for such a long time.

Going back to the main point that I was emphasising earlier, the Prasangika present all phenomena as being merely

imputed. 'Imputed existence' means that there is not the slightest existence from its own side for any phenomenon apart from being merely labelled and merely imputed. First of all one needs to understand that 'label' refers to the name or term that is given to something, and 'imputation' means the conceptualisation that we have when we refer to that object.

As a specific example consider Jeremy: 'Jeremy' is just the term or label that is assigned to the aggregates that we see. It would have been Jeremy's parents who gave the label 'Jeremy' to his aggregates and that, in itself, is proof that Jeremy does not exist from the aggregates own side. If Jeremy were to exist within the aggregates - from its own side, then his parents would not have had to label or name him 'Jeremy'. The fact that Jeremy had to be named soon after he was born (or before, whatever the case), is due to the fact that Jeremy does not exist upon the aggregates themselves. When we see Jeremy and think 'that's Jeremy', that's a conceptualisation of Jeremy.

This however does not deny the existence or the functionality of Jeremy, because we can see that Jeremy functions as a person. He not only functions as a person, he is a father of children too! [*laughter*]. So the indication that Jeremy is a mere label, doesn't imply that besides the label there is no function there. One must not misunderstand that the 'merely' of 'merely labelled' implies that it is just a mere term and that there is nothing that actually functions or exists there. So while 'Jeremy' is a mere label or a mere term given to the aggregates, Jeremy is also able to function as a person. That is how the Prasangika explain that while things do not exist inherently from their own side, they still exist nominally or conventionally. The conventional existence of Jeremy is that he functions as a parent and in all other activities that he performs. So while Jeremy does not exist inherently from his own side there is the conventional existence of Jeremy, which is the existence of Jeremy dependent on many causes and conditions.

Jeremy lacks any inherent existence, but nevertheless Jeremy does exist interdependently, and the existence of Jeremy is based upon a suitable basis, which are the aggregates of Jeremy. The label 'Jeremy' is given to the appropriate basis and the function that it is able to perform. Thus, Jeremy does exist and function as a human being. The main point is that even though things are merely labelled, the label has to be nominated upon a suitable basis for it to be an existent phenomenon. When it is merely labelled upon a suitable basis, then through its interdependent origination, it exists and functions as an existent phenomenon.

We get this understanding from, for example, the *Heart Sutra* where it says 'Form is empty and emptiness is form'. 'Form is empty' indicates that form does not have any inherent existence, i.e. all forms lack inherent existence. The implication of 'emptiness is form' is that while form lacks inherent existence it nevertheless still functions conventionally, i.e. it has a conventional existence and function. What also needs to be understood here is that the manner of how Jeremy exists as a merely labelled phenomena, is completely different from a merely labelled striped snake. One must be careful not to misinterpret the analogy and take it too far. The difference lies in the fact that the merely labelled snake is based upon a striped rope, and the rope does not function as a snake, whereas 'Jeremy' being a mere label does not negate the function of Jeremy. All other existent phenomena are the same; even though they are merely labelled they still have functions.

The analogy to be understood here - naming or thinking a striped rope to be a snake - is an analogy of mere labelling, but is not an analogy in terms of the functionality of that object. Further analogies presented in the auto-commentary are a heap of stones or a tall log being labelled a person. The analogy is to be understood like this: from a distance or at dusk, a heap of stones may be mistaken for a person or a tall log or a small tree may be mistaken for a person. Nevertheless there is no person existing from the side of the object, so it is merely imputed by the mind.

Again, this reminds me of an incident that occurred when we first settled in India. Sera Monastery and others were re-established at the camp in Buxador over thirty years ago. The area was known to have ghosts and spirits and the energy was quite disturbed. We had to go out into the wilderness to go to the toilet, and when it was dark it was very scary. So when Geshe Shakya went to the toilet he would take a kerosene lamp in one hand to see, and in the other hand he took one of his protection cords with a protection wheel on it, and he kept repeating the syllogism 'a vase is not inherently existent because it is interdependent'. He repeated that because it is known that if one has some understanding of emptiness and actually meditates on emptiness, then that can ward off any evil forces or negativities. So reciting that syllogism was a way of reminding himself of emptiness as he went out into the dark night. But at one point he came rushing back [laughter] and when asked, 'what happened?' He replied 'There is something there, I saw something!'. Later on we went to check, and we found that what he had believed to be a spirit or ghost was just a tall bush [laughter]. Whenever we mentioned that to him later he was always embarrassed.

There are further and more subtle implications with the analogy of labelling the striped rope as a snake. For example as explained in other texts, the striped rope is analogous to our physical aggregate, and labelling it snake, which is false, is analogous the object of negation. The mind that apprehends the striped rope as a snake is analogous to grasping at inherent existence, which is innate self-grasping. The fear that arises when one sees the striped rope as snake is analogous to the fears and the unwanted miseries of samsara. Until and unless one recognises the striped rope for what it actually is - a rope - one's fear of the snake will not be eliminated. This means that from the moment one realises that it is not a snake and only a striped rope, the fear of the snake will be eliminated. This is analogous to the fact that we can only remove of all of the unwanted miseries of samsara when we remove our misconception of innate self-grasping.

The tathagata view of how things exist

The auto-commentary then quotes from the sutras:

As stated in the sutras:

Even though one may have the appearance of a city of gandharvas, [i.e. a conjured city that doesn't exist]

Such a city is not found to be existent anywhere in any of the ten directions,

Thus, such a city is none other than a mere label,

Similarly this is how the tathagata perceives all living beings.

As explained, things exist just as they are perceived by the tathagatas. If our perception was not mistaken, then all phenomena would appear to us as being merely labelled imputed existents too. However, because of being under the spell of ignorance, phenomena don't appear to us in this way.

The tathagatas see all existence as being merely labelled, in the same way that just as we see illusions and mirages of places and things that do not exist, we understand that the illusion is just a mere label and a mere conceptualisation.

The statement 'things exist just as they are perceived by the tathagatas' implies that tathagatas (meaning the enlightened beings) perceive all existence as being merely labelled and merely imputed. For us unenlightened beings things don't appear as being merely labelled or merely imputed; rather they appear as existing from their own side. Referring back to Jeremy, when we look at Jeremy, and when we talk about Jeremy he does not appear to us as being merely labelled upon the aggregates, or merely imputed by our mind. Rather Jeremy appears to us as really existing out there independently. When we see Jeremy it seems to us as if Jeremy is actually there, existing within his aggregates, from his own side.

Another analogy that is used in the teachings such as the *Lam Rim*, is that when we observe a galloping horse we are completely convinced that there is an actual horse there that exists from its own side. We see no distinction between the horse's mind and body, only a very real galloping horse. In other words we don't have any notion of a horse that is merely labelled upon the aggregates. We totally believe that there is an actual horse that exists from its own side. These are ways of explaining how, by observing and investigating our misconception of things, we get closer to the understanding of what the object of negation is, which we have to recognise in order to negate.

Ignorance and karma

As indicated here in the auto-commentary

However, because of being under the spell of ignorance, phenomena don't appear to us in this way. On the contrary, the opposite of their mode of existence appears to us. As we grasp this faulty appearance, we accumulate karma and create the causes to circle in the rounds of samsara to experience numerous types of suffering.

What is being indicated here is that the reason things don't appear to us as being merely labelled and merely imputed by conception, is because we are under the spell of, or influenced by, or tainted with ignorance, and so phenomena don't appear to us as being merely labelled and imputed.

As explained in our last session, we should investigate and really consider how our individual self appears to us, particularly at those times when we have a strongly opinionated mind such as 'If you do this, I cannot accept it. This is totally unacceptable to me'. How does that 'me' or 'I' appear to oneself at that moment? If we were to actually stop and investigate it would be quite evident that the 'I' or 'me' appears as if it exists in and of itself, and that it does not relate to our physical aggregates or to our mind. The 'me' or 'I' seems to appear solidly, independently and existing in and of itself, and such an appearance is a faulty appearance, which we actually grasp onto. We apprehend and grasp at that faulty appearance, believing that it is 'me'.

It is this grasping at that faulty appearance which, as mentioned here in the auto-commentary, leads us to create the karma that propels us into the rounds of cyclic existence. To be more specific, because of that strong opinionated mind, that sense of 'me', and the grasping at the faulty appearance of the 'me' or 'I', the differentiation between 'I like this' and attachment to what 'I like' naturally arises, and conversely anger naturally arises with 'I don't like that'. This is how through the attachment to things with which one

agrees, and anger to things with which one doesn't agree leads one to create the karma that becomes the cause for us to be propelled into samsara.

If one can use this explanation to further enhance and expand one's understanding of how one creates karma, then that would be really meaningful. When we honestly look into how anger or strong attachment arise, we will come to notice that the stronger the sense of grasping at 'I' or 'me' (which are actually a false 'I' or 'me'), the stronger our opinions of what we like and dislike will be. Thus with a strong sense of 'I want this' or 'I like this' or 'this agrees with me', attachment develops. Whereas a strong sense of 'I don't like that', 'It doesn't agree with me', creates a strong aversion. Thus due to cravings or attachment and aversion or anger we create the karma that propels us into samsara.

Both the twelve links and the four noble truths explain that ignorance is the main cause for us to create karma, which is the secondary cause for us to be born into samsara. Here ignorance refers to the faulty appearance that we grasp onto and believe in, which is called innate self-grasping. If we were to overcome that faulty appearance and replace that innate self-grasping with the realisation of the wisdom realising selflessness or emptiness, then the causes to be re-born into samsara will cease.

There is a quote in the teachings saying that once the state of an arya has been obtained, the karma that propels one into samsara is no longer created. What is to be understood here is that the reason an arya being does not create the new karma to be re-born into samsara is because the arya being has realised selflessness or emptiness, which completely opposes self-grasping. And because there is no self-grasping, then strong attachments and aversions or anger do not arise any more. That is how the causes to be re-born in cyclic existence cease.

Here, one can also understand the connotation of the word 'arya', or *pag-pa* in Tibetan. It has the connotation of ascending to a higher level. The general connotation of 'ascending' is understood as ascending from an ordinary being to a noble being. I feel however that a more profound connotation could be 'ascending from having the ignorance of grasping at a self, to achieving the state of the wisdom realising selflessness'. Thus, when one ascends to that state, one no longer creates the karma to be reborn in cyclic existence.

Applying this to ourselves

Coming back to our personal experience and practice, it is good to honestly check and then observe that the stronger the sense of 'I', and the more opinionated that 'I' is, the more likely we seem to develop strong attachment or aversion to something. Thus if we begin to think about how the 'I' does not actually exist as it appears, then we will reach a point where we begin to notice 'Maybe there is something wrong with this perception that I have of myself; perhaps it could be false'. Even that basic understanding will help to reduce the strong sense of the opinionated 'I', which will reduce strong attachment or anger. That will definitely help us not to create heavy negative karmas.

We have not really been able to go much further into the actual subject matter of the text this evening. However I have taken the time to explain some of the main points that are presented in the text, because these points are in fact really important points for us to consider, particularly in relation to our own practice. As mentioned earlier, investigating how the 'I' appears to oneself and how one

actually grasps at it, is a worthwhile investigation to do in the practice of meditation.

In order to overcome all of the confusion and problems that we are going through, we have to investigate and see that the misconception that we have is actually the cause of all of our problems. The root of all of the problems comes from within ourselves, so trying to look for a solution somewhere else, will not help us in any way. We have to do a self-investigation and really look within ourselves. An analogy is that if a thief takes our valuables and goes off into the forest, then we have to look in the forest for the thief and the valuables. If we were to look in the city when the thief has gone into the forest then we have completely missed the point, and are on the wrong track. So the source of all our problems and their causes lies within ourselves, thus self-investigation is a really worthwhile and essential activity.

The point that I'm raising here is how, for our own benefit and practice, it is much more worthwhile that we look within ourselves and do that self-investigation to find the source of all our problems, rather than pointing outwards and complaining about the selfishness or ego of others. People often make comments like 'he is really egocentric' or 'she is very short-tempered, and gets upset or angry so quickly' or 'they are very selfish'. Noticing that in others doesn't help us in any way, as it doesn't help us to overcome the causes of our own problems. What will help us is looking within ourselves. Rather than complaining, spend your time and energy in self-investigation and checking out how much ego there is, or how selfish or short-tempered one may be. Such a personal investigation is far more worthwhile and meaningful than investigating or checking others out, as it can lead to constructive and positive results.

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

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Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇམ་དགེ་ལུན་ལུག་ཀྱི་ཚེན་པོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

25 August 2009

Let us sit in a comfortable posture and generate a motivation along the lines of the refuge and bodhichitta prayer that we have just recited. We should try and develop a strong sense of refuge in our mind, followed by a bodhichitta attitude for receiving the teachings.

HAVING MEDITATED ON EMPTINESS, ESTABLISHING THE OBJECT

At our last session we left off at this point in the auto-commentary:

If our perception is not mistaken, then all phenomena would appear to us as being merely labelled - imputed existents too. However, because of being under the spell of ignorance, phenomena don't appear to us in this way.

On the contrary, the opposite of their mode of existence appears to us. As we grasp this faulty appearance, we accumulate karma and create the causes to circle in the rounds of samsara to experience numerous types of suffering.

This was explained in our last session and you would have also discussed it further in the seminar, as well as having a lot of discussion amongst yourselves. It is good to think about these points.

The commentary then continues:

If one were to take full advantage of one's potential now, then one will be able to identify this faulty appearance as the appearance of the object of negation, or the appearance of truly established existents; and the grasping as grasping or apprehending truly established existents.

This is explaining the possibility of identifying the object of negation. First of all - in relation to oneself as an individual or as a person searching for one's own 'I' - if one were to ask whether this 'I' or person exists, then of course, as explained earlier there is no question that the 'I' or person definitely does exist. However what is being explained here is that the 'I', person or the individual being does not exist as it appears to exist to our ordinary perception.

If we really look into, and investigate how, the 'I' appears to us (as ordinary beings), it will be evident that the 'I' appears to us as being inherently existent, i.e. as existing from its own side, rather than being a merely imputed or a merely labelled 'I' or person. We then apprehend the person as existing in that way. Note the terms that are used: the appearance of a truly existent person, an inherently existent person, and a person that exists by its own characteristics are synonymous. While apprehending the person to exist in that way is referred to as the misconception of grasping at a truly existent person, or a truly established person, or an inherently existent person. Is that clear?

Then the commentary reads:

As an ordinary being, besides the appearance that we have now, there is no other way for us to apprehend the negation of the syllogism's thesis.

What is being explained here is that apart from how a person appears to us ordinary beings, there is no other appearance of the object of negation. In particular, there is no other way to apprehend the negation of the syllogism's thesis. In the mahamudra context the particular syllogism used is, 'Take the subject 'a person': it doesn't exist inherently, because it is imputed upon the six elements'. In another format the reason would be 'because it is an inter-dependent origination'. In both cases the thesis concerns the lack of inherent existence of the person. So the negation of the syllogism's thesis is the inherent existence of a person or being, which is also the object of negation. Thus, what is being explained here is that besides the usual appearance of a person or being, there is no other way for the object of negation to appear to an ordinary being. In other words, the appearance of the person is the appearance of the object of negation.

As part of our normal routine we should have spent a few minutes in meditation at the beginning of the session; anyhow the point I want to make is that one could base the meditation on this explanation. As explained earlier, one first tries to identify the 'I' or the person as it appears to us, i.e. investigating how the innate self-grasping apprehends the 'I' or person. We basically relate this to ourselves: how does our 'I' or individual being appear to us? How do we apprehend that? That is our first task.

When we come to identify how the 'I' appears to us, which is that it appears to exist from its own side; not depending on anything it appears to exist self-sufficiently, in and by itself. We further become aware that we also grasp at that 'I' just as it appears to us. At that point in our meditation we have identified the actual misconception that we have in relation to the 'I'. Then one tries to recall the reasons why this 'I' or person does not exist in that way, using the syllogism quoted earlier (an 'I', person, or being could not exist inherently, because it is an entity that is merely imputed upon the six elements). When one really contemplates this reasoning, then one will get a sense of how the 'I' that appears to us does not actually exist in the way that it appears; this will become quite evident and strong in one's mind. Then one will gain a sense of what is to be negated. As one negates the inherent existence of an 'I', then selflessness - the fact that there is no inherently existent self - becomes more apparent to our mind.

When investigating the 'I' or being, one really must have the correct understanding of what it is that one is actually negating. As mentioned previously, if you are not able to identify the object of negation very clearly, then there is the danger of actually negating a conventionally existent 'I' or person. If one were to negate the conventionally existent 'I' or person, then one would be falling into the extreme of nihilism. If one comes to the conclusion that the 'I' or person does not exist at all, then that means that one has negated too much and fallen into the extreme of nihilism.

Initially when one meditates, one investigates the five aggregates and the six elements, and searches for the 'I' within that basis of imputation. One will then come to

realise that there is no 'I' within the heat element, and that there is no 'I' in the water element and likewise within the earth, wind, consciousness and space elements. When one thoroughly investigates in this way, one arrives at the point of not finding the 'I' within any of those six elements. Thus one reaches the point where there is seemingly no 'I' to be found at all. When one comes to that point of not being able to find the 'I' in that way, then although there is a sense of the 'I' being 'empty' or that there is no 'I', that is not yet the actual realisation of emptiness.

Nevertheless, it is said that this is a good point to reach initially, but if one were to leave it at that, i.e. that because one cannot find the 'I' within the six elements, therefore an 'I' does not exist, then one has fallen into the extreme of nihilism. However when the 'not finding' is based upon not finding an inherently existent 'I' (which is the object of negation) then one will be clear about what it is that does not exist. That will give the sense of what the emptiness of the 'I' or what the selflessness of the 'I' actually is. In other teachings, it mentions that the 'not finding' is the ultimate finding. Searching for and not finding the object of negation to be existent, is indeed a very subtle understanding of emptiness.

The auto-commentary further reads:

That is because all types of consciousness within sentient being's mental continua are tainted by ignorance and thus we necessarily perceive whatever object appears to our mind as being truly existent.

Another important point to note from the explanation here is, while the apprehension of truly established or truly existent phenomena can be overcome when one realises emptiness, the mere realisation of emptiness does not mean that one will necessarily overcome the appearance of inherent existence for either persons or phenomena. For example, an arhat would still have the appearance of an inherently existent person, and that is because an arhat has not abandoned the obscurations to omniscience.

According to the Prasangika, because an arhat has not overcome the obscurations to omniscience, the appearance of inherently existent phenomena still exists within their mental continuum. As explained in the teachings, the method for overcoming the obscurations to omniscience is by supplementing and enhancing the realisation of emptiness with bodhichitta, and thus creating extensive merit through the practice of the six perfections. One becomes enlightened when all taints of inherent appearance have been completely removed.

These points were clarified in the Madhyamaka teachings and it is good to try to recall the main points of difference between deluded obscurations and the obscurations to omniscience. According to the Prasangika the difference between these two obscurations is that, for example, the seed of the fundamental ignorance, which is the grasping at inherent existence or true existence, is called a deluded obscuration, and the latency or the imprint of that ignorance is referred to as an obscuration to omniscience. An arhat would have removed the actual delusions and their seeds and therefore overcome the deluded obscurations, thus becoming a foe destroyer or arhat. However they still have the imprints of that ignorance

and related delusions in their mental continuum. Therefore, because the appearance of inherent existence is still in their mind, they have not overcome the obscurations to omniscience. As explained in the teachings the reason why the appearance of inherent existence is still existent in the mind stream of an arhat is because their mind is still tainted by the obscurations to omniscience.

An analogy used to explain this is that when spectators see illusions of horses and elephants that are conjured up by magicians, they do so because their eyes are tainted by the magician's spell. For as long as the eye consciousness of the spectators is under the spell, that appearance will be there. Another analogy given in the teachings is that when one is asleep the sleep mind overrides one's awareness; thus everything is tainted by that sleep consciousness. Therefore while the events that take place in dreams appear to be real, they are all actually tainted by the sleep consciousness, so in fact they are not real. Thus when the mind is tainted by spells and so forth, one sees objects that do not actually exist. Similarly, the minds of ordinary beings are tainted by both deluded obscurations and the obscurations of omniscience; while the minds of arhats are tainted by the obscuration of omniscience; and it is only a valid being, a buddha, who has completely overcome both obscurations. Thus, a buddha has completely abandoned all misconceptions and mistaken views. This gives us a sense of what achieving enlightenment means.

The commentary further explains:

Thus by conceiving persons and phenomena as being merely imputed existents, one begins to understand how the 'I' is apprehended by innate self grasping - which is the root of samsara.

This is another subtle point. When one conceives the person or phenomena as being merely imputed existents, (for example how the person is merely imputed upon the aggregates or the six elements, and how the conceptual mind labels the aggregates or six elements as being person) it is not as if the person exists from within the six elements, so it cannot exist from the side of the aggregates. Rather, based on the six elements a person is imputed upon that collection, and that is what merely imputed means. When one begins to understand this, then one will also begin to understand how the 'I' is apprehended by innate self-grasping. This means that when one actually understands that the mode of existence of phenomena is that they are merely imputed, then one will also understand how the misconceived 'I' is apprehended by the innate self-grasping. When that is understood then one will recognise that as being the root of samsara.

Then the commentary reads:

By realising that, one will be able to fully understand how the subtle object of negation is apprehended.

The Venerable Omniscient One [Lama Tsong Khapa] has stated: 'The method is, presenting all phenomena as imputed existents and identifying the object of negation that opposes that'.

When we really think about the meaning of this quote from Lama Tsong Khapa, we will realise that he is making a very profound point. 'Presenting all

phenomena as imputed existents', refers to phenomena being merely imputed or labelled from the side of the conception and not existing in any way from the side of the basis. When one understands how phenomena are merely imputed and labelled by conception, then the opposite of that, (that things are not imputed or labelled, - but exist from their own side, or from the side of the basis) will be understood as being what has to be negated. This makes it clear that there is a direct relationship between the understanding of the actual mode of existence of things and the refutation of the object of negation.

One of the main points to be understood here is the meaning of imputed existence. Is it clear what imputed existence means? Another main point to be understood is identifying the object of negation. So it has to be clear what these mean.

The commentary continues:

Regarding these methods, indeed there is no certainty that great and famous scholars, with the conceit of being the guide of many migrating beings, really could lead others with a few words. The holy beings who have accomplished the essence are however the ones alone who have the utmost knowledge on this matter.

There have been many who have proclaimed themselves as scholars but, despite their conceit, their mere words do not necessarily explain the essential meaning of what is being explained here. On the other hand those holy beings who have engaged in the practice of meditation and so forth, and then relate these points from their experience are the ones who have the most knowledge on this matter.

As proclaimed by the great adept Norzang Gyatso:

The constellation of conceited scholars,
Who follow Losang, the Lord of Illumination,
Speak of objects established by their own
characteristics,
Inherently established entities, and truly existent
phenomena,
As objects to be negated that are bound by words
that designate,
Or objects to be refuted through cognising that they
are posited by one's mind,
And are seen to desire the great middle way that is
free from extremes.¹

I think what is being explained here comes to the same meaning as that presented in the Madhyamika text by Changkya Rolpa Dorje called *Recognising My Old Mother*. As a verse in that text states:

These days some bright minds,
So attached to terminology,
'Self-sustaining', 'truly existent' and so on,
Ignore this animated appearance
And search for another horned creature to refute.

As explained in another commentary on Mahamudra by Trije Tenpa Gyaltsan:

Some say that because the person is conventionally existent it should not be refuted. What is to be refuted is the true existence of person, for a person cannot in any way be truly established. However, while they assert

that on one hand, on the other hand, they assume that the 'animated appearance of a person' is not to be refuted. So leaving the animated appearance of person as it is, they assume a person merely bound by words that designate 'truly existent' is to be negated. This presentation can in no way be accepted.

So, it is my feeling that the explanation given by Norzang Gyatso comes to the same point being made here, which says that leaving aside the animated appearance of a person, and trying to look somewhere else for an object to be negated is missing the point. As explained, there are some who fear that if one were to negate the animated appearance of a person, one would fall into the extreme of nihilism. The main point to be understood in the Prasangika school is that what is to be negated is a truly established person as it appears and apprehended by sentient beings. Thus as these texts explain, holding on to the animated appearance of a person as the conventional person, while using the mere terms 'self-sustaining' and 'truly existent person', and assuming that the animated appearance of a person is not to be negated, is missing the point. So, it is my feeling the explanation given here comes to same point, however I could be wrong.

Another important point not to confuse is that for sentient beings there are two parts to the appearance of a person, a part that is the appearance of a conventional person as well as the part that is the appearance of a truly existent person. So, the object of negation is a truly established person in relation to the appearance of a truly existent person; and not the conventional person itself. In other words the apprehension of truly extent person as it appears to sentient beings is what needs to be negated and not the appearance of the person itself. If one is not clear about this point, it can lead to further confusion. [Translators note: in further checking with Geshe-la, he clarified that while the apprehension of a truly existent person can be abandoned through logic and reasoning, the appearance of a truly existent person, being an obscuration to omniscience, can only be abandoned when one reaches enlightenment - which is done by accumulating merit along the path to enlightenment.]

The quote in the auto-commentary from Norzang Gyatso further reads:

But if they only (assert) mere appearance to mind,
Such as the forms in a dream or illusory horses and
oxen,
And other than that (assert) nothing exists in the
least.

As explained here, the forms in a dream, or illusory horses and oxen are established as being a mere appearance to the mind, but they do not actually exist as they appear. This is the analogy used to illustrate how while things appear as truly existent, in fact they do not exist as truly established phenomena.

The quote continues:

Or if they only (assert) that individual sentient
beings,
From the summit of existence to the hells,
Are merely imputed by conception,
Then I know that without negating the subtle existent
object of negation,
However much they engage in analysis,
There is no way they will become aryaas through this
partial view.

¹ Jampa Igen kindly translated this quote from Norzang Gyatso in the auto-commentary.

This translation uses the term 'aryas', a word can also mean that one will not go to higher levels by being satisfied with only that analysis, which is a partial view. The main point made here is that to merely affirm that dreams or illusory horses and oxen, or all existence from the summit of existence of samsara to the hells, are a mere appearance to the mind and are imputed by conception, and that no matter how much they engage in analysis, without actually negating the subtle object of negation they will not actually reach higher levels. So 'partial view' would mean gaining an understanding of how things lack substantial existence, according to the lower schools' explanation of selflessness. The main point being made here is that without really identifying or negating the subtle existent object of negation, one will not really go to the higher levels of gaining the realisation of the correct view.

The auto-commentary then further explains:

Thus, when investigated, if the 'being', 'person' or 'I' were to exist as it appears to the mind, then there is no other way for it to exist besides as a truly existent entity.

First of all we try to look into how the 'I', or being, or person appears to us. If we were to conclude that the 'I' or person exists as it appears to us, then there is no other way for it to exist besides as a truly existent entity, because that's how it appears to us - as being truly existent or inherently existent. When we really analyse how that 'I' appears to us, it appears as being independently existent, and not depending on any of the other bases such as the six elements or the aggregates, but rather as existing from its own side independently or inherently. Here 'being' 'person' and 'I' are to be understood as being synonymous. Thus what one needs to conclude that a being or person or 'I' does exist, and thus a person exists, but the (inherent) self of a person does not exist. Thus a person is selfless.

What needs to be understood is that if one were to be asked if a person exists, we would be able to answer with confidence that a person does exist. Yet the (inherent) self of a person does not exist. This is a particular distinction that we make in Buddhism. Some non-Buddhist schools such as some Hindu schools would be shocked if it were to be explained that the self of a person does not exist, because they believe in the self of a person as ultimately being established [as the *atma* or soul].

Since the conclusion is that 'I' does exist, what is the 'I' established upon?

Student: An 'I' is that which is imputed on the aggregates and the six elements.

Where is that 'I'?

Student 1: It is imputed on the basis.

Student 2: In the consciousness.

Once, up at Chenrezig Institute we were discussing how the 'I' is established and where it exists, and a lady called Dorje Drolma said confidently 'well, I am sitting on the chair, so that's where it is!' ***The definition of a person is: an 'I' that is imputed upon either of the five aggregates as its basis.*** While the teachings establishes the existence of the 'I' in this way, we still need to ask, 'So where is that 'I' that is imputed upon the five aggregates?'. My

explanation is that when we refer to our aggregates, then that clearly is not the 'I' because we talk about 'my aggregates', 'my head' or even different parts of the body as being a possession of the 'I'. The same is true for the mind or consciousness - we talk about 'my mind' or 'my consciousness', which indicates an 'I' that is separate from it. So, I feel that there is an instinctive and spontaneous sense of 'me' or 'I' that we have within ourselves, which is what we can identify as the 'I'. Maybe you have another interpretation. However we do have that instinctive sense or notion of 'I' or 'me', don't we? So, what is that based upon? How does that notion of 'I' or 'me' arise?

Student 1: Causes and conditions

Student 2: In the consciousness

We do have that notion or sense of 'me' or 'I' irrespective of our aggregates and mind. Of course, even to us it is clear that none of our body parts are the self, because we have that sense of ownership of our body. With the mind too, the very term we use, 'my mind', has that notion that the mind is a possession of the 'I' or the 'me'. Yet there is that instinctive sense or notion that the 'I' or 'me' does exist within ourselves, and since that is there, we need to further investigate how that arises. I would suggest that the instinctive and spontaneous notion or sense of 'I' that is present within ourselves is the basis of what we refer to as a person or 'I'. That is a point for further discussion and investigation.

Besides investigation through discussion, the masters have mentioned that it is really worthwhile to spend some time investigating where the 'I' or the person is while in meditation. Whatever time you spend in meditation investigating the 'I' or 'me' is very, very meaningful if we are to gain a deeper understanding of our identity. And while doing that, it also calms and settles down the mind, so there is that temporary positive effect of calming the mind down too. Besides that immediate positive effect, there is a deeper value to be gained from investigation, which will help us to utilise our potential for a deeper understanding.

There is a verse in the Madhyamika text that reads:

Seeing with awareness that all afflictions and faults arise,
From the view of the transitory collections,
And having realised the self to be its object,
Yogis strive to negate the self.²

So, it would be good to reflect on the meaning of this verse and incorporate it in our meditation.

As mentioned in our last session, it is very important that we really understand the point that it is a matter of focussing on the same object, and apprehending it in different ways. This refers to innate self-grasping versus the wisdom realising selflessness, both of which focus on the 'I' or the person. So although the focal object is the same, the innate self-grasping apprehends it as being inherently existent or truly established, whereas the wisdom realising selflessness apprehends it as lacking inherent existence and true existence. Thus, the two

² See the teaching of 11 May 2004

different apprehensions of the same object are to be understood as being completely opposite to each other. When one understands that, then one gets a sense of what is to be established and what is to be negated.

It is by meditating on these points that one becomes more acquainted with them. When one actually meditates on these points, and will recognise that the apprehension of the 'I' or person as perceived by the innate self-grasping is false, whereas the apprehension of the 'person' or 'I' perceived by the wisdom realising selflessness is true, and it is that which is to be established. So when one gets a good sense or understanding of that, then one acquaints one's mind with the true establishment of the person as perceived by the wisdom realising selflessness. One acquaints one's mind more and more with how the person has to exist in that way, and the more one does that, the more the misconception or misapprehension of the self or 'I', as perceived by the innate self-grasping, will naturally reduce in strength. This is how we eventually negate that misconception of the 'I' or self completely. It is in this manner in meditation that one gains higher and higher realisations. So, it is the main point that we need to understand from the practice.

Student: I wonder whether the 'I' has to be a primordial; that which has existed from beginningless time?

Actually the distinction between the 'I' that is categorised by this life's existence will cease when this life, whatever one's name or label and functions and so forth, ceases. However the mere 'I' is, as you have said, a primordial 'I' that comes from beginningless lifetimes and continues on to future lives. That is the distinctive and instinctive sense of 'me' or 'I' that we have, which would be the primordial 'I' that one has from previous lifetimes. So there is definitely that sense of the 'me' or 'I' that we instinctively have, which is actually something that we had in the past lives and will have in future lives. We will always have that sense of 'me' or 'I' regardless of the characteristics that one has in relation to ourselves now.

There followed considerable discussion among the students on this matter.

As mentioned in our last session, there are three modes of apprehension of the 'I': the apprehension of 'I' that is characterised by a truly existent or established 'I'; the apprehension of 'I' that is not characterised by a truly existent 'I'; and the apprehension of the 'I' that is characterised by neither. Whenever we think 'I want something', or 'I want to do something', or 'I want to go somewhere', that is the sense of 'I' or 'me'.

The different Buddhist schools have different interpretations of what that 'I' is. For example, the Svatantrika school assert the consciousness as the 'I', whereas the Chittamatra or the Mind-only school assert the consciousness that is the basis of all is the 'I'. Then there are the lower schools that assert that the five aggregates are the 'I'.

One master from the Svatantrika school asserts that the 'I' is sort of a continuum within oneself. When we die, the consciousness and this continuum goes on to the next life and then the next life after that, and so on, and that is what has to be considered as the 'I'.

It is only the highest Buddhist school, the Prasangika school, which establishes a 'mere I' as the instance of a person. So the Prasangika do not posit any of the aggregates, or the collection of the aggregates or the consciousness as the 'I' as it is actually just a 'mere I' that is posited as the person or being.

In the lower Buddhist schools when you search for the 'I', you can basically find it, because there is something that is established as being the 'I'. Whereas in the Prasangika Buddhist school, you cannot find the 'I' when you search for it. So the position of the Prasangikas is that when you search for it you cannot find anything besides the mere label 'I'.

Sometimes we may have more familiarity with the lower school's position, so if we are not careful that understanding might influence us, and assume that is what we are referring to as the 'I'. It is important that we try to get a grip on the 'mere I' that is being explained as being the person by the Prasangika school. It is a matter of investigation and finding out through one's own experience.

Apparently scientists have come to a similar conclusion. They have come to the point where when you try and look for the subtlest atom, you can't actually find it, and some scientists have come to agree that the atom is actually nothing more than an imputation or label.

Thus the Prasangika point of view is that things are merely imputed by the mind and exist as an imputation, and that if we were to actually search for the object within itself, we can't find it. For the Prasangika that is the indication that it exists as a mere imputation or a mere label. You can do further discussion and investigation of this for yourselves.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
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Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

འཇིགས་པ་ལྷན་པུགས་ཀྱི་ཆེན་པོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

1 September 2009

Just as we have recited, bring to mind the particular characteristics of refuge and bodhichitta. Refuge secures one from following perverted paths while bodhichitta secures one from the lower-vehicle paths. Based on that understanding we can set our motivation and spend about five minutes in meditation. (*Pause for meditation*)

Of course, we don't have much time to spend in meditation here, so this is a sample of the meditation practice that you can do at home, when you have time. Keep in mind that the main purpose for practising meditation is to calm oneself by subduing one's mind - to free one's mind from negative thoughts. So try to meditate with that intention.

The Buddhist practice of meditation is unique in investigating and understanding the internal matter within oneself. Ultimately the techniques are used as means to overcome grasping at a self, and so that is the ultimate purpose of meditation. As presented in the teachings, that which serves as the main opponent or antidote for overcoming grasping at a self is the wisdom realising selflessness or emptiness. Thus, we are studying selflessness.

The manner of meditating on special insight

HAVING MEDITATED ON SELFLESSNESS, ESTABLISHING THE IMPUTED EXISTENCE (CONT)

In our last session we explained the meaning of the quote by Norzang Gyatso with the following explanation in the auto-commentary:

Thus, when investigated, if the being, person or 'I' were to exist as it appears to the mind, then there is no other way for it to exist besides as a truly existent entity. However, such a being as it appears to conception, is totally non-existent.

When one searches for the being, person or 'I' and investigates whether it exists as it appears to the mind, then the conclusion is that if it were to exist as it appears to the mind, 'then there is no other way for it to exist besides as a truly existent entity'. However the being that appears to the mind is totally non-existent. This indicates that the person or 'I' is not truly existent. In order to understand the full implication of what is being explained here, it is not sufficient to leave our understanding at the mere words 'the "I" is not truly existent'. Just being able to say that will not really help us to gain a deeper understanding of what is being implied here.

Rather, one must further research and investigate - if the 'I' was to exist inherently, then how would it exist? One needs to really search and further investigate the 'I', trying to bring to mind a vivid image as to how it would exist if it were to exist inherently. That is what identifying the object of negation means. Then based on a clear understanding of the object of negation, one goes into the process of eliminating the possibility of there being a truly existent 'I' or person.

Of course there are a variety of syllogisms that are used, however one of the most prominent ones is this: Take the

subject 'a person' - it lacks true existence - because it cannot be established as a truly existent singular entity, nor can it be established as truly existent multiple entities. The implication of this is that if the person or any other phenomena were to exist truly or inherently, then the only way for it to exist is either as a truly existent single entity or truly existent multiple entities. Because anything that is perceived by the mind is perceived as either a single entity or as multiple entities, all existence is subsumed into these two categories. So if the 'I' were to exist inherently, then it would have to exist as either a singular entity or as multiple entities. However, no matter how much we may search for it, we cannot find an 'I' or person that exists as an inherently existent single entity, or as inherently existent multiple entities. Lama Tsong Khapa elucidated this syllogism in his teachings on the lack of truly established existence of things.

When one reaches the point of having totally eliminated any possibility of the 'I' or person existing in that way, then the sense of how it is empty of true existence, or inherent existence, dawns. The main point here is not to leave one's understanding just at the mere words that a person or 'I' lacks true existence or inherent existence, but to undertake a thorough search to understand how the 'I' lacks true existence. If the truly existent 'I' were to exist, where does it exist within oneself? Thus, the commentary leads us into the actual investigation of searching for a truly existent 'I' within oneself. One gets a sense of what it is that is to be negated after a thorough investigation, when one successfully eliminates all possibility of a truly or inherently existent 'I' or person within oneself. Thus, the object of negation becomes clear to the mind, and in this way we are able to establish the lack of inherent or true existence. If we have time later on in our sessions, we can elaborate more on the reasonings presented in the *Lam Rim* and other syllogisms. However, one can also supplement this understanding now by reading the relevant texts.

What has to be specifically understood as the meaning of 'however a being, such as it appears to conception, is totally non-existent', is that it is not the appearance that is 'totally non-existent' but rather that it does not exist in the way that it appears to exist. So the appearance does exist. Using the analogy of the conjured horses and oxen, that illusion of a horse and ox does appear to us, nevertheless it does not actually exist in the way that it appears to us, i.e. it appears to us as a real horse or ox, but in fact it is just a conjured horse and ox that does not exist in reality. Similarly with phenomena, things appear to us as being truly existent, but they don't exist in the way that they appear to us. However the appearance does exist. In terms of obscurations, even though the appearance of inherent existence is an obscuration to omniscience, the appearance does exist. What we have to understand here is that the object does not exist in the way that it appears to oneself.

The search for the non-inherently existing 'I' is done in a meditative state, i.e. one has to actually be in meditation. This means that one withdraws from all distractions and maintains a complete focussed mind. Then, in that focussed state of mind one searches for the 'I' within oneself. One goes through the process of really looking into every aspect of oneself and investigating whether the 'I' exists as an independent or inherently existent 'I'. That is the process of identifying the object of negation, which then forms the basis for one to meditate on the selflessness of the 'I'. What has to be understood is that one investigates the 'I' within meditation, so one is investigating the meditator's 'I', and

based on that investigation one establishes the selflessness of the meditator's 'I'. So that is the process.

As the auto-commentary further reads:

That is because such a being's body and mind respectively are not the 'being'. The combination of body and mind is also not the 'being'. Each of the six elements is not the 'being'. The combination of the six elements is not the 'being'. Yet, there cannot be a 'being' which is completely separate from the six elements. Thus the incomparable protector lord Nagarjuna has said:

The current heading from Kyiwo Tsang's commentary - 'Having meditated on selflessness, establishing the imputed existence' - is the second of two subdivisions of the heading 'The manner of meditating on special insight, (the first subdivision being 'Identifying the object of refutation on the subtlest level').

This second sub-division is further divided into four:

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

There is a significance in the order of these outlines that is quite apparent.

1. MEDITATING UPON ONESELF AS AN OBJECT

This sub-heading is concerned with establishing imputed existence. Initially in meditation, one uses oneself as an object; then having gained a good understanding using oneself as the object, it is relatively easy to apply that understanding [of selflessness] to other objects. The root text reads:

30. *An individual person is not the solid matter of his body, nor is he the liquid, heating or gaseous matter. He is not the space of his body, nor is he the consciousness. If an individual is not any one of these, then the kind of person other than this who does exist is merely the label of a person on the six sensory spheres.*

The explanation in the root text is actually a verse from Nagarjuna's text, *The Precious Garland*. Thus the author is using the very reasons that are presented in Nagarjuna's treatise. In relation to this presentation, the syllogism being used is this: Take the subject 'a person' - it lacks true existence - because it is imputed on the six elements. We introduced this syllogism last week, whereby one gains a further inkling of how the person lacks true existence because it is merely imputed on the six elements.

The main point to understand here is that it is through the logical reasoning 'because the person is imputed upon the six elements', it therefore lacks inherent existence. This is the reasoning that is presented in the sutras. Nagarjuna extracted the essence of the sutras when he explained it in this way. Shantideva also uses this very reasoning to establish the lack of inherent existence or true existence, and Lama Tsong Khapa then further elucidated that. Thus the author presents this reasoning as an essential way of establishing mahamudra. Of course this also is related to the reasoning of interdependent origination, and so, even though it is worded differently, it comes to the same point.

There are actually many attributes of this particular reasoning that is derived from the earlier masters. One of the specific characteristics of this reasoning that has been highly praised is that it enhances one's understanding of the correct view of selflessness or emptiness. Furthermore, it has the

characteristic of being able to eliminate a lot of misconceptions or conceptual thoughts easily. It also has the characteristic of being able to enhance the focus of one's meditation. Another important characteristic is that this syllogism establishes the correct view while not in any way harming the laws of cause and effect and interdependent origination. It is said that rather than harming it actually enhances the establishment of interdependent origination. Thus in the meditation, one relates the reasoning that is based on this syllogism 'Take the subject "the person" or "the being" or "the individual" - it does not exist truly - because it is an imputation based on the six elements' to oneself, and one then goes through each of the six elements within oneself. Thus the understanding of the reasoning is developed from within one's meditation.

The reasoning that the person lacks inherent or true existence negates the possibility of true existence of an individual or a person. The actual reason that a person lacks true existence is because it is merely imputed upon the six elements. The connotation of 'merely imputed' implies that the 'I' does not exist upon the basis.

When this is first presented to someone who does not have much acquaintance with the view of emptiness or selflessness, then that can be a bit of a shock. They might think, 'if the person does not exist upon the very basis that it is imputed upon, then where else could it possibly exist?' It is not surprising that this view might be a bit of a shock. However, the way that it is presented here is a bit more skilful than being just a bald statement. Firstly it says that when searched for, you cannot find it on the basis that it is imputed upon. Not being able to find it after searching for it, gives more space in one's mind, rather than bluntly stating that it does not exist upon the basis at all. So saying you cannot find it on the basis of imputation when you search for it gives a little bit more time for the mind to digest that information. Then as the teaching presents, one actually goes into each of the six elements and searches as to whether the self or 'I' or person exists there or not.

The main point is that if you investigate how you cannot find the 'person' within the six elements. Thus as mentioned earlier, the being's body and mind are not the being, the combination of the body and mind are also not the being, each of the six elements is not the being and the combination of the six elements is not the being either. That is the summarised result of investigating and searching into every aspect of the basis of imputation.

In relation to the meaning of the verse itself, 'An individual person is not the solid matter of his body' refers to the earth element. Solid matter would be for example, the structure of the bones, so the earth element is the solid aspect within one's body. So, upon investigation the bones are not found to be the person. Nor are the liquid aspects of the water element the self. Just as we have to be based on solid matter (bones and other structures), we also need the liquids within our body for survival. 'Heating' refers to the fire element, so we need to have warmth and heat for survival. However, the heating or fire element within oneself is not the self. The gaseous matter refers to the wind element, which at a gross level functions as our breath. And the fact that the external sign of death is when our breathing stops shows how much we depend on the wind element. However, the wind element or the air within oneself is not the person. Then there is the space element, which refers to the crevices, hollows and empty spaces within the body that we also depend on. Even that is not the person. The consciousness is

also not the person. 'If an individual is not any of these' indicates the collection of all of the elements. Therefore individual or being or person is neither one of these elements, nor is it the collection of all of the elements. As the root text further indicates that even though the person is not any one of the elements and not even the collection of the elements, there cannot be a person who is not related to the six elements, i.e. a person that exists as an independently existent entity does not exist.

In this investigation, it is clear that an individual or person cannot exist as a separate entity from the six elements, but that rather the person or individual exists in dependence on the six elements. But when one searches within the six elements (as mentioned earlier) and goes through each of the six elements of the earth, water, fire, wind, space as well as the consciousness, one eliminates every singular aspect of the elements within oneself as being the person. When one does further investigation and finds that the collection is also not the person, then through that process of investigation in meditation one will come to the clear assertion and understanding of how 'person' is a mere label that is imputed upon the six elements.

The auto-commentary then quotes from Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* text, which I have explained previously. The presentation in the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* is a more thorough investigation of the basis of imputation, going into each and every aspect of what makes up ourselves. It first looks at the physical aspects, and then goes on to the aspect of consciousness and every other aspect of the characteristics that make up a person, searching whether that is the person or not.

As the auto-commentary reads:

Similarly, as stated in the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*:

Teeth, hair and nails are not a 'self',
Nor is 'self' the bones or blood,
'Self' is neither mucus nor phlegm,
Nor is 'self' lymph or pus
'Self' is not fat nor sweat,
Neither is 'self' the lungs nor liver,
'Self' is not any other visceral organs,
Neither is 'self' faeces nor urine.
Flesh and skin are not a 'self',
Nor is 'self' heat or wind,
In no way is 'self' one of the bodily orifices,
Nor are any of the six types of consciousness a 'self'.¹

The auto-commentary then further explains the meaning of these verses, and includes definitions of each of the elements.

As the auto-commentary reads:

As stated, the being, self or 'I' is not any of the solid body aspects of the earth element, such as the bones and so forth. Nor is the self any of the fluid aspects of the water element, such as blood and so forth. The self is neither any of the heat aspects of the fire element - which pervades from the top of the crown to the bottom of the feet. The being is not the light and moving aspect of the wind element. The orifices of the body such as the pores are not the being. The various types of consciousnesses such as the eye consciousness are not the self, and the self is not any of the consciousnesses either. The collection of the consciousnesses is not the self, and the self is not the collection too. As such, there is no other

instance of the self existing in the way that it appears and apprehended by the meditator.

The auto-commentary next quotes from sutras that explain that the self is not one of the five aggregates.

The sutras also state: Form is not 'self'; feelings are not 'self'; discrimination is not 'self'; compositional factors are not 'self'; consciousness is not 'self'.

The auto-commentary then further explains:

Thus, the meditator's five aggregates, six elements, the collections of these, the shape of the collections and so forth are not the meditator's 'being'. For if it were, then the fallacy of the bases of imputation and the imputed phenomena; the one that adopts and that which is adopted; and that which possess branches and the branches themselves; would have to become one.

This is a more elaborate explanation relating to explanations given in other teachings as well.

The sutra quoted above actually identifies each of the five aggregates as not being the self. The first, the form aggregate refers to our physical aggregate, our physical body. Nor are the second aggregate, feeling, and the self. The third of the aggregates is the aggregate of discrimination; the fourth the aggregate of compositional factors, and the fifth aggregate is the aggregate of consciousness. So the sutra identifies each of the five aggregates and explains that they are not the self.

I have explained the reason for the particular order of the five aggregates in the past, however to refresh your memory I will just go over the sequence again. When we perceive anything, the first thing that we perceive is the shape or colours of an object, which is the *form aggregate*. Then based on whether the object appears attractive, unattractive or neutral, one develops either a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling, which is the *aggregate of feeling*. Then based on any of those feelings, a faulty sense of discrimination develops in our mind, which is the *aggregate of discrimination*. Then we generate attachment towards attractive objects, anger towards unattractive objects and indifference towards neutral objects. Attachment, anger and indifference are encompassed in the *aggregate of compositional factors*. The states of mind of attachment, anger or indifference then leave an imprint upon the consciousness, which is the *aggregate of consciousness*. This is how we create the karma to be reborn again and again in the cyclic existence. This explanation is from the *Abhidharmakosha*.

When we understand the significance behind the order of the five aggregates as actually relating to our own experiences of relating to objects, then we gain a deeper understanding that sums up our existence here in the cyclic existence. We can leave the second part of the quote from the auto-commentary for our next session. Meanwhile it is good for you to read the commentary as translated in the textbook that you have. It is good if one has access to these books and familiarises oneself with the points made here.

The purpose of going into great detail is so that we will be able to gain the unmistakable and correct understanding of the view of emptiness. As mentioned previously, just repeating the words 'things don't exist inherently', or 'things don't exist truly', will not be sufficient for us to get the correct understanding of the view of emptiness. Rather, the process of gaining the correct view of emptiness or selflessness is through a thorough investigation based on sound reasonings.

¹ See the teaching of 24 May 2005.

If we were to try to do some reasoning just by ourselves, without reference to the teachings, then we could easily come to the wrong conclusions, and that again will not serve the purpose of gaining the correct understanding of the view of emptiness. In fact if we were to rely just on our own reasoning then we could easily fall into either of the two extremes. If we try to do too much analysis and investigation, without the basis of good reasoning, then there is a danger of falling into the extreme of nihilism (where we assume that nothing exists and the self does not exist at all). Whereas if we don't investigate enough, then we will not be able to gain the correct view, and we will just remain with that normal notion that we have of things as being solid and existing truly. So for an unmistaken and correct understanding of emptiness, one must investigate using the reasonings that are presented in the teachings.

The masters who presented these reasonings based on the Buddha's teachings have really worked hard in presenting it in the most correct manner possible. A good understanding based on the correct view of emptiness is necessary if we are to do other practices such as the tantric practices of visualising oneself as a deity. With every tantric practice of visualising oneself as a deity, one has to arise as a deity in the sphere of emptiness. This means that one has to have a correct understanding of emptiness in order to rise as a deity in the sphere of emptiness. If we don't have a proper understanding of what emptiness means, then in the beginning we might assume a deep state of trying to do the visualisation of the deity within that sphere of emptiness, but then later on in the practice we come back to assuming our view as an ordinary being, where we go back to normal perceptions and act as an ordinary being. That is the fault of not having a sound and proper understanding of emptiness or not maintaining a proper understanding of emptiness. Thus in every aspect of the practices, sutra or tantra, it is essential that we get the proper, unmistaken and correct understanding of emptiness.

Of course these points have been explained earlier during our Madhyamika classes, however I will just re-cap the main ones. In the process of study, and periodic recollection, and thinking about the view of emptiness and how it is established, we may not be able to gain an actual realisation of emptiness in this lifetime. That might be too high an expectation, as it might, in fact, be quite impossible to actually achieve this in one lifetime.

Nevertheless, every effort and every attempt that we make in that process will not be in vain. Every time we make an attempt to understand emptiness it leaves a very profound imprint in our mind to become the suitable vessel for receiving the profound teachings of emptiness. What we do now is preparation for when we meet the correct master, the master who is able to impart the unmistaken view of emptiness. The Madhyamaka text says,

Whoever, upon hearing emptiness while an ordinary
being
Repeatedly generates intense inner joy, whose eyes are
Moistened by tears arising from intense joy,
And whose body hairs stand on end.²

As mentioned, a suitable trainee is moved to the extent of feeling such joy that it manifests in a physical aspect of tears uncontrollably flowing from one's eyes and the hairs on one's body standing on end. If upon hearing the words 'emptiness' one is not moved in that way, then that is

already a sign that one has not yet become the actual and proper trainee with all of the right conditions. What I'm trying to point out here is that every attempt that we make now it will leave deep imprints in our mind to gain all the necessary conditions as a trainee to receive the profound teachings on emptiness, which will result in quickly developing the realisation of emptiness.

As people would be aware the next session is discussion and the one after that is the exam. It is good to take that to heart and try to do the best you can, in both the discussion and the exam.

Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
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² See the teaching of 26 November 2002.

DISCUSSION

Week: 1 (11 August 2009)

1. Explain why focusing on either 'I' or 'mine' are equally the same view of the transitory collection. [4]
2. Does an 'I' exist and how is this different to the view of the transitory collections? [4]
3. When would be an appropriate time to investigate the misapprehended 'I'? How does that 'I' appear to us at that time? [4]

Week: 2 (18 August 2009)

1. What does 'Imputed existence' mean? Explain with the example of Jeremy, or someone.
2. Show the further and subtler implications with the analogy of labeling the striped rope as a snake.
3. Explain what leads us to create the karma that propels us into the rounds of cyclic existence.

Week: 3 (25 August 2009)

1. Give the particular syllogism (re: the person) used in the Mahamudra context. Also, show the reason used in another format.
2. What is the method for overcoming the obscurations to omniscience?
3. What is the difference between deluded obscurations and obscurations to omniscience?

Week: 4 (1 September)

10. Go through the sequence of the five aggregates.

Exam

Name:

Block: 5

Mark:

Week: 6 (15 September 2009)

1. Explain why focusing on either 'I' or 'mine' are equally the same view of the transitory collection. [4]

2. Does an 'I' exist and how is this different to the view of the transitory collections? [2]

3. When would be an appropriate time to investigate the misapprehended 'I'? How does that 'I' appear to us at that time? [4]

4. What does 'Imputed existence' mean? Explain with the example of Jeremy, or someone. [4]

5. Show the further and subtler implications with the analogy of labeling the striped rope as a snake. [4]

6. Explain what leads us to create the karma that propels us into the rounds of cyclic existence. [3]

7. Give the particular syllogism (re: the person) used in the Mahamudra context. Also, show the reason used in another format. [4]

8. What is the method for overcoming the obscurations to omniscience? [3]

9. What is the difference between deluded obscurations and obscurations to omniscience?
[4]

10. Go through the sequence of the five aggregates. [6]