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# Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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Along with the motivation that we have just generated by reciting the refuge and bodhichitta prayer, we will engage in five minutes of meditation. (*pause for meditation*)

Prior to engaging in a teaching session like this, the most important thing is to generate a good motivation on both sides. As you work towards developing a good motivation, from my side I also generate a good motivation for sharing the teachings. The motivation is as, as indicated earlier, along the lines of the prayer of taking refuge and generating bodhichitta that we have just recited. Generating bodhichitta secures the practice as a Great Vehicle or Mahayana practice, which is based on love and compassion. It is that sense of love and compassion that secures our motivation as a unique Mahayana motivation.

Generating a positive motivation at the outset also secures us against falling into despair in the event that we are not able to succeed in the goals that we have set ourselves. We may have encountered occasions where, after setting certain goals for ourselves, we do not actually achieve them. When that happens, it can bring about a lot of despair, making us feel depressed and upset. In a worldly context we know that even if we set out goals for ourselves it is not certain that we will actually achieve them. However when that happens, it can still bring disappointment and despair to our minds.

Generating a positive motivation can help to secure our mind against feeling despair in the event that we don't achieve the goals that we have set out for ourselves. There is definitely a difference in our state of mind when we set out on a good motivation. We will be able to adopt the attitude, 'Well, I've initiated in this activity with the best of intentions, however if I am not able to achieve my goals, then it is probably because it is beyond my capacity'. In this way we do not allow not achieving our goals to affect our mind, leading to despair.

From the teacher's side the significance of setting a good motivation is this: when you embark on giving teachings without the proper motivation then the reactions of others can easily influence your mind. For example, if others praise one it may cause pride to arise, leading to pompous thoughts such as 'I must have done very well'. So the praise becomes the cause for pride.

If one is criticised for not giving a good teaching, then that can cause anger to arise in the mind. Developing a good motivation prior to engaging in the teaching - a motivation that is free from any desire for praise, and which has the intention to really benefit others - will definitely help to prevent negative feelings of pride or anger from arising as a result of the comments that others make. Not generating anger when others make critical

remarks, and rejoicing when others praise us would be a positive reaction.

Personally, I consider this an important point in my own practice. Thus, I encourage you to also follow suit, by adopting a similar motivation - particularly those of you who give teachings to others.

Lacking a good motivation can also cause stage fright. You might come to give teachings and begin to shake because of a lack of confidence. Back in about 1984 when the centre was in St Kilda, not that many people came to the Monday sessions. Owen suggested that maybe we should discontinue having them, but I thought that it would be beneficial to continue offering the meditation sessions. So, I said that I would think about it.

Noticing the relaxed demeanour of one of the students, Hal Young, I thought it would be good for him to lead the Monday session, and on the first evening about 14 people attended. The second time I asked Alison to lead the session because she seemed to have the particular talent of being able to talk softly and gently, so I thought that would be good. About 10 minutes before the session began Alison came to see me, saying, 'There are about 40 people there, and ten minutes to go! What should I do?' She seemed to be very shaky. My immediate advice was, 'Don't be afraid. When you go to the session try not to feel overwhelmed with the number of people in the audience, just contemplate Tara above you, and think that Tara is guiding you in giving the talk. Also try to generate a good positive motivation and you will be fine'. After the session she came back smiling; she seemed to have done well. Of course these days she has no hesitation in giving talks.

## INTRODUCING THE MIND THAT IS THE OBJECT OF FOCUS (CONT.)

This topic is subdivided into two

1. That which is mistaken
2. Accepting that which is unmistakable

In our last session we covered the mistaken technique, which refers to mistaking the recognition of the conventional mind as the ultimate nature of the mind.

### 2. ACCEPTING THAT WHICH IS UNMISTAKABLE

The root text states

*27. This may well be so, but what has been explained here is the best method for merely settling the mind on the initial level. I, Cho-kyi Gyaltsan, say that this is the way merely to introduce yourself to the conventional mind.*

The auto-commentary doesn't give much explanation about this verse. In relation to how to develop calm abiding, Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains that when one comes to the point of recognising the conventional mind then that is the unmistakable identification of the mind itself, and that this is according to the explanation of Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltsan's own lama Sanggye Yeshe. Thus, the verse states, the author will explain the further points in accordance with his own lama's explanation.

#### Identification of the conventional mind

What is being introduced here is the identification of the conventional mind. When using the mind as an object of

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focus on which to develop calm abiding, one comes to the point of recognising the conventional nature of the mind, which is that it is clear and free from any obstruction of physical phenomena, and which by nature is empty like space. That is how the conventional mind is identified. Because one of the natural characteristics of the mind is that it is empty like space, there are those who mistake that for the ultimate nature of the mind, thus believing that they have realised the emptiness of the mind. So, the mistaken view is believing that one has seen the ultimate nature of the mind, when in fact one has merely seen the conventional mind.

In relation to recognising the conventional mind, the point that one needs to understand is that in the process of developing calm abiding by using the mind as an object to focus on, one has recognised the conventional mind when one reaches the point of being able to identify the clarity and un-obstructive nature of the mind. However that doesn't mean that one has realised the conventional truth of the mind. The older students may remember that this point was clarified in the Madhyamaka teachings.

In order to realise the conventional truth of any object one has to understand that the phenomenon is false; in order to recognise the phenomenon as being false one has to first negate the phenomenon as being truly existent. Thus, in order to understand the phenomenon as being a conventional truth one has to have the pre-existing understanding of the lack of true or inherent existence of the object. Do you remember those points from earlier classes on Madhyamika?

What is being pointed out here is while identifying the clarity of the mind is recognising the conventional mind that, however, does not mean that one has understood the conventional truth of the mind. To understand the conventional truth of any phenomenon one has to first realise the phenomenon as being false in appearance, and prior to that one has to have negated the phenomenon as being established as truly existent.

For example, in order to establish someone as a liar, the fact they are honest has to be negated first. This means that to recognise someone as a liar or cheat, we already have to know that they don't tell the truth. One cannot recognise someone as a liar if one does not already know that they do not tell the truth. Similarly, in realising the conventional truth of any object, one has to first recognise the object as false, and in order to recognise the object as false, one has to have first negated a truly existent object.

The actual implication of these subtle differences of what is false and what is true were introduced in the Madhyamaka teachings. So it is important to refer to those teachings and revise these points.

### **Conventional and ultimate nature of the mind**

In relation to the mind, the conventional mind has to be posited as being false, whereas the ultimate nature of the mind, the emptiness of the mind, is true. That is because the main consciousness that perceives the ultimate nature or emptiness of the mind is the primordial wisdom of an arya being in meditative equipoise, and as things exist as they appear to this consciousness, they are therefore true. Whereas the consciousness that perceives the

conventional mind is a mind of duality, thus things do not exist as they appear to this consciousness. That is why the objects that appear to a mind of duality are referred to as conventional phenomena, and are false. These are really important points to know in order to get a good understanding.

For example, the main consciousness that sees this clock is the eye consciousness. According to the explanations in the teachings we have to say that the clock does not exist in a way that it appears to the eye consciousness. If one were to ask whether the clock actually exists, then of course the conclusion is that the clock does exist. However it does not exist in the way that it appears to the eye consciousness. What does that actually mean?

*Student: To the eye consciousness, the physical form of the clock appears to exist from its own side, without any appearance of it being merely labelled and dependent on causes and conditions; but it does not exist in that way.*

That is correct. The consciousness that realises the ultimate nature of the clock would be for example, the primordial wisdom realising emptiness of an arya being in meditative equipoise. Thus, the ultimate reality of the clock (which is the emptiness of the clock) exists as it appears to the arya being's meditative consciousness.

When one understands this point then one has also understood one of the assertions of the Prasangika view (the highest Buddhist School), which is that sentient beings' eye consciousnesses are necessarily mistaken consciousnesses. The reason why a sentient being's five sense consciousnesses perceive things mistakenly, is because their consciousnesses are influenced either by the actual grasping at true existence, or the imprints of grasping at true existence.

- ∞ Grasping at true existence - either on a manifest level or as an imprint - influences the sense consciousnesses to perceive things in a mistaken way. That is why all sorts of distortions appear to the perception of sentient beings.
- ∞ The consciousness of an arya being in meditative equipoise does not have any dualistic appearance. The only thing that appears to the consciousness of an arya being in meditative equipoise, is emptiness, which is ultimate and non-mistaken reality.
- ∞ To the consciousness of an enlightened being, or a buddha, everything appears just as it is, without any mistaken views or any dualistic appearances at any time

### **INTRODUCING THE OBJECT, EMPTINESS<sup>1</sup>**

This heading has two subdivisions:

1. The pledge of composition
2. How to engage in the practice after having established it

#### **1. The pledge of composition**

The verse of the root text relating to this heading is

*28. Therefore I shall now explain the methods for introducing yourself to the true nature of the mind in accordance with the oral teachings of*

<sup>1</sup> The sequence of headings is according to Kyiwo Tsang's commentary, which differs from that used in the auto-commentary.

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*my root guru, who eliminates all darkness of the mind, looking like a saffron-robed monk, but being in actuality a manifestation of the wisdom of all the buddhas.*

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains that the word 'therefore' in the verse can have two connotations: it can indicate the connection between the earlier presentation and the following presentations, and also refers to the explanation of the actual mahamudra, which is object mahamudra.

You will recall that earlier in the presentation that mahamudra is divided into subject mahamudra and object mahamudra, and that subject mahamudra is further divided into sutra mahamudra and tantra mahamudra, both of which refer to the wisdom realising emptiness.

Subject mahamudra refers to establishing the view from within the meditative state. You will recall the two different techniques introduced earlier: 1) gaining an understanding of the view first and then meditating on the mind, and 2) meditating on the mind first and then gaining the understanding of the view afterwards. The system followed here is establishing the technique of meditation first, thus the presentation so far has been on how to develop calm abiding using the mind as an object to focus on. Having explained that, what is being presented now is the actual mahamudra or object mahamudra, which is emptiness itself.

In further explaining the meaning of verse 28, Kyiwo Tsang's commentary explains that the essence or the wisdom of all the buddhas of the ten directions manifests in the aspect of a fully ordained saffron-robed monk; which is referring to Panchen Losang Cho-kyi Gyaltsan's own guru Sanggye Yeshe. With modesty the author says, 'Although my lama has an ordinary appearance as a saffron robed monk, in essence, in accordance with his name, he is the "wisdom of all buddhas'. From my lama I have received the transmission of the Ensapa lineage. This lineage that I have received from my own lama has not previously been established in writing, so I take upon myself the responsibility for formulating it in writing, and thus compose this text'.

In explanation of the verse the auto-commentary says, 'While the meaning of the verse can be understood easily, the pledge made here differs to the earlier pledge thus there is no fault of redundancy'.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary clarifies the reasons why there is no fault of redundancy. He explains that there are three pledges that are made at different times. The first pledge was to present mahamudra in general, the second pledge is to introduce the subject, which is the conventional mind, and the third pledge, being made here, is to introduce the object, which is emptiness itself, the actual mahamudra.

### **The uniqueness of the union of calm abiding and special insight**

According to Kyiwo Tsang the third pledge also has the implication of showing the uniqueness of the union of calm abiding and special insight. His commentary then indicates that as the view of emptiness is the actual path of liberation, thus it is referred to as actual mahamudra.

The technique for developing calm abiding serves as a method for realising the actual view of emptiness. However calm abiding itself cannot be established as being actual mahamudra.

Kyiwo Tsang states that the explanation of the method of achieving calm abiding was presented with a threefold classification: the preliminaries, the actual and the completion<sup>2</sup>. One may wonder whether 'the actual' refers to the actual mahamudra, but there the term 'actual' refers to the actual presentation of calm abiding as a method of realising the actual mahamudra. It is referred to as 'the actual' to encourage and give others faith in developing calm abiding. According to our own system the calm abiding technique that was presented earlier is used to realise the ultimate nature of the mind. The main reason why calm abiding was introduced first is so that it can be combined with special insight.

Kyiwo Tsang's commentary further explains that in the auto-commentary there are various different presentations of the actual mahamudra under the heading, 'the general classifications', which are in accordance with the different capacities and mental dispositions of the disciples. The auto-commentary also includes an explanation of its own point of view under the heading, 'Combining the Essence of All'. Kyiwo Tsang's commentary omits the different presentation from different lineages and goes straight to where the auto-commentary relates to combining the essence of all.

The actual presentation according to our own system is the Middle Way presentation, which is the view that is free from both extremes. This was clearly presented by Lama Tsong Khapa, so Kyiwo Tsang quotes this verse from *The Lines Of Experience*, Lama Tsong Khapa's brief lam rim text:

- Meditative concentration is the king wielding power over the mind
- If you fix it (on one point), it remains immovable like mighty Mount Meru.
- If you project it, it can permeate any virtuous object (at will).
- It leads to the great exhilarating bliss of having your body and mind be applicable (to any virtuous task).
- Knowing this, the yogis of (mental) control have devoted themselves continuously to single-minded concentration, which overcomes the enemies of mental wandering and dullness.

The commentary explains that the main point to extract from the line 'knowing this the yogis of mental control have devoted themselves continuously to single-minded concentration, which overcomes the enemies of mental wandering and dullness' is that when one attains calm abiding one obtains the ability to keep one's mind single-pointedly focused on an object. That in itself is not such a great achievement; it is a merely a sign of having developed single-pointed concentration on an object. Being able to keep one's mind focused single-pointedly on an object for as long as one wishes does not, in itself, overcome the subtle misconceptions in one's mind.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a good example of the way in which the heading structure of the auto-commentary and Kyiwo Tsang's commentary differ.

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The main point here is that one must be able to use that single-pointed concentration to further terminate subtle obscurations in one's mind. Using this combination of calm abiding and special insight to further investigate and penetrate the ultimate reality of phenomena will completely destroy the very seeds and imprints of the obscurations.

This is really very sound advice. One should not to be content with having developed single-pointed concentration: rather one should use that to further enhance one's wisdom and thus use the special insight to further analyse ultimate reality. In accordance with the above quote from Lama Tsong Khapa's text, when calm abiding is combined with special insight then you can project it and permeate any virtuous object at will.

The connotation here is that while the mere development of calm abiding may allow you to focus single-pointedly on an object, if you do not have the ability to further investigate and analyse all other objects of focus, then the virtue that one gains from that single-pointed concentration is very limited. One does not gain the highest virtues, which are the means to destroy the inner obscurations. However combining calm abiding with special insight develops that ability to further analyse and investigate different objects. That is how one gains the highest virtues.

As the commentary further clarifies, if we have the potential or ability to meditate on emptiness or selflessness, but do not fully understand how special insight is crucial to further enhance our understanding, then it is as if we are intentionally prolonging our existence in samsara. Not only would we not be practising in accordance with the Mahayana vehicle, but we would not even be practising in accordance with the lower vehicle, which is to achieve self liberation. Even that cannot be achieved if we don't develop special insight.

What has been explained so far is in accordance with the system of realising the view after having established the meditative state that is calm abiding. However the calm abiding that is developed has to be on the basis of the view. It is not as if this system uses a different object to meditate on. Rather the object on which calm abiding is developed is the view that one has familiarised oneself with earlier. In both cases the importance of the view realising emptiness or selflessness is emphasised in conjunction with special insight. In order to explain that further the commentary quotes from another of Lama Tsong Khapa's lam rim texts.

The points that are raised here in this commentary are quite significant and quite important for the development of our practice. That is why I have taken some time to go into it. Otherwise we could just use the auto-commentary, which does not have an extensive explanation of these points.

It is quite important for us to gain a good understanding of what it means to seek the view after having first established the meditative state. The implications of this are an important point for us to understand.

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full implication in this way, one will derive a greater meaning from the quote.

### Compassion and suffering

As mentioned here, out of great compassion the Buddha revealed the view of emptiness. Now, this is a very profound and unique level of compassion. As you will recall from the Madhyamika teachings, the three levels compassion are:

1. The compassion of merely focusing on sentient beings;
2. The compassion of focusing on the aspect of Dharma;
3. The compassion of focusing on suchness or emptiness.

The compassion of merely focusing on sentient beings refers to the compassion that is developed as a result of merely focusing on the obvious sufferings of sentient beings. This level of compassion is common to all religious traditions. When seeing someone else suffering, even individuals who do not believe in any particular religion can have the compassionate feeling of wishing them to be free from that particular type of suffering. Furthermore, everyone seems to agree that compassion is the basis in all religions.

Is there is any difference between the compassion that Buddhism presents and that of other religions? One needs to understand that the specific difference is that Buddhists present the other two levels of compassion. For example, focusing on sentient beings wandering in samsara as a consequence of lacking the understanding of emptiness is compassion focusing on emptiness. When one reflects upon this reality, then that instils a deeper and much more profound level of compassion within oneself. This is the compassion that is unique to the Buddhist faith, as other traditions do not have this presentation. This is important for us to understand.

Older students will recall that the Madhyamaka text opens with verses dedicated to the first level of compassion, which is focusing merely on sentient beings.<sup>1</sup> You will recall reference to developing compassion by focusing on the endless suffering of sentient beings. That is the implication of the first level of compassion.

Just as it is necessary for us to develop our compassion to a more profound level, so too with the understanding one gets from the teachings, the level of renunciation needs to become more profound as well. For example, developing a sense of renunciation of the first type of suffering (the suffering of suffering) is relatively easy, because no one considers that type of suffering as being desirable. Physical or mental pain is something that we all understand and recognise as being undesirable and unpleasant. Whereas the wish to be free from the second level of suffering, the suffering of change, and the more subtle pervasive suffering, leads to a much more profound understanding of suffering and thus renunciation is fully developed.

For us to be able to derive more essence from our practice it is essential that we practise in accordance with the understanding that we get from the teachings. You will recall from the teachings that the level of renunciation needs to be developed to the point of where one is not only disgusted with unpleasant suffering, but disgusted with the pleasures of samsara as well. One needs to develop the profound understanding of how even the pleasures of samsara are actually in the nature of suffering. Thus one develops wariness towards samsaric pleasures and

generates the wish to renounce them as well. When we reach a level in our practice where we have a developed a real feeling of renunciation in our mind, not just mouthing the words but a true sense of renunciation, then on this firm and stable basis our practice will develop further.

### The antidote

In relation to the second two lines of the quote from the sutra *An Inquiry by Arya Rastrapala*, the auto-commentary states:

Thus, seeing the plight of sentient beings in samsara, the great compassionate teacher presented various methods for realising selflessness, as well as establishing selflessness through a hundred-fold reasoning. Thus, the path for realising selflessness had been established both explicitly and implicitly.

What is to be understood here is that the method for presenting the view of emptiness is established through many reasons, explicitly in some teachings and implicitly in other teachings. In all cases, the teachings are directed towards gaining the realisation of emptiness.

The auto-commentary then continues:

Likewise the great protector Shantideva says:  
The Mighty One taught all these practices,  
For the sake of gaining wisdom.

These are the first two lines of the ninth chapter of Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, the last two lines of which are:

Thus those who wish to be free from suffering,  
Must strive towards realising emptiness.

What is being indicated here is that all the practices that were presented in the earlier chapters of the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* such as generosity, ethics, concentration and so forth, were presented by Buddha Shakyamuni, referred to as the Mighty One, as a cause to gain wisdom, meaning the wisdom realising emptiness. Thus, Shantideva says, those who wish to be liberated from suffering must strive to gain the realisation of emptiness.

Then the auto-commentary quotes from Atisha's work:

The great master, Atisha also says:  
The forty four thousand bundles of Dharma,  
Were taught for the purpose of [realising] emptiness.

As stated, the purpose for the Mighty One to expound the forty four thousand bundles of Dharma was ultimately to serve as methods for disciples to perfectly realize suchness or selflessness [indicating the direct realisation of suchness or emptiness].

However, in order to gain the direct realisation of selflessness, one needs to meditate on selflessness based on first hearing and contemplating it.

### The direct realisation of emptiness

How do you gain a direct realisation of selflessness? I bring up these questions as way to refresh your memory and not forget those points.

*Student: You have to realise selflessness at a non-conceptual level, that things don't exist from their own side.*

What does non-conceptual mean?

*Student: The realisation of emptiness without a generic image.*

To be more specific, as you have mentioned, the direct realisation of emptiness is perceiving emptiness without mixing it with a generic image. It is not possible for ordinary beings to perceive emptiness without a generic image. This means that an ordinary being always has to go through a

<sup>1</sup> See 9 April 2002 and 16 April 2002, and page 116 of *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism*.

generic image in order to perceive emptiness. Thus the one who has gained the direct realisation of emptiness without having to go through or mixing with a generic image is an arya or superior being.

Another point to keep in mind is before gaining the direct perception (Tib: *mnong sum*) of emptiness, one has to first have an explicit perception (Tib: *ngo su*) of emptiness. Ordinary beings can have an explicit perception of emptiness, but not the direct perception of emptiness. There is a difference between an explicit perception of emptiness and the direct perception emptiness. To have an explicit perception of an object means to see the object with its actual aspect appearing to the consciousness, while direct perception means to perceive the object non-conceptually; which is the consciousness perceiving the object without mixing it with the generic image of the object.

To give a more common example, when the eye consciousness sees the colour red with your eyes open, that perception is both a direct perception as well as an explicit perception of the colour red. It is an explicit perception because the actual aspect of red appears to the eye consciousness. It is a direct perception because you see the colour red without mixing it with a generic image. Now when you close your eyes and think about the colour red, you will perceive an image of the colour red. That image is perceived by the mental consciousness and it is not a direct perception. There is an appearance of red at a conceptual level, but it is not a direct perception of the colour red because there is a generic image involved. What is being perceived is a mental image rather than the actual colour red.

### The importance of the correct approach

The auto-commentary said that 'one needs to meditate on selflessness based on first hearing and contemplating it'. What is being presented here is the actual procedure of gaining the realisation of emptiness. One needs to first hear an unmistakable presentation of what emptiness or selflessness is. In order to gain a really sound understanding of what emptiness is, one needs to hear the unmistakable presentation many times over. Then one needs to contemplate and think about it thoroughly again and again with the various different logical reasons. Then as a result of hearing and thinking about emptiness many times over, one would have created a sound basis for meditating on emptiness. That is the proper procedure for gaining the actual realisation of emptiness.

The auto-commentary continues:

The meditation of merely developing calm abiding, such as that of the non-Buddhists, cannot serve to abandon the delusions. It is as stated in *The King of Concentration sutra*:

Although worldly persons cultivate concentration,  
They do not destroy the notion of self.  
Afflictions return to disturb them,  
As they did for Udraka, who cultivated concentration  
in this way.

The meaning of this quote from *The King of Concentration sutra* is clear: although worldly people cultivate concentration, that does not destroy the notion of self and so afflictions return to disturb them.

Apparently Udraka was an individual who developed concentration to the point of achieving calm abiding, and having obtained calm abiding, qualities such as the clairvoyance and the miraculous feats were also obtained.

However when the attainment of calm abiding is lost, the miraculous powers, clairvoyance and so forth are also lost. At that time the manifest levels of the delusions become very strong in the mind again. What is being implied here is that even though ordinary beings may develop concentration to the highest level of calm abiding, that will not in itself serve as a means of destroying the notion of a self or grasping at a true self.

### The three principles of the path

What one needs to derive as a personal instruction from this is that if meditation is done without the three essential principles of the path, which are renunciation, bodhichitta and the wisdom realising emptiness, then even if one were to attain calm abiding, that will not be a cause to be free from samsara and obtain liberation. To be more specific, lack of renunciation is the main obstacle to liberation, whereas lack of bodhichitta is an obstacle to achieving enlightenment, and the lack of realisation of emptiness is an obstacle to developing the antidote for overcoming the grasping at true existence of the self.

Without these three elements, one will not derive much essence from one's practice. What we can derive as a personal instruction here is that whenever we engage in the practice of meditation, we need to try to relate it to these three principles of the path, and to try to combine one's practice with a sense of renunciation, bodhichitta and whatever understanding one has of the view of emptiness.

As mentioned previously, at the very least developing renunciation secures one's practice to becoming the cause for obtaining liberation; developing bodhichitta is a cause for obtaining enlightenment; and developing an understanding of emptiness is a cause for developing the antidote that overcomes grasping at true existence.

The auto-commentary then gives a further explanation:

If asked what then is the meditation for actually obtaining liberation?

This question is implying that if merely obtaining calm abiding does not serve as a cause to achieve liberation, the what type of meditation does serve as the cause to obtain liberation?

To quote from the same [*The King of Concentration*] sutra again:

If you analytically discern the lack of self in  
phenomena,  
And if you cultivate that analysis in meditation;  
This will cause the result, attainment of nirvana;  
There is no peace through any other means.

What one needs to understand from this quote is that the mere attainment of calm abiding is not sufficient. In addition, one must also develop special insight in order to analytically discern the lack of self in phenomena. Cultivating that analysis in meditation, specifically implies developing special insight in conjunction with calm abiding

### The object of negation

Then the auto-commentary continues:

As stated above, by first analysing the selfless nature of phenomena, and then meditating on the meaning derived from that analysis, one will obtain the result of liberation. Even though selflessness by its own nature cannot be divided into coarse and subtle, it is however classified into selflessness of persons and selflessness of phenomena.

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As explained by the glorious Chandrakirti:

For the sake of liberating sentient beings,  
Selflessness is classified into that of persons and  
phenomena.

The older students will recall these points from the Madhyamaka teachings. Specifically this is where the actual object, which is emptiness, is introduced. What is the implication when it says 'even though selflessness by its own nature cannot be divided into coarse and subtle, it is however classified into selflessness of persons and selflessness of phenomena'?

*Student: The aspect of selflessness is the same, which is that both phenomena and person lack existence from their own side. That view is unique to the Prasangika. It is only the object qualified by emptiness that is different, not the object of negation itself.*

As opposed to the lower Buddhist schools from the Svatantrika-Madhyamika downwards, the Prasangika do not distinguish between the coarseness and subtlety of the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena. So it is unique to the Prasangika - that there is no division between selflessness of person and selflessness of phenomena in terms of coarseness and subtlety. Why is that so?

*Student: The Svatantrika posit the person's lack of being a self-sufficient substantially existent person. Realising that, will overcome the obstacle to liberation, but will not overcome the obstacles to omniscience.*

To be more specific there is no difference in the object of negation for both the selflessness of the person and the selflessness of phenomena in the Prasangika. For the Svatantrika-Madhyamika school, however, the object of negation in relation to a person is a self-sufficient substantially existent person, while the object of negation in the selflessness of phenomena is independent existence. From the Prasangika point of view, however the object of negation of both person and phenomena is inherent existence. That is, inherent existence is the object of negation for both persons and phenomena. The reason why even the Prasangika make a distinction between the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena is because they are different objects - a person is a living being and all the attributes of the person and other objects are inanimate phenomena. As there are these two distinct objects - person and other phenomena, selflessness is divided into two: selflessness of person and selflessness of phenomena.

From this part onwards the presentation is very profound, because it's all about emptiness. This is the crucial point of the teaching. It would be good for you to read the text and try to familiarise yourself with it before coming to the teachings. In that way you will become more familiar with the topic.

Those of you who responded to the questions this evening gave very good answers, however you do need to think about this subject again and again. Doing so will lead to deeper and more profound understandings of emptiness.

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Edited Version*

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# Mahamudra: The Great Seal of Voidness

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

21 July 2009

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As we do normally, we will generate a motivation for receiving the teachings that is combined with the bodhichitta motivation.

## **IDENTIFYING THE OBJECT EMPTINESS (CONT.)**

In the Kyiwo Tsang commentary there are two sub-divisions to this heading. We are covering the second sub-division.

### **How to engage in the practice after having established it<sup>1</sup>**

Last week we concluded with this quote from Chandrakirti in the auto-commentary:

For the sake of liberating sentient beings,  
Selflessness is classified into that of persons and  
phenomena

The reason why there is this twofold classification of selflessness is because all existence can be subsumed into either animate living beings or inanimate phenomena.

Thus, focusing on a person as a referent object and perceiving it as being truly existent, is *grasping at the self of a person*. While focusing on the person as a referent object and perceiving it as being empty of true existence is the perception of *selflessness of person*.

And focusing on phenomena as a referent object and perceiving it as truly existent, is *grasping at the self of phenomena*, while the opposite, focusing on phenomena as a referent object and perceiving it as being empty of true existence, is *selflessness of phenomena*.

The auto-commentary then continues:

The manner of how these two are established are explained in various sutras and commentaries as following: first the selflessness of phenomena is established, but when meditating on it, one needs to first meditate on the selflessness of the person.

What is being explained here is the sequence of how the two selflessnesses are established in various treatises: first the selflessness of phenomena is established and after that the selflessness of a person is established. That is because, as explained in various texts, of the two grasping the grasping at phenomena (the aggregates) arises first, and based on that the grasping at person is developed. Thus, the order in which the two types of selflessness are presented in the texts is the same as the order in which the two types of grasping arise.

However, as the commentary explains, in meditation one first realises the selflessness of person followed by the selflessness of phenomena. Because the basis ('I' or 'me') is relatively easier to recognise, the selflessness of person is realised first. Another way of explaining it is, without realising the person as being empty of inherent existence one cannot realise the aggregates as being empty of inherent

existence, thus when realising selflessness in meditation the selflessness of person is realised first.

Here then, one needs to understand the point that, as explained last week, although there is no difference in the coarseness and subtlety of the selflessness of person and the selflessness of other phenomena, there is however a difference in terms of the realisation of the two. The realisation of the selflessness of person is relatively easier to gain than the realisation of the selflessness of other phenomena, because of the different basis. These points were covered earlier when we studied the Madhyamaka teachings. So it is good to revise the points on selflessness made in the texts, which I have covered great detail.

As explained in the auto-commentary, in treatises such as Chandrakirti's *Madhyamakavatara* and Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, the selflessness of produced phenomena is established first, with the logical reasoning that all products are free from the four extremes<sup>2</sup>. (The selflessness of unproduced phenomena being easier to understand, was not explicitly established in those treatises.) Then later on when selfless of person is established in Chandrakirti's *Madhyamakavatara*, it uses the seven-fold reasoning<sup>3</sup> by adding two extra on top of the five reasonings presented in Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom*. These, of course, were presented in detail in earlier teachings; the reason I bring them up now is so that you can refer to those points and refresh your memory. The five reasonings establishing selflessness also came up in the teachings on Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses*.<sup>4</sup> In fact, they have been covered many times.

The seven-fold reasoning succinctly summarised into the reasoning of 'not being inherently one or inherently separate'. And this is the main reasoning that is used here, and why Lama Tsong Khapa used it in the concise lam rim teaching. Lama Tsong Khapa's presentation of the teachings to Gyaltsab Je is said to contain a unique presentation of how to use the seven-fold reasoning.

Coming back to the point made here, the selflessness of phenomena is established first, but when meditating on it the reverse is the case. To back up these points the auto-commentary quotes from the *King of Concentration sutra*:

When you have distinguished with respect to yourself,  
apply your understanding to all phenomena.

The nature of all phenomena is that they are completely pure, just like space. If you know this on the basis of one thing, you know it on the basis of everything. If you see this on the basis of one thing, you see it on the basis of everything.

This explanation is quite clear and has also been mentioned many times earlier in other teachings. Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses* commented on this point: when you realise the emptiness of one thing, then you use that understanding to establish the emptiness of other phenomena as well<sup>5</sup>.

The heading 'How to engage in the practice after establishing it' from Kyiwo Tsang's commentary is subdivided into two.

1. How to accumulate the conditions for establishing special insight
2. The manner of meditating on special insight

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, teaching of 15 April 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, teaching of 13 July 2004.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, teaching of 1 July 2008.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, teaching of 26 June 2007.

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<sup>1</sup> As this teaching involves several of Kyiwo Tsang's headings they are numbered but not separately formatted.

## 1. How to accumulate the conditions for establishing special insight

Three conditions are presented:

1. Relying on a spiritual teacher
2. Engaging in listening to the teachings from the spiritual teacher
3. Contemplating the received teachings accordingly

In relation to the **third condition**, Kyiwo Tsang explains that having listened to the teachings from the lama or the guru, one needs to contemplate the teachings that one has received over and over again.

As the commentary further explains, in order to obtain the special insight focusing on emptiness, the main condition that one needs is the ultimate understanding of the view itself, based on the attainment of calm abiding. The main point (which should be clear to you) is that in order to gain the special insight focusing on emptiness, one has to first have a sound understanding of the right view. And in order to have the right understanding of the view, one must have first developed calm abiding so as to be able to focus on the view. So the sequence presented should be clear. As you will recall, the system in the Mahamudra is finding the view after having established meditation, which refers to establishing calm abiding first.

In relation to the **first condition**, relying on the spiritual teacher or the guru, the guru is to be seen specifically as being inseparable from the deity Manjushri. This is a specific instruction for relying on a guru in order to obtain an understanding of the right view, which is emptiness. That is because Manjushri is the embodiment of wisdom. When one wishes to meditate to develop compassion and bodhichitta in one's heart, then the main deity one focuses on is Avaloketishvara, or Chenrezig in Tibetan.

As further explained here in the commentary, the **second condition**, the instructions that one needs to gain from one's teacher, are the explanations from the *Great Treatises* - not just any text, but specifically the *Great Treatises*. Having heard the profound explanations on the correct view from the *Great Treatises*, one then must think about their meaning over and over again. Then, based on the understanding that one gains from that, one needs to further accumulate merit, and maintain ethics in accordance with the vows one has received.

The commentary quotes from a text that is also explained in the lam rim teachings: if one does not familiarise oneself with the instructions that one has received, by thinking of them over and over again, then it is similar to 'a drawing of a lamp', which cannot not illuminate anything. If one does not accumulate appropriate merit, then it will be like 'a seed without moisture' - no matter how long that seed is kept, it can never germinate because the lack of moisture. If one does not observe and maintain ethics, in relation to keeping one's vows well, then it is similar to 'great unowned wealth', which means wealth that cannot be put to any good use. So it is extremely important, particularly in these times-of-degeneration, to envisage oneself within the protection wheel of the guru and the deity.

## 2. The manner of meditating on special insight

This is sub-divided into two:

- 2.1. Identifying the object of refutation on the subtlest level
- 2.2. Having meditated on selflessness, establishing designated phenomena

### 2.1. Identifying the object of refutation on the subtlest level

Since we have already covered the topic of calm abiding, can you give the definition of calm abiding.

*Student: It is a single-pointed focus generated from the nine stages of concentration combined with physical and mental bliss.*

That's nearly complete, but something is missing.

*Student: Being able to maintain that focus for an indefinite time.*

So a newer student was able to give that answer!

The definition of special insight is: *The wisdom that arises as a result of having analysed the object of analysis, which is based on having obtained calm abiding, accompanied by the bliss of the pliancy that one obtains from that.*

The term special insight doesn't imply that one sees something extra in meditation that one has not already seen during calm abiding. Rather it is a special attribute that one gains from that investigation, which isn't obtained during mere calm abiding meditation. Based on calm abiding, when the object is analysed, the specific attribute is the actual bliss and pliancy that are obtained from that specific analysis of the object. That bliss and pliancy is in addition to that of calm abiding, so it is not an extra understanding.

The auto-commentary then explains:

In order to meditate on the selflessness of a person, one must first identify the object to be negated.

As explained by Shantideva:

If you have not come into contact with the object that is to be refuted,

You cannot gain an understanding of its refutation.

Of course you would have heard this point many times in previous teachings. So, what does this mean?

*Student: After you achieve calm abiding and intensify the practice through special insight, you gain some sort of understanding of the mind.*

I am actually after a specific explanation of the quote from Shantideva.

*Student: If the object is the nature of the mind and you have experienced it as emptiness it is hard to refute what you have not experienced.*

That is close.

*Student: We need to understand how the object is held other than by being merely imputed by thought.*

How do we derive the meaning from Shantideva's quote, 'If you have not come into contact with the object that is to be refuted, you cannot gain an understanding of its refutation'? Shantideva is specifically saying that we have to identify the object that is to be refuted. What is that object? The specific object to be refuted here is true existence. Without understanding what true existence is, one cannot gain an understanding of its refutation, which is the lack of true existence or inherent existence. So one cannot realise the lack of true existence without understanding what true existence itself is. Is that clear?

What is the thing that is imputed by grasping at true existence?

*Student: Inherently existing objects.*

That is correct. The establishment of true existence is the object to be refuted. Without understanding what true existence means, one cannot negate its absence, i.e. the lack of true existence.

Then the auto-commentary further explains:

Just as has been explained, if one has not identified the object of negation, then it would be similar to shooting an arrow without seeing the target, or going to war without recognising the enemy.

To explain this in lay terms, in order to gain even an inkling of what selflessness or more specifically, the lack of true existence is, one has to first understand what true existence means. Without that understanding one could not possibly understand that something lacks true existence. To give a more tangible example, if we were to ask someone whether there is a vase here, then in order for someone to recognise the absence of a vase in the room, they would first have to know what a vase is. If they don't know what a vase is to begin with, they wouldn't know whether the vase exists in the room or not. These points will be explained in more detail later on. However the basic point made here, using the analogy of the vase, is that in order to understand the lack of true existence of any phenomena, one has to first understand what true existence itself implies.

Then the auto-commentary further explains:

Even after identifying the object of negation, if it is over-pervasive one will fall into the position of nihilism.

These points are explained in much greater detail in the *Great Treatise of the Graduated Path to Enlightenment (Lam Rim Chen Mo)*, and it is good to refer to it again. 'If it is over-pervasive one will fall into the position of nihilism' refers to the view asserted by some that all phenomena, from physical form all the way up to enlightenment, are to be negated. So according to this view when one negates the self of phenomena, everything has to be negated entirely. That is the view of nihilism – that everything is to be negated.

The auto-commentary continues:

If it is under-pervasive, one will not be able to negate the subtlest object of negation and thus one is in the grave danger of falling into the position of eternalism.

There are those who posit that the existence of phenomena is established in these three modes.

1. The characteristic of nature is that it is not produced out of causes and conditions;
2. The characteristic of its instance is that it does not change from moment to moment;
3. The characteristic of its establishment is that it does not rely or depend on other factors.

So the under-pervasive is where things are established either as being self-sufficient or permanent and not changing. It is good to refer to the refutation of this view in the lam rim teachings where it is quite clearly explained. Referring to those explanations will clarify the meaning of these points

To return to the earlier point, the auto-commentary then further reads:

As stated in Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*:

Gaining an incorrect view of emptiness,  
Will be the fall for those with insufficient wisdom,  
Just as it is a grave danger to catch a snake,  
Using faulty charms and mantras.  
Thus, seeing the difficulty of the feeble,  
To understand the correct view in its depths,  
Buddha avoided teaching at first,  
The fundamental view of reality.

This quote specifically explains how the Buddha, after having obtained the state of enlightenment (which is the

understanding of the fundamental nature of all existence) realised that such a profound view might not be understood by others. So he remained in that meditative state for forty-nine days. It was only after the god Brahma specifically requested the Buddha to impart his teachings, that he give his first teachings. We have of course explained these points in earlier teachings.

There is a text that explains the implication of why Brahma made that specific request for the Buddha to turn the wheel of the Dharma. Apparently it was because of the many beings who followed Brahma, so when Brahma made the request for the Buddha to teach, all his followers naturally turned to the Buddha's advice and teachings. So it took Brahma to turn so many other people around to receive the profound teachings from the Buddha. That is one indication of why Brahma made the initial request.

Then the auto-commentary goes on:

The eight thousand verse *Prajnaparamita sutra*, states:

Grasping on to 'me' and 'mine', sentient beings  
revolve in samsara.

Just as stated, the root cause of all faults stems from innate self-grasping or innate grasping at the 'I'.

At this point it is also good to refer to the two objects of refutation. They are refutation on the path of practice and refutation through logical analysis. *Refutation on the path* means the refutation that is made as a result of meditating on the path: being able to make certain refutations with the wisdom one gains in meditation. *Refutation through logical analysis* is negating inherent existence through the reasoning presented in the teachings; which means overcoming the misapprehensions of inherent existence or truly established phenomena or a thing being existent from its own side. It is through the various logical reasons that these misapprehensions are negated.

The quote from the *Prajnaparamita sutra* accords with the explanation in the Madhyamaka teachings that the grasping at oneself and one's possessions is the cause for entering samsara. These points were explained very explicitly in the Madhyamaka teachings. So it is good to refer to those teachings and relate them to the points being made here<sup>6</sup>.

The commentary specifies that the root or main cause of all faults and negativities is grasping at the self or the 'I'. Another technical term for innate self-grasping that is used in the teachings is the 'view of the transitory collections'. You really need to understand the actual meaning and implication of this term and what it indicates. What does understanding how one grasps at the self or the 'I' as being inherently existent mean? How does that actually manifest within oneself? From the teachings we can talk about the object of refutation, which is inherent existence or true existence or existing from its own side, or independent existence (we use all of these terms). When we use those terms in the context of general objects that have to be understood as being empty of inherent existence or true existence, then it is vaguely impersonal and outside of what we commonly understand as the self. Whereas innate self-grasping at the 'I' in relation to oneself is a bit more personal, as it involves investigating within ourselves, how we view ourselves and how we grasp at ourselves. With this personal investigation we will begin to gain an understanding that leads to personal transformation.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, teaching of 20 April 2004.

The auto-commentary then states:

In general in relation to the notion of 'me', there are three modes of apprehension of the 'I'.

1. Apprehending the 'I' that is characterised by true existence,
2. Apprehending an 'I' that is characterised by the lack of true existence, or that which is merely labelled and imputed by the mind,
3. Apprehending an 'I' that is not characterised by either of the above two.

Again, these points are also very clearly explained in the lam rim teachings. The main point here is that there are three ways of apprehending the 'I'. Then the auto-commentary further explains:

The last one establishes a mere 'I' as found by the mind validly cognising the conventional.

This is referring to the last of the three, which is the 'I' that is established by validly cognising the conventional meaning, which refers to the 'I' as in 'I am going', 'I am sitting', 'I am eating' and so forth. That is the 'I' that we are referring to when we refer to the conventional 'I', or the 'I' that exists.

The auto-commentary then continues:

The middle one is found only in individuals who have found conviction in the middle way view and not by any other.

What is being explained here is that only 'individuals who have found conviction in the middle way view' understand the 'I' that is characterised by the lack of true existence.

The auto commentary then completes the analysis of the three modes:

The first is a grasping to the self of persons. The apprehension of true existence of a person that arises by focusing on another person is a grasping at a self of person but it is not an innate grasping at the 'I'.

This point has been clarified many times before. So for those students who have received these explanations previously, what does 'The apprehension of true existence of a person that arises by focusing on another person is a grasping at a self of person but it is not an innate grasping of the 'I' mean?

*Student: The 'I' must be in one's own continuum for it to be the view of the transitory collection.*

And what is grasping at a person in general?

*Student: Grasping at the person who is still qualified as a person, but not in one's own continuum.*

That is correct. The auto-commentary further explains this point:

The innate grasping of the 'I', also known as the 'view of the transitory collections' is defined as a deluded wisdom that focuses on the personal self as an object, and has the aspect of apprehending it as inherently established.

Here the 'view of the transitory collections' is defined as a deluded wisdom. There are some texts that establish wisdom as necessarily being virtue. Therefore here it is necessary to explain that the 'view of the transitory collections' is not a true wisdom, but a deluded wisdom. As there are texts that posit wisdom as being necessarily virtue, one has to explain that a deluded wisdom is not actually wisdom.

In debate when those quoting from texts say 'if it is a wisdom it is necessarily virtuous', the question raised is

'How about the view of transitory collections, is that a virtue? It is said to be a deluded wisdom, so therefore it must be wisdom. Thus in order to sustain the argument of wisdom being a virtue, one has to then explain that it is a deluded wisdom and therefore not real wisdom.

According to the normal program, the next session is still a teaching session and the following one would be the discussion. However, if you wouldn't mind having the next session as a discussion and the following one as an exam, then that would give me a little bit more leisure for the retreat that I have to do for the White Tara initiation. If I were to give a teaching then due to the preparation time as well as the actual teaching time, it would be hard to finish the required number of mantras that I have to recite. So is that okay with you?

*Students: Yes!*

If it is not fine, then I can of course continue with the teaching. Is anyone pleased however with the announcement that there will be no teaching for our next session? That is something that can of course occur when we are young, when studying is regarded as part of our regular duties. As a youngster we used to receive teachings from our teacher over a long period of time. At times he would announce "As I'm a bit tired, we can skip our teaching session today". As young monks we were quite pleased and excited to get that news. So, I hope this is not the case for you!!

As usual, I request that you participate in the discussion well. It would be good to focus primarily on the object of negation, as presented in earlier teachings to the older students. Identifying the object of negation is not a simple matter, because there are the different presentations of the different schools, such as the Chittamatra (Mind-only), the Sautrantika and Prasangika schools. It would be good to discuss the different approaches to the object of negation in the different schools and to try to clarify them. Here we have been discussing the object of negation from the view of the highest school, but it is also good to understand the points of view of the other schools as well.

The main logical syllogism used here in identifying the object of negation is: Take the subject 'a person': it lacks true existence, because it is neither inherently one nor inherently separate.

That syllogism is the main logical formula that identifies the object of negation. In this formula, the subject is 'a person', the predicate is that 'it lacks true existence', and the reason is that it is neither inherently 'one' nor inherently 'separate'. This means that if a person were to exist truly, it would have to be either inherently one with its aggregates or inherently separate from its aggregates. But because a person cannot exist in either of these two ways, then it logically establishes the person as lacking any true existence.

Using this syllogism formula, when you establish the predicate, which is that 'a person lacks true existence', it also establishes the negation, which is the opposite of that predicate (a truly existent person). In this way the syllogism also identifies the object of negation that is to be refuted.

When one investigates with these logical reasonings and thinks over these points, it helps to make the correct view much clearer. When the object of negation is identified correctly, then it becomes clear in one's mind as to what is to be negated and abandoned.

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**Week 1 07.07.09**

1. While identifying the clarity of mind is recognising the conventional mind, however, does not mean that one has understood the conventional truth of the mind. Why? [4]

2. a) Which consciousness realises the ultimate nature of the clock? [2]

b) Why does a sentient being's five sense consciousnesses perceive things mistakenly? [2]

3. Why should one not be content with having developed single pointed concentration? [4]

**Week 2 14.07.09**

4. Name the three doors of emancipation and explain what they refer to. [6]

5. Is there any difference between the compassion that Buddhism presents and that of other religions? Give an example. [4]

6. Even if one were to attain calm abiding, why is that alone not a cause to be free from samsara and attain liberation? [4]

**Week 3 21.07.09**

Give the order in which we establish and meditate on the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena. [4]

8. Give the definition of special insight. [4]

9. What is the object of negation? Give an analogy showing why we need to gain an understanding of the object of negation. [4]

10. The commentary specifies that the root or main cause of all faults and negativities is grasping at the self or the 'I'. What is another technical term for this? Why did Geshe-la say we really need to understand the actual meaning and implication of this term and what it indicates? [4]

11. Give the syllogism used here identifying the object of negation, identifying the subject, predicate and reason. [6]

**12. Not an exam question.**

Discussion about the tenets and how they differ in regards to the object of negation.

# **Exam**

**Name:**

**Block: 4**

**Mark:**

**Week: 6 (4 August 2009)**

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1. While identifying the clarity of mind is recognising the conventional mind, however, does not mean that one has understood the conventional truth of the mind. Why? [4]

2. a) Which consciousness realises the ultimate nature of the clock? [2]

b) Why do a sentient being's five sense consciousnesses perceive things mistakenly? [2]

3. Name the three doors of emancipation and explain what they refer to. [6]

4. Is there any difference between the compassion that Buddhism presents and that of other religions? Give an example. [4]

5. Even if one were to attain calm abiding, why is that alone not a cause to be free from samsara and attain liberation? [4]

6. Give the order in which we **establish** and the order we **meditate** on the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena. [4]

7. Give the definition of special insight. [4]

8. What is the object of negation? Give an analogy showing why we need to gain an understanding of the object of negation. [4]

9. The commentary specifies that the root or main cause of all faults and negativities is grasping at the self or the 'I'. What is another technical term for this? Why did Geshe-la say we really need to understand the actual meaning and implication of this term and what it indicates? [4]

10. Give the syllogism (logical formula) used here to identify the object of negation, showing the subject, predicate and reason. [6]