

**Members Reflections for the Buddhist Discussion Centre Five Day Christmas Bhavana Course  
Held from 27th December 2021 to 31st December 2021**

**Mahamudra – The Emptiness of The Mind**

The Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia held a five-day Bhavana course from the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 2021 to the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2021 with the Teacher being our Centre's Abbot and Director, Anita Carter. The teaching offered to students was on the topic *The Emptiness of the Mind (Mahamudra)* and was based on a recorded teaching by Geshe Michael Roach. It was given to a group of students in Soquel, California, in 1999. Geshe Michael is an American Buddhist Teacher who was ordained in the Tibetan Gelugpa tradition and is the first American person to receive the Tibetan Buddhism's Geshe degree. The Gelugpa tradition was founded by Je Tsongkhapa who lived from 1357 – 1419 and the lineage continues to this day with its head being The Dalai Lama.

Geshe Michael Roach is a unique teacher who is able to explain the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism in a way that is meaningful and engaging for Westerners. For anyone wishing to listen to this discourse, the full class including the audio recordings and written materials can be accessed from the website [www.theknowledgebase.com](http://www.theknowledgebase.com).

To increase the chances of success during a bhavana course, students were advised to identify the outcome they wanted to achieve from the five days learning and practice. One member expressed an aspiration to attain 'a deeper understanding of emptiness and to make the causes to wake up this lifetime for the benefit of the self and all sentient beings.' Another stated he 'was hoping to increase wisdom according to Buddhist philosophy... and learn the true nature of things though direct experience.' A third member asserted his desire to prolong his mindfulness while performing his daily activities at work, home, conversing with people, while driving and so on.

The five-day Bhavana course was an excellent opportunity to engage with the Buddha Dhamma over an extended period of time. Members were encouraged to create space in their calendars where they could give themselves wholeheartedly to the study of Buddha Dhamma. To ensure an optimum learning environment during the five days, members were asked to observe ten precepts and bring offerings of food, water, flowers, light and stationery. Each participant was encouraged to request their Teacher to be taught the Buddha Dhamma three times, prompting the correct intention and completely embracing the mind of a student who is open and willing to learn. To support the practice, it is always advisable prior and during the course to build a vast store of merit that can be employed to help in comprehending the teaching. On arrival at the Centre, persons were advised to perform circumambulation of the Stupa, Quan Yin image and Bodhi tree three times. They were asked to make offerings to the Buddha image in the Golden Buddha Pavilion, take refuge in the Triple Gem and complete six prostrations in the main hall.

To provide participants with a concept of how much merit was made by the Buddha, students studied a Sutra entitled *The Questions of Manjusri*. The Sutra describes the great expanse of merit of The Tathagata's Dhamma Conch. One student wrote later that:

'Although it provides a mathematical explanation of Buddha's accumulated merit, we lost count of it halfway through the sutra as the amount is beyond our comprehension. The vastness of Buddha's merit enables us to recognise our limited merit pool. We need

help from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas on our path to enlightenment. Students were advised to make a request to the merit fields, asking for assistance from the innumerable Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to guide us to develop a bright mind and help us remove the negative karma we have accumulated in this and past lives.'

Another student discovered:

'My first reading of *The Questions of Manjusri* from The Noble Mahayana Sutra was a great reminder of Buddha's accomplishment; his Enlightenment and the turning of the Wheel of Dhamma. It was humbling to recollect through reading of the Sutra, the inconceivable scale within time and space, the right effort the Buddha exerted to accumulate the merit he needed for his eventual supreme attainment. It put into perspective the importance of not only accumulating clean merit, but also in the preservation of our merit. It felt as if for every wasted merit, we are taking several steps in the wrong direction from the Noble Path.

'It was a blessing to be guided by our Teacher, in the meditation of generating a protective field for the practice of Dhamma. As a senior student, I understand the energy required from our Teachers, in particular, from our Abbot, to set up and maintain a protective field conducive for strong Dhamma practice. Therefore, it gives a sense of relief and empowerment to know that I can assist in generating a protective field for myself, and for others – collectively.

'The meditation generated a stronger luminous quality in my mind and a physical sensation of protective stability. It was an experience that I have never felt before during a course that I personally generated.'

To prepare the mind, participants were provided with a list of advice to follow in order to take advantage of the precious opportunity to learn the Buddha Dhamma. It is important to pledge to remain calm and not allow ourselves to indulge in irritation, sadness, jealousy or any mental disturbance that may arise. It is equally important to accept the present circumstances – what is occurring *is the way it is*. Prompting a smile can be an effective method of pulling our minds out of trouble. In accepting the present, we accept ourselves one hundred percent. Mental chatter is simply that – chatter – it is not always beneficial. We can produce wholesome mental activity with the wish to be well and happy. We can create an awareness of what is arising through labelling, when thoughts are distracting us from the present, we prompt the label thinking, thinking. When we are intoxicated with ideas, we can prompt idea, idea; or when we are plagued with memories, we prompt remembering, remembering. Making cups of tea and offering food and beverages to fellow students can protect the mind from being pulled into unwholesome activity. We can recollect the preciousness of the opportunity to learn Buddha Dhamma and be joyful for that opportunity.

On the first day of the Five Day Bhavana Course students were blessed by the presence of Venerable Ajahn Hāsapañño to the Centre in order to offer him dana. Venerable is the Abbot of Vimokkharam Forest Hermitage in Kallista. The Buddhist Discussion Centre has had a connection with Vimokkharam Forest Hermitage for many years as our Members have offered food to the Monks as they walk their daily alms round through the Kallista township. One member pointed out:

‘it was a blessing to begin our course with the opportunity to offer alms to the Sangha. I likened the action to a wholesome primer that allows our engine for practising the Dhamma to be sustained and potentially flourish. It has prompted me to include fortnightly almsgiving at the Hermitage as part of my merit making plan.’

It was a precious opportunity for The Buddhist Discussion Centre to host Venerable Ajahn Hāsapañño. We were able to commence the course with the meritorious activities of offering food and flowers to the Sangha, listening to the Dhamma and sitting in meditation, which enabled participants’ minds to be able to study and practice well in the days to come.

After the offering of lunch, Venerable Hāsapañño provided the students with a short Dhamma talk. He taught that taking Refuge in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is not limited to the external form of paying respect to Buddha and His qualities. Taking refuge also involves comprehending that members have Dhamma in them and can realise it. It prompted one member to reflect:

‘we often see the three jewels as external objects and something we have great appreciation and respect for, which is wonderful. But if we are able to internalise the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and carry them inside us, we are the refuge, there’s no need to have a refuge externally. This has allowed me to see how expansive the Dhamma can be when it’s coming from inside us. Internalizing the refuge, we live in the Dhamma, we become the Dhamma. With mindfulness and precepts, we not only see how Karma unfolds, we also create the right causes for the future. Thank you Venerable Hāsapañño for his profound teaching and extraordinary skills in delivering the Dhamma.’

Venerable Hāsapañño provided students with some direction for overcoming sleepiness in their meditation. He warned that falling asleep during meditation is an extremely bad habit to develop as it can be very challenging to overcome. It is a good practice to establish one’s energy level. If meditators are feeling sleepy before they begin, they should meditate with the eyes open, cutting off the temptation to doze. If that fails, stand up and complete a walking meditation. Sometimes, the most prudent choice is simply to abandon the meditation and go to sleep. Mindfulness should be employed to ascertain when to resist sleepiness and when to go to bed and rest. At the end of the session, the Venerable gave us a powerful Blessing.

In the afternoon, the students began the study on *The Emptiness Of The Mind (Mahamudra)*. Mahamudra translates to the “Great Seal” and can be defined as the study of the emptiness, or voidness, of the mind. The teachings come from the Mahayana school of Buddhism and refer to a series of contemplations and practices that focus on the emptiness of one’s own mind. There are two methods of studying *Mahamudra*: by studying the sutras; and through tantric study. In reaching a deep understanding of the voidness of the mind through sutra study, one is then well primed to engage in tantric study of *Mahamudra*. The teachings from the *Mahamudra* help us to understand the inherent emptiness of worldly phenomena, as one student explained: ‘all things will appear in the world and then at a later time, disappear.’

Geshe Michael Roach taught that according to the *Mahamudra* there are six flavours of emptiness. The first five developmental stages are important to cognise the sixth one. He took us through these six views, each of which takes a position on the selflessness, and eventually, emptiness. Each flavour is considered important in unravelling our conventional view, which is that things out there in the world exist from *their own side*. Each of the six flavours enables students to

let go of some conventional view which they habitually take on as humans. The highest form of 'emptiness' view, which is accepted by Buddha Shakyamuni and the great realised masters (according to Geshe Michael), is the sixth flavour in this teaching. The position states that everything in our world, including our mind, is void of *existing from its own side*. There is an absence of it existing from its own side because it could not exist in the way it does without our projection, and no matter where we look, or how far we break it down, it is completely void of any form of self-identification.

The first flavour challenges the notion of permanence about our world. We believe that people, objects, buildings, our sense of self are fixed, always there and reliable. When we look at our contexts, there is this innate sense of permanence about the way things are, and that they are independent, self-standing, and separate from us. We expect our material possessions to be as they were when we last put them down. This worldview is shattered when the television remote controller is not where we left it, the pen runs out, our car breaks down or someone close to us dies causing us much distress. Despite regular evidence to the contrary, our belief in permanence is quickly re-established.

Geshe conducted a meditation in which students looked at an object and observed how their minds reinforce this world view. Students employed a pen to observe the method by which they project their perceptions onto phenomena. He guided participants to be aware of how their minds produce evidence that the pen is there, clearly in front us, not moving, changing or disappearing. Geshe then advised Members to prompt the view that the pen is 'a flash in history, we and it are hurtling towards a state of destruction.' For one member 'it reminded me of the line in the Brief Ngöndro Practice where it is written 'the life of beings is like a bubble. Death comes without warning; this body will be like a corpse.'" Another member noted:

'We conger up memories of pleasant and unpleasant things which haunt us, and in the next minute we don't conger up these memories. Then we find ourselves conjuring up new memories within our minds. The whole process of recalling things is an example of the impermanence of our minds.

'Why go to the effort of specifically focusing on the emptiness of one's mind? It is because it is our minds that sees things, perceives things, understands things, develops views about things and has feelings about all these mind derived things. So *Mahamudra* is a way of knowing that not only that all things are impermanent, but our perceptions of all these things are impermanent.'

The second flavour of emptiness disrupts our sense of ownership. The mind assumes ownership of things and becomes angry or disappointed when they are lost. It asserts 'I own and control this body, these possessions and these circumstances.' We spend a lot of time trying to manipulate and influence phenomena in order to feel better. We tell our noisy neighbours to turn their music down, we go to great lengths to prevent damage to our most favoured possessions and we uphold all manner of ideas in pursuing better health. The problem is that our neighbours don't have to follow our instructions, our material possessions wear out and we still get sick. One member concluded: 'we do not have ultimate ownership as we have no choice when we keep or let go of them.'

There is a belief in the occurrence of random happenings, unexpected moments that appear to 'come out of nowhere.' The third flavour of emptiness teaches that nothing happens by accident. It dismantles ideas about chance and luck by asserting that the reason why moments unfold as they do is as a result of karma. In fact, the *only* reason why events occur and the world looks the way it does is because causes were made in the past. If no such causes were made, such events would not have occurred. In his explanation of this flavour of emptiness, Geshe explored the difference between *how* phenomena occur and *why* phenomena arise. *How* simply explains the way in which we experience reality from a conventional perspective, but the *Why* explains the true cause, the karmic cause. For example, we earn money because we work – that is the **How**. The **Why** tells us that we earn money because we have been generous in the past. If we understand that these two things are not the same, we can practice 'Acts of Truth'. An Act of Truth is when we do the right action to get the result we are aiming for, even if it seems detrimental in the present. Instead of using unskilful Band-Aid solutions, we figure out what causes we need to make, and act in the way that will plant the right seeds for the outcome we want.

When we meet people that have vastly opposing views from us, we can, at times, experience disturbance at their different position. When another person demonstrates alternative values and subsequent actions, it can be difficult to comprehend his motivation. According to the fourth flavour of emptiness, the labels and explanations for phenomena we adhere to are our own mental constructs. Personal judgements are due to our perceptions - we apply filters on our experience in the world. It implies the objects we judge arise from their own side when they do not. These filters could come from our cultural backgrounds, past experiences etcetera. This results in a practice whereby we judge other people displaying opposing views as incorrect. We should not judge a person because everyone's conduct comes from their own karma.

The fifth flavour of emptiness explains that the raw data of forms *do* have their own existence but we put our own perceptions onto those arising forms, making them what they are. Our worlds are created by the combination of forms that *do* exist and our perceptions of those forms. The concept of an object arises from its own side as well as the perceiver's side – our mind perceives that an object has its own independent existence and a subject's projection. Geshe Michael Roach gave the example that some people think they have no control over what happens to them; they could only adjust their response to the arising phenomena. He refers to this as 'crap coping'. One member explains

'that the cylinder (pen) is arising from its own side and the other half, from us. Possessing this conventional view from my experience leads to the constant pursuit of trying to establish order between the chaos of the pen and that of your view. It still hasn't let go of the previous four flavours.'

This method only allows a person to deal with life; it does not lead the way out of suffering.

The sixth flavour of emptiness is the only one that provides a total release from samsara. All phenomena – our thoughts, projections, memories, body and materiality have no independent existence from their side, they arise as a result of kamma that has been made in the past. There is no independent existence of an object, and it is all coming from our own side. With this, we can create our lives. We can plant a seed of the fruit that we want, creating the causes for us to realise the Buddha Dhamma. Geshe Michael Roach taught how perceiving this ultimate voidness of all things has an incredible impact on our lives, because it changes the way we act in the world and

therefore what we experience. Our behaviour changes because we understand why we experience what we do. We can then employ this knowledge to change our world. Geshe Michael said 'You're at the mercy of your past deeds – it never waivers.' One student discovered:

'The *Mahamudra* explains to me that everything I am experiencing in my current reality is ultimately coming from my Karmic causes made in the past. According to this worldview I am at the mercy of my past deeds. Everything that I experience in my daily life is arising from past causes - not only from this lifetime, but also from the 'Karmic imprints' of all my previous lifetimes. My world and everything within it are all coming from Karma. The correct way to interpret this information is to look at everything in my reality as being 'empty.' This includes me (as the experiencer) and all people and objects around me. According to the true nature of 'Emptiness', there is an absence of 'self' (self-existence) in all things.'

During the course students were able to learn about the various levels of understanding of selflessness and emptiness, and find out how they can practice *Mahamudra* in their daily lives. If they are diligent and sincere, they will begin to notice very clearly how karma works and increase their wisdom and compassion. One student discovered:

'In my previous opportunities to learn *Mahamudra*, I have had a mental barrier that obstructed me from going beyond the definition of *Mahamudra; the Great Seal*. Geshe Michael Roach's approach of listing and explaining the Six Different Flavours, then concluding with using the mind as the object allowed me go beyond that barrier.'

While another:

'learned the fundamental importance of the *Mahamudra* is it contains in written form teachings of the Lord Buddha; profound realisations and insight for the proper and correct way for us as human beings to view the world around us. As a way out of suffering, the endless cycles of death and rebirth, and the un-satisfactoriness of human existence, the Buddha wholeheartedly encouraged all human beings to develop and cultivate the right way to look at our reality and to see the true nature of all phenomena as they really exist.'

The ultimate goal is to see emptiness directly, and this can be done through this kind of practice.

Our sincere gratitude to Anita and Frank for running this course, to Buddha Shakyamuni for turning the Wheel of the Dhamma, and to Geshe Michael Roach for giving this course 22 years ago and making it accessible for our study.

Sadhu, Sadhu, Sadhu

May you gain the precious opportunity to study *The Emptiness of the Mind (Mahamudra)*.

May you be well and happy.

May all beings be well and happy.

This script was written and compiled by Simon Kearney, Claire, Destin Nguyen, Connie Siow, Vinse Cheung, Mark Fowler and David Yates.

**References:**

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***Claire***