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# Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

ལྷན་སྐྱོད་ཀྱི་ལམ་ལུགས་ཀྱི་སྒྲོན་མ་བུ་གསུང་སྒྲུབ་སྒྲོལ་།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual, let us spend some time on our meditation practice. [*Tonglen meditation*]

We can set our motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines: For the sake of all mother sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose, I will engage in listening to this Mahayana teaching and put it into practice well.

The subject of our teaching is the renowned text, the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, by Atisha. My intention is to just go briefly over this text, as I have previously taught the Lam Rim quite intensively<sup>1</sup>. I felt that, for auspicious reasons, it would be good to present an explanation on *Lamp for the Path* at this time.

The *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* is held in great esteem and regarded as very sacred because it is the root of all other lam-rim teachings. There have been various lam-rim teachings, and the *Lamp for the Path* is the source or root of all of them. As a commentary to *Lamp for the Path*, none excels the *Lamrim Chenmo - The Great Treatise on the Stages of The Path to Enlightenment* by Lama Tsong Khapa. Of all the lam-rim teachings, I can say with certainty that the *Lamrim Chenmo* is indeed the most extensive commentary on *Lamp for the Path*.

After Atisha composed the original text of *Lamp for the Path*, the Buddhadharma was revitalised and spread throughout Tibet. Indeed, many great masters have gained realisations on the path to enlightenment by relying on the study and practice of this very teaching. When we think about how so many beings have benefited from this teaching, we can definitely generate strong faith and admiration for Lama Atisha. Of course, more detailed accounts of his life are presented in the lam-rim teachings, so I will not take up extra time presenting that here.

In the commentary that I am using [the explanation on *The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* called *Joy of the Blossomed Excellent* by Panchen Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltzan<sup>2</sup>], the contents of the text are presented under four main headings, which are basically the same as in Lama Tsong Khapa's great treatise on the lam-rim and in all other lam-rim texts:

1. The greatness of the author
2. The greatness of the Dharma

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary to *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Pabongka Rinpoche, Study Group 1990-2000. Also, ongoing commentary to the Middling Lam-rim, Wednesday evenings with Geshe Doga, from 2003 to present, and various lam-rim teachings for one-day, weekend and Easter courses at TI.

<sup>2</sup> Fourth Panchen Lama, 1570-1662

3. How to teach and listen to the Dharma that has these two greatneses (of the authors and of the Dharma)
4. Presenting the actual meaning of the teaching (in the lam-rim, this heading corresponds to 'The sequence in which the disciples are to be taught the actual instructions').

In order to present the explanation of the text to others, one needs to have received the lineage of the explanation first. I have received teachings on the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* several times, including from my own great teacher, Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, as well as from His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. In fact, from a very early age in Tibet, when I was studying in the monastery, I had a great interest in this text and took it upon myself to memorise the entire text. Having memorised it, I really tried to gain some understanding of the meaning. In this way, I took this text to heart, and I found really incredible benefit from it. For me, it was like finding a treasure, a real source of joy and inspiration for gaining an understanding of the Buddha's teachings. Of course, I am not claiming in any way that I have gained any realisations or deep understanding of the text, but what I can share is that I have received the lineage of the teachings and have taken a keen interest in them from an early age.

We need to really take the lam-rim teachings to heart and rely upon them to help subdue our mind. There is no greater text to help subdue this unruly mind that we find so hard to subdue. Indeed, if we cannot subdue our mind by relying on the lam-rim teachings, there are no other teachings that will help us subdue it. That is because the lam-rim condenses the entire path to enlightenment, categorising it into the three scopes for the three types of practitioner (those having the motivation to attain a human rebirth; or liberation from cyclic existence; or complete enlightenment). Thus, it is a very sacred teaching.

We must take the initiative to overcome the disturbances in our mind. Our mind is mostly preoccupied with trying to please our relatives and friends, and subjugate our enemies, or those towards whom we feel aversion. We create a lot of negativity in so many ways by engaging in attachment and anger based on ignorance, which gives rise to attachment and anger. Thus, our mind is rampant with the three poisons, causing so much confusion and distortion.

We all long to be happy. And there is no other way to experience genuine happiness than by subduing this unruly mind. It is our unruly mind that constantly looks outwards to blame external conditions and situations; it always finds fault externally, failing to look within to find the real causes for its disturbance. Due to the unruly mind, we are constantly preoccupied with finding faults in others and in external situations.

Relying on these sacred teachings, however, becomes a means for us to look inward and begin to work on subduing the inner conditions that bring us unhappiness and turmoil. Of course, specific instructions on how to subdue one's mind will be presented in the teaching itself, but this is by way of an introduction.

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## 1. THE GREATNESS OF THE AUTHOR

The first outline, the greatness of the author, is presented to show that the teachings have an immaculate, profound source. The author of this text that we are about to study, the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, is Atisha. All the classical lam-rim teachings begin with this heading, the greatness of the authors, which is divided into three sub-headings:

- How Atisha was born to one of the high families of great lineage
- How he attained his good qualities in that very rebirth
- The great activities he did to further the doctrine after getting these qualities.

I will just briefly go over these points, as I mentioned to you in our last session that you need to look them up in the *Great Treatise* or in *Liberation in the Palm of your Hand*, which many of you have. Most of you have received the lam-rim teachings, so you should already be familiar with these points of the topic.

In relation to Atisha's life story, the main point is that when one begins to understand the greatness of the author, one will naturally generate faith in the author and faith in the teachings presented by the author. So one sees the greatness of the author, which encompasses the great trainings and practices he undertook, and after that, the great activity of propagating the teachings.

In this way, one begins to generate great faith in the actual teaching itself, the *Lamp for the Path*. This leads us to the next greatness, which is the greatness of the Dharma, given to increase one's respect for the instruction.

## 2. THE GREATNESS OF THE DHARMA

The greatness of the Dharma here refers particularly to the subject matter, the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*.

As explained in the commentary by Panchen Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltsan, although Atisha composed many treatises, *Lamp for the Path* is like the root, because it carries the essence of all the Buddha's teachings. That is because of its three features and four greatnesses, which is the same as explained in other lam-rim teachings.

The **three features** are:

- 1) This teaching is complete because it contains all the subject matter of sutra and tantra
- 2) It is easy to put into practice because it emphasises the steps for taming or subduing the mind
- 3) It is superior to other traditions because it is enhanced with instructions from two gurus who were schooled in the traditions of the Two Great Champions. The Two Great Champions, also known as trailblazers of the Mahayana doctrine, are Nagarjuna and Asanga. The guru skilled in Nagarjuna's instructions was Rigpai Kuchok [Vidyakokila], and the guru skilled in Asanga's instruction was Lama Serlingpa [Suvarnavdipa].

The Great Treatise also outlines the **four greatnesses** of the Dharma, which are given to increase one's respect for the instructions:

- 1) The greatness of allowing you to realise that all the teachings are without contradiction
- 2) The greatness of allowing all the scriptures to present themselves to you as instructions
- 3) The greatness of allowing you to easily discover the true thinking of the Victorious One
- 4) The greatness of allowing you to save yourself from the worst misdeed.

As mentioned previously, I am just relating the main points here; it is for you to read the lam-rim texts, such as *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, to get a more detailed explanation on each of the four greatnesses. My aim is to present the key points, which can serve as the basis for you to have discussions and read the relevant parts for yourselves. In order to get a sound understanding of the lam-rim, you need to familiarise yourself with it again and again, through reading and discussing it.

I also intend for you to have discussions on the Madhyamika text that I had taught previously.

## 3. HOW TO TEACH AND LISTEN TO THE DHARMA THAT HAS THESE TWO GREATNESSES (OF THE AUTHORS AND OF THE DHARMA)

This commentary to *Lamp for the Path* does not go into detail in explaining how to listen to the Dharma that has the two greatnesses, and mentions that you can refer to The Great Treatise. In the lam-rim outline, it is presented as:

1. The way to listen to the Dharma
  - 1.1. Contemplating the benefits of studying the Dharma
  - 1.2. How to show respect for the Dharma and the teacher
  - 1.3. The actual way to listen to the Dharma
2. The way to teach the Dharma

You can read the lam-rim texts for further explanations under these headings and sub-headings.

## 4. PRESENTING THE ACTUAL MEANING OF THE TEACHING

The lam-rim covers these subjects under the fourth main heading mentioned earlier: 'The sequence in which the disciples are to be taught the actual instructions'. Under the major heading, 'The preparatory rites', the relevant sub-heading is:

- The root of the path: devotion to a spiritual guide

Under this, the next level of sub-heading is 'What to do in your meditation sessions', which is then subdivided into 'The preparatory rites'. This latter subdivision includes the sub-heading 'Petitioning the merit field' and so forth.

So the presentation in the lam-rim is that first we must relate to the root of the path, which is relying on the spiritual guide, and following that, we engage in the actual practices.

Thus on the basis of relying on the spiritual guide, we take these instructions on the path, beginning by taking the essence of this precious human rebirth with its eight freedoms and ten endowments. In the commentary to the

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*Lamp for the Path*, the first verse is how to take the essence of this human rebirth.

The *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* itself begins with taking the essence of this precious human life, presented in the context of the practices of the three scopes. The topic of how to take the essence of the precious life is presented under the three main headings:

- Recognising the preciousness of this human life
- Contemplating its great meaning
- Taking the essence from this rebirth and putting this teaching into practice.

Within the three scopes, the small scope practice of taking the meaning of this precious human life would be to use it as a way to obtain a higher status in the next life, such as a precious human rebirth. Taking the essence for the medium scope person would be to achieve liberation, while taking the greatest essence from this precious human life would be to use it as a means to achieve enlightenment.

To take the essence of this precious human life, one needs to first contemplate its rarity and how easy it is to lose it. Without contemplating the rarity of this precious human life and its impermanence – how easy it is to lose it – there is no way we can embark on the actual practice of the Dharma, because one's concerns would mainly be focused on this life's affairs.

So it is essential in the beginning to contemplate not just the preciousness and rarity of this human life, but also how easy it is to lose it. As the great master Lama Tsong Khapa said, by thinking about the preciousness of this human life, one will not waste one's time sitting around idly engaging in frivolous, meaningless activities. And by thinking about the rarity of this precious human life, characterised by its ten endowments and eight freedoms, one will understand the great meaning one can achieve with it: that it will enable one to secure a good rebirth the next life.

Then, if one wishes to advance further and seek the goal of liberation from cyclic existence, that goal can be obtained only through having this precious human life. Liberation cannot be obtained through any of the rebirths of the lower realms; it is only obtained through rebirth in higher realms, such as this precious human life. Furthermore, that which enables us to seek the highest goal of enlightenment is this very precious human life that we now have.

In simple terms, the teaching is saying that you are in possession of this very precious human life now; that it is rare, and it will be difficult for you to obtain such conditions again in the future; and that, now, as you have this great opportunity, you must not waste it but put it to the highest of the three purposes mentioned earlier.

You can read more about the precious human rebirth characterised by the ten endowments and eight freedoms in other lam-rim teachings, which explain in more detail how it is rare, difficult to obtain, and so forth. This topic is preliminary to the actual subject matter of the practices of the three scopes. In the commentary to the *Lamp for the Path*, this topic is not explained in detail at all, it just goes

right into the practice of taking the essence of the precious human life.

The fourth main heading as presented in the commentary, 'Presenting the actual meaning of the teaching', is subdivided into four:

- The meaning of the title
- Salutation of the translator
- The actual meaning of the text
- Explanation at the end

#### The meaning of the title

The title is presented here in Sanskrit – *Bodhipathapradīpa*. In Tibetan, it is *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*, and in English, *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*.

The commentary breaks down the Sanskrit term and gives its literal translation: *bodhi* refers to enlightenment, *patha* is the path, and *pradīpa* refers to lamp.

It is called the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* because enlightenment is the state of the primordial wisdom of the Buddha, the ultimate state of having completely abandoned all faults and acquired all qualities. That which leads one on the path are the ten grounds and five paths. This treatise is called a lamp because, for those who do not have an understanding, or have a wrong understanding, or have doubt, it removes all of this darkness.

From the title, one can get an understanding of the actual contents of the treatise itself. The word 'enlightenment' refers to the ultimate goal to be obtained, and as explained in the commentary, 'path' refers to the ten grounds and five paths, which serve as the causes to achieve the ultimate state of enlightenment. The term 'lam-rim' connotes that there are different stages that lead an individual all the way to enlightenment, whereas the title of this text, *Lamp for the Path to the Enlightenment*, indicates that it is a lamp for those who embark on the path – the ten grounds and five paths – to enlightenment, a state where one's wrong conceptions, wrong understanding and doubts are completely eliminated.

The commentary also gives an explanation of the word 'enlightenment'. In Tibetan, this is *jang-chub*. *Jang* means to purify or clear away – in this case, it means clearing away both the deluded obscurations and obscurations to omniscience. *Chub* means to completely master or thoroughly establish, which refers to thoroughly establishing the omniscient mind, that which thoroughly cognises the two categories of all existence, conventional truth and ultimate truth. Similarly, the Tibetan term for Buddha is *san-gye*, which is also made up of two syllables, *sang* (one who has totally eliminated all obscurations) and *gye* (one who has fully perfected all good qualities). The Sanskrit word, Buddha, means to awaken, as in awakening from the stupor of ignorance, and to open up, like the opening of a lotus flower.

From this explanation, we can see that the English translation 'enlightenment' does not carry the specific connotation of the two main qualities of the enlightened mind. As mentioned earlier, *jang* means that the enlightened mind has completely abandoned the deluded obscurations and obscurations to omniscience; and *chub* has the connotation of completely establishing all the

qualities, particularly relating to thoroughly knowing the two truths – of conventional reality and ultimate reality. Because the enlightened mind knows all existence, it is omniscient.

Therefore, the primordial wisdom of the enlightened being has the two qualities attained as a result of entering the path and engaging in the five paths and ten grounds. The unique understanding we can derive from this explanation is that the state of enlightenment is attained through a gradual process of having engaged in all the earlier causes – it cannot be spontaneously attained by anyone, but only attained through its causes. This greatly encourages us with the possibility of attaining enlightenment ourselves. Buddha was not always enlightened, but was once exactly like us, practising on the path and gradually engaging in all the paths and grounds in a sequential manner, finally attaining the ultimate result of enlightenment.

So there is the real possibility that each of us can attain enlightenment. We can refer to Buddha Shakyamuni's own life story to see how it is possible for each and every one of us to also attain enlightenment. This is very encouraging.

The teachings also explain that we each possess 'Buddha nature'. The two obscurations are adventitious, meaning that they are not inseparable from our mind, but rather can be separated when the appropriate measures are applied. This means that we can definitely eliminate both types of obscuration from our mind; all stains and obscurations can be completely removed. And when they are removed, the primordial wisdom or ultimate nature of the mind becomes apparent, making enlightenment possible. This is the 'Buddha nature' that we all possess.

The commentary next explains the purpose of presenting the text, beginning with the Sanskrit name. It is traditional to present the Sanskrit title first. The commentary explains the three main reasons for doing this:

- To show the authenticity of the source of the teaching
- To remember the kindness of the great pundits and translators of the past. Indeed, this very text that we have is only possible because of the great pundits, who composed it, and the translators, who translated it
- Giving the title in Sanskrit first leaves an imprint in one's mind of that sacred language of ancient India.

### Salutation of the translator

What is missing from the English text that we have here is the homage of the translator, which is usually presented first. This is: 'I pay homage to the bodhisattva, the youthful Manjushri'.

As the commentary explains, the translator of this text is the fully ordained bhikshu, Gelong Geway Lodro. The translator pays homage to Manjushri to show that, within the three different categories or baskets of texts, this text belongs to the Abhidharma or treasury of knowledge category. This is because its main content is the wisdom realising both the contaminated and uncontaminated classifications of phenomena. It thus presents the means

and methods to obtain a good worldly status, such as the causes to be reborn as humans or in the god realms; and that which surpasses that, liberation and enlightenment.

### The actual meaning of the text

Having explained the meaning of the title, followed by the salutation of the translator, we now arrive at the third outline, which is the actual meaning of the body of the treatise. This is subdivided into three:

- Praise
- Pledge to compose
- The actual meaning

The **praise** is presented in the first verse of the text itself:

1. *I pay homage with great respect to all the Victorious ones of the three times,  
To their teaching and those who aspire to virtue.  
Urged by the good disciple Jangchup Wö,  
I shall illuminate the lamp for the path to enlightenment.*

The first verse actually includes both the paying of homage as well as the **pledge to compose**. The homage is in the first lines, *up to their teachings and those who aspire to virtue*. The next two lines, *urged by the good disciple Jangchup Wö, I shall illuminate the lamp for the path to enlightenment* are the pledge to compose.

We can leave up to here for this evening. It would be good for those who have the lam-rim text to refer to it and look into these points, so that you can relate it to the next presentation.

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Edited Version*

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