

Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual, let us engage in our meditation practice.
[Tonglen meditation]

As I explain regularly, it's important for us to generate a positive motivation for receiving the teachings.

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

When the lam-rim explains how to listen to the Dharma it refers to listening by removing the three faults and generating the six recognitions. It is important to have some understanding of how to listen to the Dharma, otherwise the explanations that we hear will not have served much purpose.

Unless we make an attempt to recollect these points and implement them whenever we listen to the teachings, we may wonder, 'Oh, is there a particular way to listen to the teaching?'. That would be an example of how, if we don't put advice that we receive into practice, we may not recollect those points when it is necessary to remember them.

Many of you would have read *The Vajra Cutter Sutra*. At the beginning of this sutra, when Subhuti requests the Buddha to teach, the Buddha says, 'listen, listen well and properly retain it in your mind'. This is how you should listen to the teaching.

As presented in *The Vajra Cutter Sutra*:

Then, in the morning, having put on the lower and upper Dharma robes and carried the begging bowl, the Bhagavān entered the great city of Śhrāvastī to request alms. Then, having gone to the great city of Śhrāvastī to request alms, the Bhagavān afterwards enjoyed the alms food, and having performed the activity of food, since he had given up alms of later food, put away the begging bowl and upper robe. He washed his feet, sat upon the prepared cushion, and having assumed the cross-legged posture, straightened the body upright and placed mindfulness in front.¹

Reflecting on this we need to understand how important it is to be really be familiar with the subject that we are presenting, and have mindfulness when we give a talk or a teaching.

It seems to make a real difference to a presentation when one has contemplated and thought about the points one is intending to present. If one really takes the time to contemplate and think about these points, they have a clear and vivid appearance in the mind when one is

presenting, and the presentation itself flows well. It will not be like just reading out a text, and it will have really positive effect on the listeners as well.

Because of this, I remind Monday evening presenters to take the initiative to really think about and contemplate whatever subject they want to present. Of course, if you want to look up certain points you could refer to your notes, but if you are not just reading from your notes or text then the presentation will be much more effective. We can learn about how to teach from the way the kind and incomparable Buddha conducted himself prior to teaching.

Relying on alms shows how the Buddha, along with his disciples, did not have any preference for any particular type of food; he wasn't choosy and would just go out and receive whatever was offered. This is the proper way for fully ordained Sangha to conduct themselves. Being served by others and expecting a palatable meal is not the right way to go about it at all. I have mentioned in the past that if I had the chance I would like to go out on alms rounds in India, however I didn't have an opportunity to live that way of life in the past. Nevertheless these are good points to contemplate.

The Vajra Cutter Sutra says that the bhikshus respectfully sat together, which suggests that it was not a teaching where people were casually coming and going, but rather it was a teaching that was conducted in an orderly and disciplined manner. Then, when the Buddha had completed his preparation, Subhūti spoke saying:

"Bhagavān, the extent to which the Tathāgata Perfectly Enlightened Buddha has benefitted the bodhisattva mahāsattvas with the highest benefit, the extent to which the Tathāgata has entrusted the bodhisattva mahāsattvas with the highest entrustment - Bhagavān it is astonishing; Sugata it is astonishing. Bhagavān, how should one who has correctly entered the bodhisattva's vehicle abide? How practice? How control the mind?"

That was said, and the Bhagavān said to the venerable Subhūti, "Subhūti, well said, well said. Subhūti, it is so; it is so. The Tathāgata has benefitted the bodhisattva mahāsattvas with the highest benefit. The Tathāgata has entrusted the bodhisattva with the highest entrustment. Subhūti, therefore, listen and properly retain it in mind, and I will explain to you..."

In accordance with the explanations in the lam-rim, saying, 'listen' relates to being like a stainless vase, which is a vase without any stains. We wouldn't consume the contents of a dirty or stained vase because it could be contaminated. In terms of listening to the teaching this illustrates the importance of developing a positive motivation. Without a positive motivation, one's mind could be stained by ulterior motives and so forth, and then the teaching itself will not be beneficial. Generating a positive motivation prior to listening to the teaching is way of ensuring that one is in a clear and positive state of mind.

When the Buddha says 'listen properly' this relates to being free from the fault of an upturned vase. If a vase is turned upside down, then you cannot pour anything into it. Similarly, when one listens to the Dharma, one should listen to the teaching in an extremely attentive manner.

¹ *The Vajra Cutter Sutra*, translated by George Churinoff, FPMT, 2002. Available at <http://fpmt.org/education/teachings/sutras/vajra-cutter-sutra/>.

The third point presented in *The Vajra Cutter Sutra*, is 'to retain it in mind'. In relation to being free from the three types of vases, this relates to being free from being like a leaky vase. Even if a vase is made of a good material, if it has a leak then no matter what you put into it, the contents will not be retained. Similarly, if you do not retain what you have heard in the teaching, then it is very likely that you will just forget about it and not remember the contents of the teaching.

Therefore, as I repeatedly suggest, it is good to read the text again and again, familiarise yourself with the topics, and put them into practice as much as you can. That is the way to retain the meaning of the teachings.

We won't go into the six recognitions now; you can look them up for yourselves.

The reason I relate these points is to remind you to refer to the lam-rim teachings and read the relevant points as a way to refresh what you have already learnt. We need to relate retaining the teachings in mind to virtue. We need to familiarise ourselves with virtue as way to retain it at all times. We need to put some effort into that because it is not easy for us to maintain virtue. Rather, the opposite is true. We find that we easily engage in non-virtuous activities because of our familiarity with them. Through sheer habit we seem to very easily and spontaneously engage in non-virtuous deeds, whereas accumulating virtue is much harder. That is why we need to make an effort to keep virtue in mind.

As we familiarise ourselves with accumulating virtue, recalling a virtuous state of mind will start to have a really positive effect on us. Our minds will become gentler, kinder and more positive, and consequently much happier. Therefore, it definitely has great personal benefit.

4. PRESENTING THE ACTUAL MEANING OF THE TEACHING

In our last session, we introduced the verse that has the salutation and the pledge to compose.

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 Jhangchup Wö
I shall illuminate the lamp
For the path to enlightenment.*

Salutation

The commentary explains that the object of the salutation needs to be identified. As the verse itself indicates: *I pay homage with great respect to all the victorious ones of the three times*. Here the victorious ones relates to the enlightened beings, the buddhas.

At this point, it would be good to reflect on the actual meaning of the term, '**Buddha**'. There are many different terms used to refer to the Buddha, such as 'Victorious One', 'Buddha', 'Conqueror', 'Tathagata' and so forth. One needs to immediately relate every name used to describe the Buddha to the ultimate qualities of the enlightened being, which in essence are the **excellence of complete abandonment** and the **excellence of**

realisations. This is what we need to immediately recall when referring to the buddhas.

I mentioned in our last session, that in Tibetan the term for 'buddha' is *sang-gye*. The syllable *sang* has the connotation of completely abandoning or eliminating all obscurations i.e. excellence of complete abandonment, while *gye* means to proliferate all good qualities, which means gaining all possible realisations. Similarly 'Victorious' has the connotation of being victorious over all negativities and all defilements. Here the quality of 'abandonment' is explicit, while implicitly, one needs to understand that it also relates to the quality of having obtained all realisations. In this way, as I have mentioned before, the Tibetan term *san-gye* encapsulates all the qualities of an enlightened being. It is good to reflect on these specific points.

As the commentary explains, being victorious means overcoming or destroying something, and what is being destroyed here is the very cause of all of one's faults, which is negativity. The Buddha is thus completely victorious over all the demons, which are none other than the consequences of negativities.

This meaning is reflected in the mantra of Buddha Shakyamuni - TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNIYE SOHA. MUNI means victorious. The threefold reference to the Buddha as 'victorious' has a specific meaning here. The first MUNI refers to overcoming all negativities; the second MUNI refers to overcoming all delusions and the third is overcoming the obscurations to omniscience. Buddha Shakyamuni is victorious over all three levels of these defilements. Whereas arhats, for example, who are referred to 'foe destroyers' are also victorious, but only in relation to overcoming the first two types of defilements, i.e. negativities and delusions, as they have not abandoned the obscurations to omniscience. Therefore, MAHA MUNIYE means 'great victorious' which refers to completely overcoming these obscurations to omniscience.

We can relate the first level of 'victorious' to the path of seeing. An arya being who has reached the path of seeing would have conquered all negativities, and henceforth they will never be reborn into the lower realms. The first level of 'victorious' can refer to those who are on the path of seeing as well as those who are on the path of meditation. The second level of 'victorious' relates to arhats who have overcome all delusions and their seeds, and the third level of 'victorious', i.e. 'great victorious one', relates only to an enlightened being such as Buddha Shakyamuni. We needn't worry too much that we are being left out for we will also be called 'victorious' as we progress along the path and overcome specific defilements and obscurations.

As of now, we definitely have the ability to be victorious over the temporarily release of the lower realms in our next life. That is because we have the full potential to practise virtue and observe ethics as a way of creating the causes for a good rebirth in our next life. So we can definitely say that we have the full ability and full capacity right now to be temporarily victorious over the lower realms. We have to say 'temporary' because to completely overcome being born into the lower realms

one has to have actually obtain the certainty that this will be the case. On the path of seeing one actually obtains the certainty of never again having to be reborn in the lower realms, because one has completely overcome the causes of such rebirths. However on our level, it is a comfort to know that we do at least have the ability to be victorious over our next rebirth in the lower realms.

Creating the causes to be reborn in a higher status in the next life, such as being reborn again as a human being with the eight freedoms and ten endowments, will definitely give us a great opportunity to practise Dharma again. We can definitely assert through reasoning that in our next life, our situation will be much better in terms of the conditions for practising Dharma. If we find ourselves struggling now, next time round it will be much easier because of the significant effort we have made to practice the Dharma now and the connections we have made with a number of great Mahayana teachers in this life. So through one's aspirational prayers and having met with some incredibly pure Mahayana teachers, we can rapidly progress along the path in our next life.

That is why I have always advised you to take every opportunity to go to the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Don't worry too much about whether or not you understand the teachings or whether or not there are some commitments; take every opportunity to receive teachings from His Holiness. There is great benefit in doing this because we are making a deep connection with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His Holiness is a great compassionate being who is constantly thinking about the welfare of sentient beings, so when we make the connection with him, the imprints of that connection will definitely mature and be activated in the next life, enabling us reconnect with His Holiness to receive teachings and rapidly progress on the path. So there is a great significance in making that connection now.

All of this relates to *paying homage with great respect to all the victorious ones of the three times*, i.e. the buddhas of all the three times.

In relation to the teaching and those who aspire to virtue, we need to understand this on a personal level and understand that we need to take the initiative to create the causes to achieve a precious human rebirth in a future lifetime. Indeed we all have the right to obtain a precious human life adorned with the eight freedoms and the ten endowments. We have the ability and we have the right. As we are not deprived of having those rights and abilities, it falls upon us to really take that to heart and engage in practice.

As we know, having the eight freedoms and ten endowments are not in themselves sufficient. We can safely say that all of us have the eight freedoms and ten endowments right now, but what we need to do is to really strive towards meeting with a Mahayana teacher, who will help us to mature our mind so that we can make rapid progress in the Dharma. We need to really prepare for the next life, since there is a continuity between lifetimes.

If we can ensure our practice reaches the level of being able to secure a good rebirth in the next lifetime with the

eight freedoms and ten endowments, then we will have been a practitioner of medium standard. That is something we can strive to achieve.

In terms of the causes for a precious human life for our next rebirth, the illustrious master Chandrakirti said in the *Madhyamakavatara*: 'There is no greater cause for the high status than morality'. Thus, morality and observing ethics is the very basic cause for obtaining a precious human life in the next lifetime. As the Buddha himself taught, the way to observe morality or ethics is by avoiding the ten non-virtues. Right from the start the Buddha mentions abstaining from killing any sentient being. When we put this into practice and make a pledge to intentionally avoid taking life and avoid the rest of the ten non-virtuous deeds, then we are actually practising morality. This is how we need to understand it.

The Dharma jewel

Joy of the Blossomed Excellent – the commentary on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* – explains the Dharma to be the oral teachings of the Buddha, the teachings that are practised, and the realisations that are actualised. In summary, Dharma is divided into two main parts: the oral teachings and the realisations obtained.

The actual Dharma Jewel relates to true paths and true cessation. One needs to understand why true paths are referred to as cause, and true cessations the result. As these are significant points to understand, I will explain it a bit further.

To explain what true paths mean, one needs to understand that whenever a trainee on the path directly realises the selflessness of a person, they obtain the path of seeing and are thereby called an arya being. Henceforth the paths in their mental continuum are referred to as true paths.

To explain it more specifically, the first moment on the path of seeing is called 'the uninterrupted path of seeing', which is a direct antidote for the abandonments on the path of seeing. The moment the particular abandonments on the path of seeing are abandoned, the trainee obtains what is called 'the liberated path of seeing', and this is when the trainee obtains cessation.

The abandonment that they obtain on the path of seeing is cessation, and it is obtained only by applying the antidotes; without applying the antidotes, abandonments cannot be obtained. There is some debate about this because cessation by its very nature is said to be permanent, and therefore it cannot be said to be a direct result as such.

However it is obtained as a consequence of engaging in the path of seeing. We would say that it is not a substantial result but it is a consequence of having abandoned particular defilements.

Therefore true paths are found only within an arya being. As such, ordinary beings will not have actualised the actual Dharma Jewel. The main point is that the actual Dharma Jewel is only found within the mental continuum of an arya being.

True cessation is obtained as a consequence of having first meditated and then obtained the true paths within the mental continuum. So it is possible to say that true

cessations are the result of true paths. For as long as antidotes to overcome a particular defilement are still within one's mental continuum, one doesn't yet have the cessation of overcoming those defilements. It is only when particular defilements have been abandoned, that one actually obtains the cessation of abandoning those defilements. This should be clear.

This is part of the common presentation of the Three Jewels.

The Sangha Jewel

The Sangha Jewel refers to those who aspire to virtue and, as explained in the commentary, it refers to all arya beings of all three vehicles. The term 'arya', which is translated in English as 'noble', refers to beings who have obtained the direct realisation of emptiness.

Here again it is good to understand the literal connotation of arya. The Tibetan word for arya is *phag-pa*, has the connotation of surpassing, which relates to aryas surpassing the ordinary beings. However, I personally like to relate it to a more specific explanation related to surpassing self-grasping.

Prior to gaining the realisation of emptiness and selflessness, one is still dominated by grasping at the self. As ordinary beings, we are completely controlled by self-grasping, and so whatever we do is mostly motivated by our self-grasping. Then, as a direct result, we create the causes to endlessly experience the various types of suffering of samsara. When an individual gains the direct realisation of emptiness and thus selflessness, they obtain the direct antidote for overcoming the self-grasping mind. Because of having actualised the direct opponent to self-grasping, which is the direct realisation of selflessness and emptiness, their minds are not dominated by self-grasping. So I feel 'surpassing' has a more subtle meaning when is related to being released from the control of self-grasping.

There are two specific types of self-grasping: innate self-grasping and intellectually acquired self-grasping. The uninterrupted path of seeing specifically serves as an antidote for overcoming intellectually acquired grasping at a self. Whereas when an individual being obtains the liberated path of seeing, that liberated path of seeing becomes an antidote for overcoming innate self-grasping. So from the moment an arya being obtains the liberated path of seeing, the antidote that overcomes innate self-grasping is continuously present. It is because they have the antidote to continuously counter innate self-grasping, they are not under the control of that self-grasping.

As ordinary beings, grasping at a self continuously dominates our mind; we are like slaves to this self-grasping doing whatever this master commands. Whereas when one becomes an arya being, one will be in control of one's mind, because one has the antidote to self-grasping in one's mental continuum. We can all very easily relate to being under the control of self-grasping. For example, in the morning we might be quite pious and engage in practices purifying our negativities such as doing prostrations, but by afternoon we have created more negativities. This is really a clear sign that we are under the control of self-grasping.

Of course, we can say that our situation is not too bad, as we are at least attempting to purify negativities regularly. So perhaps our debt of negative karma is not too great. However we do keep creating more negativity, and so we circle around, purifying some negativities but then creating more, and this will continue until we gain complete control over our own self-grasping.

The commentary explains the literal meaning of *ge-dun* – the Tibetan term for 'Sangha' – which is to aspire to virtue. That is because, as explained in the commentary, they abide firmly and have obtained an indestructible faith in virtue. Their minds are inseparable from virtue, which is their constant focus. So the Sangha are called 'aspiring to virtue'. An analogy is an indestructible knot, which relates to an indestructible faith. This explains the knot that is in the blessing chord or string presented to us by lamas. My understanding of this knot is that it represents indestructible faith.

As the commentary explains, the homage is paid to the buddhas of the three times; to the Dharma jewel – true cessation and paths of the three times; and to the arya Sangha beings of the three times. So the salutation and prostrations are offered to Three Jewels of the past, present and future. If asked 'by whom?', the individual who is making the salutation to the Three Jewels is Master Atisha himself, and he does so because he has acquired complete conviction and faith in the Three Jewels. This is how Atisha pays respect and offers salutations.

The reason for paying homage to the Three Jewels is as a way to remove obstacles to the composition. If these obstacles are not removed one will not be able to complete the composition. That is why it is appropriate to take some measures to remove obstacles. Paying homage and making salutations to the Three Jewels is an optimum way for accumulating great merit. As explained in the teachings, with enough merit humans can accomplish whatever they want to accomplish. That is why homage is paid to the Three Jewels here at the beginning of the composition.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the commentary, the great masters of good conduct engaged in this practice, so this is a way to inspire future disciples, such as ourselves, to engage in the same practice. This practice of paying homage to the Three Jewels is a supreme means of creating virtuous deeds.

There is Tibetan term in the verse, which has the connotation that something is to be followed after paying homage. So, as the commentary explains, after having paying homage, the particular deed to be engaged in is the composition of this text, *The Lamp on the Path for Enlightenment*.

Pledge to compose

The word 'illuminates' means to explain clearly, and the path to enlightenment is expounded in this text in a very clear and concise manner. The reason for the pledge to compose the treatise is so that the author will be able to complete the actual work without any hindrances. This is the tradition that was followed by the great masters and scholars of the past who, before beginning any composition, always made a pledge. A pledge made by

the great masters after a lot of contemplation and sound reasoning is similar to an engraving on stone, which doesn't fade away easily. Once a pledge is made, they will never withdraw from that pledge.

Why was this text composed?

As explained in the commentary, detailed reasons are explained further along in the text itself by referring to sutras – the actual teachings of the Buddha – and then clarifying those points.

As the commentary says:

The condition for composing the text is, the good disciple Jangchup Wo, made the request to Atisha, who was the master of all in Tibet.

As the verse states Atisha was *urged by the good disciple Jangchup Wo* to compose the text.

Atisha's own commentary on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*² explains that 'the good disciple' refers to Jangchup Wo being a suitable vessel for the Mahayana teachings. The actual request is said to have been made when Jangchup Wo told Atisha, 'Here in Tibet there is a lot of confusion about the teachings and there is no clarity on them. So as a way to clarify all of the different and opposing views and confusions, please compose such a text which clarifies the Buddha's intent'.

As mentioned in the commentary the request was to 'explain the meaning of the entire Mahayana or Great Vehicle concisely in a few words that contain the whole meaning. Please write down how you engage in practice yourself'.

So Lama Atisha himself took upon the task of composing the text as a way to benefit the entire Dharma. It was composed in the particular monastery called Thoe-ling.

Atisha himself explains in his auto-commentary, the request made by his disciple Jangchup Wo:

In this area of Tibet there are persons who misinterpret the Mahayana path or the Buddha's teaching. Gurus and spiritual friends are arguing back and forth about things that they themselves do not comprehend. They all have their own logic to analyse the suppositions about the profound view and broad practice. With so much disagreement on all sides, I beg you to clear up these doubts for us. And so because of his repeated entreaty for his sake, I do light this lamp for the path of enlightenment, following the teaching of the sutras and the tradition.

The actual meaning of the text

This is presented under two headings:

- Explaining the three types of beings in brief
- Explaining the characteristics of each individual being

We will continue with this next week.

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Edited Version*

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² Often referred to as his *Auto-commentary*.