
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We begin with our meditation.

[*tong-len meditation*]

Cultivate your motivation by generating the thought of achieving the state of buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings, and at the same time cultivate the motivation to put whatever you learn about the Dharma into practice as much as possible.

There's a tremendous benefit in cultivating the bodhicitta motivation. When we look into the motivation that we cultivate, we can clearly recognise that the ultimate aim that we are trying to achieve on the spiritual path is full enlightenment, the state of buddhahood. At the same time, it also makes it very clear why we want to achieve that, which is to benefit all sentient beings. As Shantideva mentioned in *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*:

If even the thought to relieve
Living creatures of merely a headache
Is a beneficial intention
Endowed with infinite goodness,
Then what need is there to mention
The wish to dispel their inconceivable misery,
Wishing every single one of them
To realise boundless good qualities?

There's a tremendous benefit in cultivating bodhicitta, even if just for an instant. We should not underestimate the benefit of beginning a practice by cultivating the bodhicitta motivation properly.

Many of us have taken the bodhisattva vows, been involved in the ritual of making a pledge to hold the bodhicitta mind and made a commitment to cultivate this aspirational bodhicitta mind at least three times during the day and three times at night. Furthermore, we have promised that we will cultivate and maintain this bodhicitta mind, as well as engage in the precepts or bodhisattva deeds in the presence of the infinite number of buddhas and bodhisattvas. So, we must remind ourselves of the importance of now keeping those pledges and vows, as well as our commitment to keep the refuge precepts and so forth and implement them in our practice.

We will now continue with the teaching on the *Lamp for the Path*. As far as the commentary goes, we are up to the heading:

How one trains in special insight

We have discussed the term *special insight* in the past, and it's very important that you remember what that state of special insight means, to the point where by simply hearing this term you will be able to recall its meaning.

Although we have learnt about topics such as calm abiding or special insight, we cannot just leave that

learning there. In order to remember what we have learnt, and become very familiar with it, every time we hear terms like 'calm abiding', or 'special insight', we should recall its contextual meaning and have some sort of picture of what it means. Then the meaning will really sink into our minds.

The commentary begins:

How one trains in special insight has two subheadings:

1. Detailed explanation
2. Summary

DETAILED EXPLANATION

The commentary continues:

The first has three which are:

1. The presentation of the collections (favourable conditions) for special insight
2. How to meditate on special insight
3. The results of the meditation

We touched on this meditative state of special insight when we were studying the topic of calm abiding. Here it specifically refers to the wisdom realising emptiness, not to any mundane or worldly paths that have the aspect of peacefulness and coarseness in order to advance on the various levels of higher realms within cyclic existence. Rather, special insight here specifically refers to the wisdom realising emptiness.

Why are we learning about this wisdom realising emptiness? It is because we are following the path with an aspiration to achieve the state of liberation from cyclic existence. In order to achieve that we must cut the root of cyclic existence, which is the ignorance of self-grasping. The wisdom of emptiness is the antidote to self-grasping because it directly opposes or counteracts the ignorance of self-grasping. In other words, the mind of the wisdom of emptiness or selflessness, and the mind of self-grasping directly oppose each other with respect to the same object of focus.

The presentation of the collections (favourable conditions) for special insight

The commentary then states,

Regarding the first [which is the subheading, the presentation of the collections] Karmalashila's *Middling Stages of Meditation* stated three collections for special insight.

Here the term *collections* refers to favourable conditions. Then the text says:

It says, what are the collections for special insight? They are relying upon the noble beings, great seeking through much hearing, and the proper attention.

The *Middling Stages of Meditation* states that there are three main favourable conditions.

The first is *relying upon the noble beings*. In order to gain the realisation of the wisdom of emptiness we have to rely upon a spiritual guide who is endowed with the full and correct knowledge of emptiness. Here, the perfect spiritual guru is called a noble being which in Tibetan is *skyes-bu dam-pa*. The term *skyes-bu* means a person, but as we have discussed in the past it connotes a being with capability or potential. The term *dam-pa* is translated as 'noble'. You'll find the etymological meaning of that

word in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Knowledge*, as being virtuous as opposed to ignoble or non-virtuous. So *skyes-bu dam-pa* means a virtuous being.

A Kadampa master said, 'I call one who engages in the ten virtues and who also inspires others to engage in the ten virtues a noble being or *skyes-bu dam-pa*. He or she is a true noble person, a yogi, and a great practitioner, regardless of whether being an ordained or a lay person, or what costumes he or she is wearing.'

The English term 'holy' might have a different connotation. I understand that 'holy' connotes an intimacy with the Almighty God, and so one of the early popes who was a close friend of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, used the word 'holy' to honour the His Holiness. As he recognised in the Dalai Lama the quality that he saw in God, he used the prefix His Holiness to the Dalai Lama as an honour. I think from there onwards people started to use the title, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. But then, nowadays the title 'His Holiness' has become very cheap. Everybody is using it! Of course, if the only meaning of holy in holiness is referring to God then that's probably not appropriate for an atheist Buddhist!

The commentary asks, 'what are the collections for the special insight?' These collections are the favourable conditions necessary for us to meet in order to gain special insight, which is the wisdom of emptiness. One of them is *relying upon noble beings*. So we need to find a spiritual guide who is qualified with the knowledge of emptiness.

The next condition is *great seeking through much hearing*. When we study emptiness, it's not a matter of simply listening to the words but we have to keep seeking the meaning of the words and we must fully understand them. The more we hear about emptiness, the more questions we should ask in order to go deeper into the meaning of emptiness.

The third condition, *proper attention*, refers to thinking or contemplating. We have to refine our understanding through contemplation and utilising the intellect of our wisdom mind. Having fully understood the meaning through deep contemplation, we then must further develop our knowledge through meditation in order to gain special insight. The implication here is that spiritual realisation doesn't happen naturally, but it depends on consistent effort from our side in the initial stage and in the middle stage, until we gain the realisation.

In fact, we have already met these conditions to some degree: we have had contact with many great noble beings, and we have made an effort in studying and contemplating the meaning of emptiness.

Then the commentary continues with:

The sutra *Unravelling the Thought* puts it into two as it says, 'Special insight arises from the causes of the perfect view found through hearing and thinking'.

The sutra *Unravelling the Thought* clearly indicates how, before we can cultivate the wisdom realising emptiness, we have to gain an understanding of emptiness through hearing about and then contemplating emptiness. The term *perfect view* refers to the view of emptiness.

In terms of the order of calm abiding and special insight, first you achieve calm abiding followed by special insight. But if you talk about the order in terms of finding the view, there can be two ways. There are those who find the view before gaining calm abiding, and there are others who find the view after gaining calm abiding. What we can also understand here is that prior to gaining special insight we have to gain the view of emptiness. As the sutra says, *Special insight arises from the cause of the perfect view found through hearing and thinking*.

Then the commentary continues:

Likewise, here too, [which refers to this explanation of *Lamp for the Path*] there are two to the presentation of the collections for the special insight, which are the wisdom arisen from thinking by depending upon reason, and the wisdom arisen from hearing by depending upon scripture.

As we can see here *the wisdom arising from thinking by depending upon reason, and the wisdom arising from hearing by depending upon scripture* clearly align with the quote from the sutra *Unravelling the Thought*. It shows how the *Lamp for the Path* directly follows the meaning of the sutra.

Wisdom arisen by depending upon reason

The commentary then states:

The first has three subheadings ...

Here 'The first' refers to the *wisdom arisen from thinking by depending upon reason*. Here the text goes into the presentation of emptiness or the view of selflessness. The first part of the presentation of selflessness is the *wisdom arisen from thinking by depending upon reason*. The three subheadings are:

1. The reason of investigating the result to refute existent and non-existent production
2. The reason of investigating the cause called the Diamond Sliver
3. The reason of investigating the identity to refute one or many

The reason of investigating the result to refute existent and non-existent production

The commentary continues:

Regarding the first, verse 48 [referring to the root text of *Lamp for the Path*] says:

*48. Something existent cannot be produced
Nor something non-existent, like a sky flower
These errors are both absurd and thus
Both of the (other) two will not occur either.*

In relation to the above presentation - that the mind which cognises things as being empty of inherent production as being wisdom - ...

The first line presents the main thesis of middle way school, which is that all things are empty of inherent production, or inherent existence.

- the Existentialists argue that this is not acceptable because it is established in manifested reality that things are inherently produced and disintegrated.

Normally the term *Existentialists* refers to the two lowest schools of tenets, the Vaibhashika and Sautrantika. However here it also includes all the schools below the

Prasangika, i.e. the Chittamatrin and the Svatantrika Madhyamika as well as the Vaibhashika and Sautrantika.

The various schools of Buddhist tenets have different views, and use the same terms such as true existence, inherent existence, or existent from its own right and so forth in different ways. For example, the Prasangika school says that all things lack inherent existence, and that true existence, or existing in its own right have the same meaning. However, the school below that, the Svatantrika Madhyamika, interprets these terms differently. For example, they accept that things are empty of true existence but not inherent existence.

You have studied this in the past so let me ask you what is your understating of the object of negation here? When you say that things are empty of inherent existence what does that mean? In the *Heart Sutra* there's a dialogue between Avalokiteshvara and Shariputra. In reply to Shariputra's question, Avalokiteshvara replies that all things, including the five aggregates, are empty of inherent existence. In order to think about the *Heart Sutra* and contemplate its meaning you should have some idea of what it means when it says that all the five aggregates are absent or devoid of inherent existence.

It is said that things are devoid of inherent existence; what is your understanding of inherent existence?

Student: It means things do not depend on causes and conditions ...

Yes, that's true, but when you use the words, depending on causes and conditions, that applies only to compounded or conditioned phenomena, and not to all phenomena. So in addition to not depending on causes and conditions, we should also add 'or not depending on their parts' so all things are covered.

Do you have anything more to add to that?

Student: The negated self refers to the self which is permanent, partless and independent.

When we talk about the idea of the selflessness in terms of a self, which is permanent, partless and autonomous or independent, we are talking about a gross form of selflessness.

All Buddhist schools of tenets reject a self that is permanent, partless and independent. That kind of self is rejected by all the schools. On the basis of this we say that all the Buddhist schools accept the view of selflessness. Here permanence means a moment-to-moment disintegration; singular or partless means not depending on any parts; and independent or autonomous means not dependent on causes and conditions. Broadly speaking, not existing inherently or independently can also mean not depending on causes and conditions or parts.

When the commentary states that, *the Existentialists argue that this is not acceptable* it is referring to the position of the Madhyamika that things are devoid of inherent production.

... the Existentialists argue that this is not acceptable because it is established in the manifested reality that things are inherently produced and disintegrated. In response to this question, another question is posed, which is to ask, for instance if a sprout is an inherently existent product then here is the question:

Does it exist or not exist or the both or neither at the time of its causes?

As to the **first hypothesis**, the problem is that it is pointless for the production of the sprout because it already existed.

This first hypothesis refers to the question, *Does the sprout exist at the time of its cause?* If a sprout exists at the time of its cause, *the problem is that it is pointless for the production of the sprout because it already existed.* That is the response to the question that is raised.

What do you think of this response? How does this contradict the point of the Existentialists?

Student: I think it's very convincing because we're talking about inherent production here. So if it exists at the time of the cause, it means there's no reason for a thing to be produced again.

If you say that the sprout existed at the time of its cause, there is a problem, right? Do you understand the problem?

In other words it's saying that if things exist inherently, then they exist independently, without depending on any causes or any other conditions. So if this sprout does not depend on any cause or condition, then there's no reason why the sprout could not exist during the time of its cause, right? And if that is the case, then how could it exist at the time of its cause? This is the question that is raised here.

Then the commentary continues:

The **second hypothesis** that the sprout does not exist at the time of its causes but is produced inherently is also logically untenable.

As it is said, 'Even hundreds of millions of causes cannot change things that don't exist'. Regardless of how powerful the force of the cause may be, it cannot produce an inherently existent sprout because such (a sprout) is like a sky flower, (a non-existent).

Although it is not necessary that something that does not exist at the time of its causes must be a non-existent in general, nonetheless, it is necessarily the case that if an inherently existent thing does not exist at the time of its causes, then it must be totally non-existent.

Stating something that was existent before is a non-existent at the present moment, attracts an absurd consequence of falling into nihilism.

To continue with the text:

The **third hypothesis** that it does and does not exist at the time of its causes also receives the above-mentioned two consequent fallacies; therefore, for a thing to have inherent existence is not logically tenable.

The **fourth hypothesis** is also untenable because it is not feasible for anything to be neither an existent nor a non-existent at the time of its causes. Thus, the sprout is not inherently produced because it is not inherently produced as an existent or a non-existent, or both or neither (an existent nor non-existent). Therefore, objects of knowledge being non-produced is established by reasoning. The *Descent into Lanka* sutra says, 'All things are unproduced because to the self-luminous nature of the mind of the Great Intelligent One, things are unproduced in terms of existence and non-existence'.

Nagarjuna's *Seventy Verses on Emptiness* says,

Being does not arise, since it exists.
Non-being does not arise, since it does not exist.
Being and non-being [together] do not arise,
due to [their] heterogeneity.
Since they do not arise, they do not endure or
vanish.

In fact, we covered all of this in detail when you studied the *Supplement to the Middle Way, Precious Garland*, and also *The Four Hundred Verses*¹. So it is good to refer to them, and also good to bring this up in your discussion session.

I will be going into retreat on August 12. On August 14 you can have a discussion night on calm abiding. On the following Sunday August 19 you are having a seminar on calm abiding, so after the seminar, on August 22 you have a discussion night on the topic of selflessness. You should particularly focus on identifying the object of negation and the four points of the analysis by referring to the lam-rim text, *Liberation in the Palm of your Hand*.

Maybe you can discuss the section from the *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* relating to the presentation of selflessness in terms of the selflessness of person, and of the other phenomena, and the details about the four points of analysis. You should all try to study that. Those of you who have been studying this for a long time should put in even more effort, so that on the night you are well prepared in advance to handle questions from others.

Even though gaining the realisation of emptiness may be a bit far away, we should at least make every effort to cover all the topics relating to the view of emptiness. Similarly, when you are studying lam-rim, it's good to, as much as possible, cover the whole topic of the lam-rim from beginning to end. Even if you don't gain a full realisation at the moment, at least you are laying a good impression in your mind for gaining such a realisation in the future.

In terms of gaining a full-fledged knowledge of emptiness, you need to go through the process in which you initially learn by reading and hearing the teaching, then you learn by contemplating your initial learning, and finally by meditating on your knowledge of contemplation.

So there's a process there. For example, when you talk about this idea of selflessness of person, and selflessness of phenomena, you need to know what each selflessness means. What is the self that is being rejected? At the same time, it is also important to understand selflessness or identifying self-grasping with respect to your own experience. When we experience this view of grasping at the self, what we experience is that the self appears to have its own intrinsic reality, even though it is devoid of such reality. So when we experience this view, then how does that self arise? You cross-reference that self that you experience in your mind with what you have theoretically learnt about that. Then move onto the view of emptiness, what it means, and so forth.

What's important is to ensure whatever you learn sinks into your mind, rather than just making notes in a book. You've got to understand that you have to leave your notes behind one day; you can't take them with you. It may be beneficial if you could compile your notes into a book, as a legacy of your study and in that way it may benefit others. Alternatively, if you share your notes with others, rather than being very secretive about it, it can benefit others.

The translation of the commentary on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* called *Joy of the Blossomed Excellent* by Panchen Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltzen is used with the kind permission of Sandup Tsering.

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¹ Ed: CD of transcripts available in the bookshop.