

---

## Study Group - *Madhyamakavatarama*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga  
Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

། དབྱ་མ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་བཞུགས་པོ། །

19 March 2002

---

Please generate the bodhicitta motivation thinking, 'I have to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings, and for that purpose I'm now going to listen to this teaching on the profound'. When we generate this motivation then we should also generate joy and enthusiasm within our mind, and sit there with a big eager smile on our faces. Lama Tsong Khapa has many things to say with regard to that.

Last week we completed the etymology of Middle Way and we also explained the homage of the translator. We didn't explain the two-fold purpose for the translator's prostration. The translator pays homage in order to accumulate merits and wisdom, so that he may be able to complete the translation. Prostrating to Manjushri will also increase one's merit and wisdom.

The second purpose of doing prostrations to Manjushri is that Manjushri is the buddha of wisdom, and prostrating to him is to signify that the text that is being translated falls into the category of Abhidharma.

What we can learn here is that first of all, merits are accumulated from prostrations, which help us to achieve our aims; and that secondly, by relying on Manjushri we can increase our wisdom.

### ***1.1.1 Compassion as the Main Cause of a Bodhisattva***

Last time we talked about the very first line of the text, which says,

*Powerful Able Ones generate Hearers, Middling Buddhas*

#### **Etymology of Terms (cont.)**

In Tibetan, Hearers is the first word, so we started out by explaining what being a hearer means. We also explained that middling buddhas are referred to as those with medium attainment.

Middling buddhas, or those with medium achievement, are also referred to as 'self-liberators' or self-buddhas<sup>1</sup>. Why are those practitioners referred to as self-liberators? The reason for it is that when they have reached their final life they have the ability to attain arhatship through the self-arising transcendental wisdom realising the profound nature of dependent arising, without necessarily having the teachings of the Buddha being present in their country. The realisation they manifest is the realisation of arhatship - for their own purpose alone. For those two reasons they are called self-liberators.

---

<sup>1</sup> Skt.: *Tatwa-Buddha* - lit: self-buddha. Other terms to describe those beings are Middling Buddha, Solitary Realiser, and Self-liberator.

---

#### **Powerful Able Ones**

With regard to the etymology of 'powerful able one', the Tibetan word *tub-pa*, translated as 'able', comes from the Sanskrit word *muni*. We know muni from the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha, which is OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA. The name muni or 'able one' is also applied to hearers and arhats, because they're able to overcome the enemy of the delusions. So the common term 'able one' can be applied to both arhats as well as to buddhas. However arhats are not referred to as powerful able ones, or great able ones, because even though they have overcome the enemy of the delusions, they have not overcome the enemy of the obscurations to omniscience.

We can also see this when we look at the meaning of the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha. First we have the OM which signifies the enlightened body, speech and mind, then we have the word MUNI twice. This is twice times the able one, which refers to being able to overcome the suffering of the lower realms, as well as the enemy of the delusions. To this point it applies to hearer arhats as well.

The third repetition MAHAMUNI, the great able one, applies only to an enlightened being. The reason is that only an enlightened being has overcome the two obscurations. Therefore 'powerful able one' applies only to a buddha.

#### **Powerful**

With regard to the etymology of 'powerful', a buddha is referred to as powerful because he has power over, or he reigns over, the three types of practitioners, which are the hearer arhats, the self-liberated arhats and the bodhisattvas. The Buddha's realisation of the Dharma has nothing above that. So therefore he reigns over all other types of practitioners, who haven't yet become enlightened.

#### **Generate**

Here the word 'generate' in the first line has the connotation of 'giving birth to'. Of course this does not mean physically giving birth to, but helping practitioners to become hearers and middling buddhas, by building them up through giving teachings with the help of supernatural powers etc.

#### **111.a The Way Hearers and Self-Liberators are born from Buddhas**

When we read this line, then of course the question arises, 'Well how do the powerful able ones give birth to hearers and middling buddhas?' The Buddha descended to Earth, and the reason he did so was in order to show unmistakably profound dependent arising and set them on the path of profound dependent arising.

#### **The Three Steps**

By practicing the meaning of profound dependent arising, by way of the three steps of listening, contemplation and meditation, the disciples attained the individual results for which they aimed. The disciples of the Buddha first listened to the teachings, and so they completed the step of listening. Then, having listened to the teachings, they reflected and contemplated the

meaning of what they had heard. Having done the second step of contemplation they then meditated on the meaning of what they had reflected and contemplated. In that way they attained the individual results for which they aimed, such as becoming hearer arhats or self-liberated arhats and so forth.

This is a very important point. The lesson we can take is how to practise in order to attain our aim. One should practise in the same way as those disciples of the Buddha practised, which is by completing the three steps of listening, contemplation and meditation.

1. First one generates the wisdom arising from hearing. In order to generate this wisdom arising from hearing, the very first thing that one has to do is to listen to teachings. Without actually listening to teachings the wisdom of hearing won't arise within one's mind.

2. Through contemplating the meaning of what one has heard, then the wisdom of contemplation is generated.

3. Only after that can one meditate on the meaning of what one has understood from contemplation and generate the wisdom arising from meditation. Only then can the wisdom of meditation arise.

The wisdom of meditation depends upon the wisdom of contemplation, which in turn depends upon the wisdom arising from hearing, which in turn depends upon first actually listening to teachings. Without listening to the teachings no understanding arising from listening can be generated. If we didn't have the understanding that arises from having listened to teachings, then what would we contemplate? If we haven't understood anything through contemplation then there will be nothing upon which we can meditate. So those three steps are very important, and it is very good for one's own practice to remember them.

As the Buddha said to his disciples, 'You should reflect upon the meaning of what I have said, and not just accept it just because I have said so'. Even though we generate wisdom from listening to teachings, that wisdom has been generated through the means of outer conditions, and it is not a very stable type of discriminating awareness. One listens to something that appears pleasant to and agreeable to one's mind, and generates a liking for it, without necessarily having actually thought about and investigated the meaning of what one has actually heard.

In order to make the understanding, which has been generated through listening to the teachings, more stable, one needs to complete the second step of contemplation. This means thinking about the meaning of what one has heard. The discriminative awareness that will be most stable is that which comes from arriving at an understanding of what one has heard, or what has been said, through one's own investigation and thinking.

### **Eliminating Doubts Regarding the Birth of Self-Buddhas from the Powerful Able Ones**

From the *Self-Commentary*:

In case someone says, 'Even though having become proficient in realising the ultimate merely through listening to the clear explanation on dependent arising they don't go

beyond sorrow during the observable lifetime'. Even though it is like that, the practitioners who received clear explanation will without doubt achieve the complete ripening of the intensely desired result, like the result of definitely ripening karma.

From Aryadeva's *400 Stanzas*:

In case, by knowing suchness, They don't go beyond sorrow here, Will attain effortlessly in another life, Like karma.

From Nagajuna's *Middle Way*:

Complete Buddhas don't arise and; Also Hearers have disappeared, the transcendental wisdom of Self-Buddhas; arises intensely without depending.

A debate arises in relation to the point of the powerful able ones generating middling buddhas, or self-liberated buddhas. How does the debate arise? It is quite clear how hearer arhats are born from the buddhas. The buddhas give birth to the hearer arhats by showing them the profound meaning of dependent arising, and then those practitioners attain the arhatship of a hearer in that very lifetime. Most hearer arhats become arhats during the lifetime in which they actually listened to the Buddha's teaching.

However self-liberated arhats don't become arhats during that very lifetime. They pass away, and then attain arhatship in some future lifetime<sup>1</sup>. Here then, some doubt

---

<sup>1</sup> From Jetsun-Cho-gi Gyaltsen's *General Explanation of Madyamaka*. There is a reason why those belonging to the family of self-liberator can't attain the result of a self-liberated arhat during the lifetime they are shown the profound dharma of dependent arising by the 'Powerful Able Ones' – because through the power of prayer self-liberated arhats are born in a realm without buddhas or hearers.

From *The Middle Way*: Complete Buddhas don't arise and; etc.

In case someone says: No self-liberator becomes the direct disciple of a supreme emanation body.

If follows there are such self-liberators – because there are self-liberator trainees that become direct disciples of a supreme emanation body because – there are people with the training of a self-liberator in their continuum that become direct disciples of a supreme emanation body because – it says in *the Self-Commentary*: The practitioners who received clear explanation will without doubt achieve the complete ripening of the intensely desired result' and in 'Tik-chen: *The self-liberator practitioners*'.

Further: If follows there are self-liberators that become direct disciples of a supreme emanation body – because there were self-liberators in the audience when the supreme emanation body praised bodhisattvas because – in that audience were beings belonging to all three families.

In case someone says: To say 'Complete Buddhas don't arise and; Also Hearers have disappeared, the transcendental wisdom of Self-Buddhas; arises intensely without depending' is incorrect – because there are self-liberators that become direct disciples of a supreme emanation body.

There is no pervasion because – the meaning of that quote is that self-liberators at the end of their existence and self-liberated arhats are born in a realm without buddhas or hearers.

Then: Even though there are self-liberators that become direct disciples of a supreme emanation body there aren't any self-liberators at the end of their existence or self-liberated arhats that become the direct disciples of a supreme emanation body. In the same way there are self-liberators that become tenet proponents but there aren't any self-liberator at the end of their existence or self-liberated arhats that become tenet proponents because – from the 'great tantric stages': 'Self-

---

arises as to how those practitioners completely achieve their aim in dependence upon the teaching of profound dependent arising by the Buddha.

The answer lies with the type of karma that is called the karma definitely to be experienced. Of the various karmas that one can generate, there is one called the karma definitely to be experienced. There's no pervasion that that karma is experienced during the lifetime in which it is created. If it isn't experienced during that lifetime then definitely it will ripen in a future lifetime when it meets with the causes and conditions that cause it to ripen.

Karma that is definitely to be experienced can be both non-virtuous and virtuous. If non-virtuous karma is not purified, then it will definitely ripen in some lifetime when it meets with the causes and conditions that cause it to ripen.

Self-liberated practitioners will definitely experience the fruit of their practice in a future life. They don't experience the completion of their aims within the lifetime in which they actually listened to the teaching of a buddha. But just like the results of definitive karma will definitely be experienced they also will definitely experience the complete ripening of they strongly desired result of a Self-Buddha in a future life.

So hearers, as well as self-liberated arhats, achieve the completion of their aims by listening to the teachings on profound dependent arising from the Buddha. Hearers do so in that very lifetime and Self-Buddhas in a future life.

It is like Aryadeva and Nagajuna explain it in the quotes: Self-buddhas attain the completion of their result during a time where no complete buddhas or even hearers exist. After having realised suchness here in this life they go effortlessly beyond sorrow in a future life without dependence upon those outer conditions. They become arhats through the intense spontaneously arising transcendental wisdom realising the profound meaning of dependent arising.

That completes the explanation of how the powerful able ones give birth to hearers and middling buddhas.

### **111b. The Way Buddhas are born from Bodhisattvas**

If the powerful able ones give birth to hearers and middling buddhas, then from whom are the powerful able ones themselves born? The answer to that question lies within the second line where it says:

*And buddhas are born from bodhisattvas.*

Here again a doubt arises. Bodhisattvas are already referred to as children of the conquerors, and now here it states that the buddhas themselves are born from bodhisattvas. So the doubt arises, 'Aren't those two statements contradictory'? Since the bodhisattvas are referred to as children of the conquerors, then how can it be that the conquerors are actually born from bodhisattvas?

Even though the buddhas are born from bodhisattvas, it is still not contradictory to call the bodhisattvas children

of the conquerors. In the same way, even though the son is born from father it is not contradictory to talk about the son's father. It is not contradictory to talk about the son's father, even though the son is born from the father, so it is also not contradictory to talk about the children of the conquerors, while still asserting that the conquerors are actually born from the bodhisattvas.

The reason for this is that the bodhisattvas are referred to as the children of conquerors, because they are the children of the buddha who becomes their teacher. So they're not seen as the children of the buddhas in general, but they are the children of that buddha who becomes their teacher. They are the children of that buddha who becomes their father and therefore they are referred to as children of the buddha, of the conquerors. But they are not the children of buddhas in general. So therefore it is correct to refer to bodhisattvas as children of the conquerors.

There are two reasons why it is said that the buddhas are born from bodhisattvas. One reason relates to 'occasion' and the other reason relates to 'different continuum'.

#### **1. Occasion**

The reason relating to occasion means that during the time, or occasion, of practising the learner's path, every buddha was a bodhisattva. Therefore every buddha is generated from a bodhisattva. When we talk about the bodhisattva from whom the buddhas are born, relating to occasion, it is a bodhisattva of the same preceding continuum.

#### **2. Different Continuum**

Buddhas are also born from bodhisattvas of a different continuum. This refers to the situation where, again at the time of the learner's path, the bodhisattva relied on another bodhisattva as a teacher. By relying upon another bodhisattva as one's teacher at the time of the learner's path, and then becoming enlightened, that buddha is also born from a bodhisattva.

That's why one says the buddhas are born from bodhisattvas, both in relation to occasion, and also from the point of view of different continuum.

The lesson one can take from this is that to do one's practice, to traverse the path to buddhahood, one needs to rely on the outer condition of a spiritual teacher for one's progress. That is something that everybody needs. This is one point that is shown here.

If we relate this to the two types of causes, substantial causes and concurrent causes, the bodhisattva of preceding same continuum is the substantial cause for that buddha. The other bodhisattvas, who the practitioner relied upon as spiritual guides during the time of practising the path, become the concurrent cause. As concurrent causes we not only have bodhisattvas, but we also have, of course, those other buddhas who don't form the attainment of that particular practitioner. That particular practitioner aims for the buddha he or she will become in a future lifetime. Those other buddhas are also concurrent causes because they act as a spiritual guide for the practitioner during the learner's path.

#### **Why are Bodhisattvas Praised by Buddhas?**

---

buddhas aren't classified as any of the four tenet proponents'.

---

There are four reasons why the buddhas particularly praise the bodhisattvas.

1. The first reason is that the bodhisattvas will definitely become buddhas. They are a very stable, very promising, and very sure cause of buddhas. Bodhisattvas are a very sure-fire cause to become a buddha, therefore bodhisattvas are very close to the heart of the buddhas. That's why buddhas cherish bodhisattvas so much.

2. The second reason is that by explicitly praising the bodhisattvas, one is implicitly praising the definite result, which is complete enlightenment or buddhahood. That's the second reason.

3. The third reason why buddhas praise bodhisattvas is explained in an example. After having planted the seed of a medicinal tree, in order to get the full result of that medicinal tree, that tree must really grow and give all the fruit that can be used. So from the very beginning, after planting the seed one takes very great care of the growing tree. The buddhas praise the bodhisattvas for the same reason.

4. The fourth reason is in order to encourage the three types of practitioners to enter the bodhisattva path.

There is a quote from a sutra that says,

As I prostrate to the half moon, and not to the  
full moon  
In the same way I don't prostrate to the  
buddhas, but I prostrate to the bodhisattvas.

Here the idea is that by prostrating to the half moon, one is automatically prostrating to the full moon, but not the other way round. In the same way, by prostrating to bodhisattvas one is also automatically prostrating to the buddhas. Whereas by prostrating to buddhas one does not automatically prostrate to the bodhisattvas. So in order to draw attention to the significance of the bodhisattvas, and the fact that the buddhas are generated from the bodhisattvas and not vice versa, here one prostrates to the bodhisattvas. Buddhas are generated from the bodhisattva, that's why by prostrating to the bodhisattvas one is automatically prostrating to the result, which are the buddhas. Then from the buddhas hearers and solitary realisers are generated, or born.

### **The Three Main Causes of Bodhisattvas**

Now we have gone through the hearers and middling buddhas being born from the powerful able ones, and the powerful able ones being born from bodhisattvas, so the next question is, 'What is the cause of the bodhisattvas? Where do the bodhisattvas come from?'

I think it is very good for you to memorise the homage of this text, that is, the first eight lines up to, 'Therefore I praise compassion'. Memorising those two verses, and then meditating on their meaning while reciting it, will help us greatly in our meditation, and in our understanding.

*Transcribed from tape by Mark Emerson*

*Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett*

*Edit 2 by Venerable Tenzin Dongak*

*Edited Version*

**© Tara Institute**