

---

# Study Group - *Madhyamakavatanama*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

འདྲུ་མ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་བརྒྱགས་པོ།

16 April 2002

---

Establish your motivation thinking, 'I have to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings, and for that purpose I am going to listen to the profound Mahayana Dharma, and put it into practice'.

## 1.1.2 Great Compassion as the Root Cause of the Other Two Causes of Bodhisattvas (cont)

Last time we finished what are called the three dharmas shown at this occasion, which refers to the three main causes of a bodhisattva. They are:

- Bodhicitta or wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings,
- Non-dual awareness, which is the wisdom realising emptiness via the door of limitless inference,
- The mind of compassion, which refers to great compassion.

Here it is important to understand that one arrives at the mind of great compassion as the initial cause, from which the other two causes arise.

To show this Chandrakirti said in his *Self Commentary*:

*Since compassion is the root of both the mind of enlightenment and non-dual transcendental wisdom I wished to show compassion as the very main cause and said:*

*Only compassion is conqueror's perfect crop's  
Seed and like water for its increase,  
Posited like ripening of state of longtime enjoyment  
Therefore, I first praise compassion*

*This is showing that in the same way as seed, water and ripening are essential during the beginning, middle and end for perfect external grain etc. and therefore definitely needed, compassion only is also definitely needed during the three times for a perfect conqueror's crop.*

From *Illumination*:

*Therefore **compassion** is important like a **seed** for the initial generation of this **Conqueror's perfect crop** and in the middle it is like **water for its** further and further **increase**. Finally, the **state of its longtime enjoyment** by the disciples is **likened** to the **ripening** of the fruit. **Therefore, I Chandrakirti praise first great compassion** before Hearers, Self-liberators, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and even before their other two causes. Or: **I praise great compassion** at the beginning of composing this commentary.*

This verse explains how compassion is important at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the path. It does this by using the example of the way the seed, water, and the ripening of the crop itself are regarded as essential during the beginning, middle, and final stages of the growing of a crop. In that way compassion is the root of the other two causes of a bodhisattva, bodhicitta as well as of non-dual awareness.

In the same way that the seed is initially important to start a crop, great compassion is essential at the beginning of the

path because it awakens one's Mahayana lineage. Once the crop has started to grow, if it is not nourished with conducive conditions such as water, then it will not grow. Similarly, if one's bodhicitta is not nourished by great compassion during the medium stages, then one won't progress along the path. In the end, just as the actual ripening of the grain is essential to enjoy the benefit of the harvest, compassion is necessary so that sentient beings can enjoy the fruit of the final enlightened state. Therefore, just like the seed, water and the ripening of the crop, great compassion is important during the beginning, middle and end of the path. Because it is so important, Chandrakirti therefore pays homage to great compassion at the beginning of the text.

The verse says, 'only compassion'. The reason for this is to point out the difference between the analogy, and the meaning being explained. In the analogy we have the seed, water and the ripening while as the exemplified meaning we have compassion alone.

In order to further clarify the type of compassion being referred to here we have already made it very clear that it is talking about great compassion. Then again, does it talk about the great compassion that is in the continuum of the practitioner who hasn't yet entered the path, or does it talk about the great compassion in the continuum of an ordinary bodhisattva? Or does it talk about the great compassion in the continuum of an arya bodhisattva?

If it is the compassion in the continuum of a practitioner who hasn't yet entered the path, then, even though it would be important at the beginning, that great compassion is not important at the middle and the end. This is because we can find it only at the beginning.

If the great compassion mentioned here was the great compassion we find in the continuum of a bodhisattva, then compassion would be only important in the middle, but not at the beginning or at the end. The great compassion one is talking about is just great compassion by itself, without specifying any particular type of great compassion. It is what is referred to as the self isolate of great compassion—just great compassion by itself.

## Compassion at the Beginning

The compassion referred to here is just great compassion by itself. Why is great compassion important at the beginning like the seed? It is because once a practitioner generates great compassion in their mental continuum, then the Mahayana lineage in that practitioner's mind is awakened. The measure of whether or not the Mahayana lineage in the practitioner's mind has been awakened is whether or not that practitioner has great compassion. In that way great compassion becomes like the seed at the beginning. When we think about the meaning of this verse we shouldn't think about it in an abstract way, not relating to ourselves. Rather we should think about it in relation to our own practice. If we generate great compassion, then our Mahayana lineage will be awakened, and in that way great compassion is like the seed.

Once we have entered the path, then great compassion will nourish and increase the qualities we have generated. So in that way great compassion becomes important during the medium stages of the path. Once we have become enlightened and have completed the development of our qualities, then, in order for others to enjoy the benefit of our qualities, great compassion is again essential at this end stage. So therefore great compassion is important at the

---

---

beginning, the middle and the end. If we relate it to ourselves then we can see the importance of great compassion to our own practice and development, and then become enlightened very quickly!

Since arya bodhisattvas are controlled by great compassion they don't get any rest. As soon as arya bodhisattvas perceive that somewhere a sentient being needs help, then their great compassion automatically pushes them to go there. So arya bodhisattvas never remain within equanimity not doing anything. They never rest, because they are compelled through great compassion to help wherever they can.

The three main causes of a bodhisattva are great compassion, bodhicitta and non-dual awareness. Here, non-dual awareness refers to the wisdom realising emptiness that is generated through the door of infinite analysis. Chandrakirti's *Self Commentary* explains those three dharmas as the main causes of bodhisattvas from the point of view of bodhisattvas with dull faculty. Even though Chandrakirti doesn't explicitly mention, or explain this verse, from the point of view of bodhisattvas of sharp faculties one can also understand that implicitly those three dharmas are also the cause of bodhisattvas of sharp faculty.

Of the three types of practitioners, (the practitioners of the hearer path, practitioners of the solitary realiser path, and the practitioners of the Mahayana path), the practitioners of the hearer's path are referred to as practitioners of smallest capacity. Practitioners following the self-liberator's path are referred to as practitioners of medium capacity. Any type of practitioner following the Mahayana path will be a practitioner of greatest capacity. From another point of view, any practitioner following the Mahayana path will be regarded as a practitioner of sharp faculty, hearer practitioners will be practitioners of dull faculty, while self-liberators are practitioners of medium faculty.

Even though all Mahayana practitioners are of sharp faculty, there are variations between them, as some are sharper than others. So the very sharp class of practitioners includes those who are very sharp, medium sharp ones and least sharp ones. Here there's a slight variation in the sequence in which bodhisattvas of dull faculty and bodhisattvas of the sharp faculty enter the path.

### **Two Types of Bodhisattvas**

Bodhisattvas of dull faculty generate great compassion first, then they generate bodhicitta<sup>1</sup> and then they engage in the practices of the six perfections. In the context of the six perfections they practice the perfection of wisdom, and then realise emptiness.

Bodhisattvas of sharp faculty also generate great compassion first, but before generating bodhicitta they realise emptiness. Then, after realising emptiness they generate bodhicitta, and then practise the six perfections.

### **Bodhisattvas of Dull Faculty**

From the point of view of the bodhisattva of dull faculty, both the generation of the wisdom realising emptiness and the generation of bodhicitta come from the root of the generation of great compassion. Here Chandrakirti is referring to great compassion as the root of the other two causes of a bodhisattva. From the point of view of a bodhisattva of dull faculty, great compassion is generated first, after seeing the suffering of sentient beings. Then being

unable to bear the suffering of sentient beings, because of their great compassion they secondly generate bodhicitta, wishing to attain complete enlightenment in order to liberate sentient beings from suffering. After the generation of bodhicitta comes the understanding that if one doesn't engage in the practice of the six perfections one won't become enlightened. So then the bodhisattva engages in the practice of the six perfections.

Here the first five perfections are likened to a blind person, and the sixth perfection of wisdom is likened to a person who can see, and who guides a host of blind people to their destination. In order for a practice to become perfection it has to be held by the wisdom realising emptiness, the motivation of bodhicitta and by dedication. So if you look at this sequence, then we can understand how compassion is important at the beginning for the bodhisattva of dull faculty.

### **Bodhisattvas of Sharp Faculty**

The bodhisattva of sharp faculty initially meditates on those first five points of the seven point cause-and-effect method starting out by recognising that all sentient beings have been one's mother and so on, generating in that way great concern, compassion, and love for sentient beings, wanting them to be happy and free from suffering. Then, having generated great compassion the bodhisattva arrives at the point where he understands that, in order to be able to free all sentient beings from their suffering, he needs to attain complete enlightenment for himself. So the need to attain enlightenment is understood. At the time when the bodhisattva of sharp faculty generates great compassion they understand the need to become enlightened for the benefit of sentient beings.

The difference between bodhisattvas of sharp faculty and dull faculty is that at this stage the bodhisattva of sharp faculty investigates whether it is actually possible to actually attain the state of complete enlightenment free from the two obscurations<sup>2</sup>, including the karmic imprints. During this investigation the bodhisattva arrives at the root of all obscurations, which is true grasping. By investigating the nature of true grasping, via the door of limitless inference, with countless types of investigation, analyses and proofs, the bodhisattva negates the imputed object of true grasping. So by the door of infinite inference the bodhisattva negates the imputed object of true grasping. Having understood that the imputed object of true grasping is non-existent, the bodhisattva understands with valid cognition that true grasping can be abandoned. Then the bodhisattva also establishes through valid cognition that the attainment of complete enlightenment free from the two obscurations, including the imprints is possible.

Once the bodhisattva of sharp faculty has established with a valid cognition the possibility of attaining the state of complete enlightenment free from the two obscurations, including the imprints, then they will generate the wish to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings.

So we can see here that great compassion is important at the beginning, not just from the point of view of the bodhisattva of dull faculty, but also from the point of view of the bodhisattva of sharp faculty.

### **Compassion in the Middle**

---

<sup>2</sup> Obscurations to liberation, which are the delusions and their seeds, and obscurations to omniscience, which are the imprints of self-grasping together with the mistaken part of dualistic appearance.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bodhicitta like the bark of sugar cane.

Great compassion is important during the middle of one's practice in the same way, as water is important for the nourishment and growth of the crop. Though the seed of great compassion has generated the sprout of bodhicitta, if a practitioner doesn't again and again nourish that sprout of bodhicitta with the water of compassion, then that practitioner will find it impossible to build up the two types of accumulations in a very extensive way, and fall to the Hinayana path. This comes about through a lack of compassion in the middle stage of one's practice.

The attainment of complete enlightenment is very difficult, and much work needs to be done to attain it. The two accumulations need building up in a very expansive manner. If one lacks great compassion, when one encounters many difficulties one will tire of building up the two accumulations, and it will be easier to fall from the Mahayana path to the Hinayana path. If the practitioner continues to practice compassion then they will not become tired of building up the two accumulations.

Here there is a doubt, which is expressed in Chandrakirti's *Self Commentary*. There it says that if it is possible for a bodhisattva to fall from the Mahayana path to the Hinayana path, wouldn't it be possible for a bodhisattva to fall to the path of a self-liberator, since that is a Hinayana path?

The way this doubt is eliminated, according to the Prasangika point of view, is that since from the point of view of the result there is no great difference between a hearer arhat and a self-liberated arhat. According to the Prasangika tenet, there's no great difference in what they have abandoned and what they have realised. For example, according to the Prasangika tenet, once a practitioner has entered the hearer's path, the practitioner won't change his mind, and then later enter the path of self-liberator, for example. Why? Because there's no particular advantage to be gained from that.

According to the lower tenets there's a difference with regard to the level of abandonments between the hearer arhats and the self-liberated arhats. The self-liberated arhats have abandoned grasping at the subject and object being of different substance, which a hearer arhat hasn't done. So there is something to be gained for a hearer practitioner to enter the self-liberated path. In the Prasangika system, however, that is not the case.

What is important to keep in mind is that if we lack compassion, then even though we might generate the sprout of bodhicitta from the seed of great compassion, we will fall from the path, because we will find it very difficult to practise the two accumulations very extensively.

If we have not meditated very well on compassion, and our mind is not trained very well in compassion, then we will find it very difficult to complete the two accumulations. This is because sentient beings are very ungrateful and difficult to handle. So even if one tries to benefit them, over and over again other sentient beings will react badly, and treat one badly. In such a situation, if one loses the motivation of wanting to work for the benefit of sentient beings, then that is a sign that one hasn't meditated very well on compassion, and that one hasn't trained very well in compassion.

### Compassion at the End

We come to the final point, that great compassion is also important at the end of one's practice. The reason for this is that even though one might have attained the state of complete enlightenment with all the accompanying qualities, if one lacked great compassion then one wouldn't stay

around until the end of existence working for sentient beings. Therefore the long-time enjoyment by sentient beings of the enlightened state comes about through great compassion.

In this sequence we have been talking about how the hearers and solitary realisers are generated from buddhas, how the buddhas are generated from bodhisattvas, and how the bodhisattvas are in turn generated from their own teachers, whether they are buddhas and so forth. This whole chain would be non-existent if the buddhas lacked great compassion, because without great compassion the buddhas wouldn't teach, and then no further bodhisattvas would be generated, no further beings would become enlightened, and no hearers or solitary realiser arhats would come about. So the increase of the accumulations of the hearers, self-liberators and arya bodhisattvas, continuously without interruption from one life to the next, is due to great compassion in the continuum of the buddhas. Therefore great compassion is again essential at the end of one's practice.

One moral to be drawn from the above teaching, according to Lama Tsong Khapa, concerns one's understanding of ones practice. From *Illumination*:

*If one wishes to practise the Mahayana one needs to be someone who's mind first is overcome by great compassion and then generates the actual bodhicitta from the depths of ones heart in dependence upon that. Then, having generated the mind of enlightenment, one must practise the bodhisattva practises in general and in particular one needs to penetrate the meaning of the profound view. Having contemplated this one should gain a firm understanding that the explanation of the four verses 'Only compassion etc' teaches that one needs to practise in such a manner.*

This finishes praising great compassion in general. Next is praising compassion by discerning them individually, or the different types of compassion.

### 1.2 Praising Compassion By Discerning Them Individually

Praising great compassion by discerning the different types of compassion individually has two main points, prostration to compassion that focuses on sentient beings, and prostration to the two types of compassion focusing on dharmas and focussing on non-focus.

#### 1.2.1 Prostration to Compassion Focussing on Sentient Beings

Chandrakirti said in his *Self Commentary*:

*Now, since I wish to compose a homage having clearly differentiated the instances of compassion by their way of engaging instances of the object of contemplation, I stated:*

*Starting grasping at self initially naming 'I'  
Generating attachment for phenomena naming 'mine'  
Praise to whatever becomes compassion for migrators  
Traversing without freedom like a bucket in a well.*

From *Illumination*:

*The view of the transitory collection grasping at 'I' generates the view of the transitory collection grasping at 'mine'. Therefore, those sentient beings, preceding the view of the transitory collection intensely grasping at 'mine', intensely **grasp** the mere meaning of that **named 'I'** to be truly existing, after the view of the transitory collection*

*grasping at 'I' has conceived the non naturally existing<sup>3</sup> self to be naturally existing. After that the view of the transitory collection grasping at 'mine' generates attachment for 'mine', the 'mine' named on phenomena other than the focal object of 'I-grasping', such as form, the eye and so forth, to be truly existing. Praise to whatever becomes compassion for migrators who because of that are circling without freedom like the circling, traversing bucket in a water well. This is the homage to the compassion focusing on sentient beings.*

Here the first two lines say that the view of the transitory collection grasping at 'I' generates the view of the transitory collection grasping at 'mine'. First we should clarify that there are two types of view of the transitory collections. There's the view of the transitory collection grasping at 'I' and there's the view of the transitory collection grasping at 'mine'.

According to the Prasangika system the definition of the view of the transitory collection is, **having focussed on the 'I' or 'mine' within one's own continuum, grasping either one of them to be inherently existing.** Of course in general the view of the transitory collection is self-grasping, but it is a specific type of self-grasping that takes as its object the 'I' within one's own continuum, and the 'mine' within one's own continuum.

#### **First Type of View of Transitory Collection**

If we go to the first line which is, 'Starting grasping at self initially naming 'I''. Of the two types of view of the transitory collection the first one is grasping at 'I'. If we relate it to the root text, then initially after having focussed on that named 'I', one starts to grasp at a truly existent self. So, after having focussed initially on that named 'I' then the grasping at the 'I' as truly existent starts.

#### **Second Type of View of Transitory Collection**

After that one generates attachment, grasping at true existence. Here we are talking about the attachment that grasps at true existence after having focussed on 'mine'. After the first view of the transitory collection, grasping at inherently existing 'I' is generated, one starts to name as 'mine' the various phenomena such as the five aggregates, the sense powers and so on, and then grasp at an inherently existing 'mine'.

The second type of view of the transitory collection generates the true grasping attachment that focuses on that 'mine'. Then in dependence upon that grasping at a truly existent 'mine' other delusions are generated, and then the various types of karma are generated. So one starts to circle within cyclic existence in the same way as a bucket traverses a well. Here the traversing refers to the cycling of sentient beings in samsara. Chandrakirti uses the bucket in a well as a metaphor for the situation of sentient beings in cyclic existence. That's why it says in the fourth line that one starts to wander 'without freedom like a bucket in the well'.

Becoming aware of this situation of the migrators, and seeing how, like a bucket in a well, they are travelling or circling without freedom in cyclic existence, a bodhisattva generates compassion. So Chandrakirti is saying here, 'I praise whatever becomes that compassion for migrators'. This is the praise to the compassion focussing on sentient

beings. This is not just praising compassion, and explaining a particular type of compassion, but it also explains how to meditate on the generation of this compassion.

Next week we can go into the six ways in which sentient beings are like the bucket in the well. This is very important, because in general we might know that compassion is the wish for others to be free from suffering but if, in addition one knows how that suffering is generated, then one knows the way sentient beings have to cycle in cyclic existence, and are bound to that suffering. Then one's compassion will become that much more stable and stronger. This is explained with those six points. We can do this next time.

What are the three dharmas?

Student: Compassion, non-dual awareness, bodhicitta.

Geshe-la: How would you posit that great compassion? Which great compassion are we talking about here?

Student: Is it the great compassion of seven-point cause-and-effect?

Geshe-la: In general that is correct. We already decided that the bodhicitta that is explained here doesn't refer to actual bodhicitta. What was the reason we said why it couldn't be actual bodhicitta?

Student: Because it is a cause for bodhisattvas.

Geshe-la: As we said last time the three dharmas that are shown here are called the dharmas of ordinary beings, and the bodhicitta that is explicitly shown here is not actual bodhicitta, because it is shown as the cause of bodhisattva. However, it would be a mistake to say that actual bodhicitta is not shown here at all. The bodhicitta shown explicitly is the bodhicitta likened to the bark of sugar cane. Implicitly the actual bodhicitta is shown, because it refers here to the three dharmas of ordinary beings. Here the ordinary beings are ordinary bodhisattvas, so it is showing the three dharmas of ordinary bodhisattvas. Therefore it has to show actual bodhicitta, but it does it implicitly rather than explicitly.

It also posits the non-dual awareness as a cause of bodhisattvas from the point of view that most bodhisattvas of dull faculty realise emptiness before entering the Mahayana path, that is, they realise emptiness before generating bodhicitta. We explained before how it is the cause even for bodhisattvas of sharp faculty. Again there's no contradiction, because even though Chandrakirti talks explicitly from the point of view of bodhisattvas of dull faculty, he doesn't exclude the bodhisattvas with sharp faculty.

From the Prasangika point of view only bodhisattvas following the Svatarika-Madhyamika or Mind-Only point of view would be bodhisattvas that haven't realised emptiness. Those bodhisattvas first train in great compassion and bodhicitta, and then realise emptiness.

Most bodhisattva of dull faculty realise emptiness before entering the Mahayana path, before generating bodhicitta. Since that is the case, it is all right to posit those three dharmas as a cause of a bodhisattva, as they are the causes for most bodhisattvas. Since most bodhisattvas realise emptiness before entering the path, there's no mistake in positing those three dharmas as the cause of a bodhisattva.

So we come to the three types of compassion, compassion focussing merely on sentient beings, compassion focussing on dharmas and compassion focussing on the non-focus. Here the first type of compassion, compassion focussing

<sup>3</sup> Tib.: *rang-bshin gis med-pa*; since *rang-bshin* is usually translated as 'nature', i.e. the nature of the cup, it seems logical to translate this as 'not existing naturally'.

---

merely on sentient beings, is probably shared by all types of religions. However I think the other two types of compassion can only be found in the continuum of a Buddhist, because they involve the realisation of subtle impermanence and so on. In the same way as we have three types of compassion there are also three types of love.

*Transcribed from tape by Mark Emerson*

*Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett*

*Edit 2 by Venerable Tenzin Dongak*

*Edited Version*

© **Tara Institute**