
Study Group - *Madhyamakavatanama*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual please generate a virtuous motivation for the listening to the teaching, thinking, 'I have to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings, and for that purpose, I'm now going to listen to the profound Mahayana teaching and then practice it.

Last time we finished the compassion that merely takes sentient beings as its object, which is one of the three types of compassion. Here, a very important point is that we don't just intellectually understand what this type of compassion means, but that we also put what we learn into practice, so that we actually develop and increase our compassion. If we don't increase and develop our compassion now while we have the opportunity, then that would be a very great loss.

1.2.2 *Compassion Focussing¹ on Dharmas and Non-Focus*

Compassion Focussing on Dharmas

First we will talk about the compassion that takes dharmas as its object.

Chandrakirti: In order to clarify compassion focusing on dharma and focusing on non-focus I stated:

They, seeing migrators as unstable and empty of Mere inherent existence like a moon in stirred water

'*Praise to whatever becomes compassion*' has to be added to this.

It is important to know how we have to meditate to generate this type of compassion. We already know how we generate the first type of compassion, by meditating on the way sentient beings are bound to cyclic existence through the twelve links. Here it explains how one has to meditate in order to generate the compassion focussing on dharmas, which is basically meditating on impermanence.

From Illumination: Praise to whatever becomes compassion for migrators after having seen them disintegrating moment by moment like the moon moving in water stirred by wind. This is the homage to the compassion focusing on Dharmas.

We have to understand how reflecting on impermanence can help us to generate a compassion that is superior to the compassion that was explained before. We have to reflect on the way sentient beings create lots of suffering

and non-virtuous karma for themselves because of not having realised impermanence.

Without having realised impermanence one grasps at permanence. Then because of grasping at permanence lots of sufferings and non-virtues are created. In the same way, if a person has realised impermanence then there is no grasping or attachment for this life. However, if a person hasn't realised impermanence then exactly the opposite happens: there's lots of grasping and attachment for this life, lots of non-virtue created, and lots of suffering.

Compassion Focussing on Non-Focus

From Illumination: Praise to whatever becomes compassion for migrators after having seen them, even though appearing to be inherently established, to be empty of being inherently established like the form of a moon in stirred water. This is the homage to compassion without focus.

Here the meditator focuses on sentient beings who haven't realised emptiness, and who because of this create various karmas, and in that way stay in cyclic existence and experience various sufferings.

It is as the Buddha said in the sutra requested by Pagpa Yul Khor Kyong, 'since migrators don't know emptiness, peace and non-generation² they started to wander in samsara. The compassionate ones guide them with method and hundreds of analyses.

As it is necessary to realise emptiness in order to be liberated from cyclic existence, it is important that one tries to understand emptiness. It is also important that one tries to understand the subject of impermanence, which is slightly less difficult to understand than emptiness. We should relate this to our own practice by reflecting on impermanence and emptiness according to our potential. We should try to see that if one doesn't realise emptiness then, because of true grasping, delusions are generated, and through delusions karma is generated, and how through that process one continues to stay in cyclic existence. This is how we should relate it to our own practice. It will be very beneficial if, as we go through the text, we relate it to our own mind and to our practice. Even if we can't realise emptiness in this life we place imprints in our mind to realise it in the future.

If we read the root text then it becomes very clear that all three types of compassion focus on sentient beings, or migrators. They take migrators, or sentient beings, as their object.

From *Illumination*:

Sometimes the two phenomena, the reflection of the moon in a part of very clear water pervaded by ripples because of a slight wind, and its momentary disintegration simultaneously with that of the water, which is the basic object focused on before the reflection, appear directly observable. Then the superior beings, namely those that are proficient in these ways, see momentarily changing impermanence and the lack of the appearing moon's nature.

¹ The Tibetan word *mig-pa* can mean to concentrate ones mind on, to think or to meditate. I think here it is more in the context of the first. Suffering migrators are the focal point of compassion and the apprehended object is 'the goodness if they were free from suffering'.

² Three doors to liberation

In the same way as in the example, bodhisattvas overcome by compassion see sentient beings abiding in the ocean of the view of the transitory collections that is fed by the wide blue river of ignorance and stirred by the wind of the mistaken conceptions. (As we know, in order for anger or attachment to arise, first the mind has to be prepared by the misleading conceptions. In order for attachment to arise, misleading conceptions have to first generate the object as being very desirable to one's own mind. After that attachment arises.)

They abiding before them, similar to the moon in the sky, like reflections of their black and white karma. Having taken them as their object of meditation while seeing them burdened with the compounded suffering of disintegrating moment by moment and lacking natural existence they generate great compassion for them.

This comes from having contemplated sentient beings as endearing and their way of wandering in cyclic existence, as was explained previously.

Ignorance is mentioned separately even though the view of the transitory collections is ignorance. This was done with the self-grasping at phenomena that induces the view of the transitory collections in mind.

How Are the Three Types of Compassion Different?

Aspect and Focus

Having gone through how one has to meditate in order to generate those different types of compassion, then the question arises, what differentiates those three types of compassion? Are they different by way of aspect or are they different by way of focus? All three types of compassion are the same in arising in the **aspect** of wishing their object, sentient beings, to be free from suffering. So all three types of compassion are the same in aspect. Even though they are differentiated by **focus**, the three types of compassion are the still same in that they focus on sentient beings.

1. Compassion Merely Focussing on Sentient Beings

The first type of compassion is called compassion focussing merely on sentient beings. Here the importance lies with the use of 'merely', because it is not as if the other types of compassion don't focus on sentient beings. There's no compassion that doesn't focus on sentient beings, because every compassion takes sentient beings as its object. The definition of the first type of compassion is **compassion as well as not directly held either by the wisdom that realises sentient beings as being impermanent, nor by the wisdom realising sentient beings as lacking inherent existence**. So the first part is that it is compassion and secondly, it is not directly held either by the wisdom realising sentient beings to be impermanent, nor the wisdom realising sentient beings' lack of inherent existence.

2. Compassion Focussing on Dharmas

Compassion as well as being directly held by the wisdom realising sentient beings as impermanent is the definition of compassion focussing at dharmas.

3. Compassion Focussing on Non-Focus

Compassion as well as being directly held by the

wisdom realising sentient beings lack of inherent existence is the definition of the third type of

compassion.

As we said before, all three types of compassion are the same in aspect, as they have the same way of apprehending the object. This means that they apprehend 'the goodness if they were free from suffering'.

That is all that the compassion apprehends. If we just said that compassion apprehended suffering itself, then that would create various problems. Actually the way the compassion looks at sentient beings is to see that it would be very good if sentient beings were to be free from suffering. That's the way compassion apprehends its object - that's its aspect. In this respect all three types of compassion are the same.

So what is the difference? The difference is that the first type of compassion focuses merely on sentient beings. Here, 'merely' means that sentient beings haven't been differentiated or qualified in any way. One hasn't thought about sentient beings in any particular way, one just thinks about sentient beings and how good it would be if they could be free from suffering.

The compassion focussing on dharmas focuses on sentient beings that have been distinguished as being impermanent. Here there's also the sequence that the second type of compassion focuses on sentient beings that have already been distinguished as being impermanent. The third type of compassion focuses on sentient beings that have been distinguished as lacking inherent existence. The first type of compassion focuses on sentient beings that haven't been distinguished in either of those two ways.

In order to have the third type of compassion one has to have the realisation of sentient beings as being impermanent. We can say that if a person has generated the second type of compassion there is a pervasion that that person has realised impermanence. In the same way, there's a pervasion that if a person has generated the third type of compassion then that person has realised emptiness. In order to have the first type of compassion neither of those two realisations is necessary.

If you think about the process, the way it works is that first of all the practitioner realises impermanence, and then meditates on the impermanence of sentient beings. Through that, sentient beings will obviously appear differently to the meditator. One has distinguished sentient beings as actually being impermanent. So they will appear differently to the meditator's mind. Therefore then, the compassion that is generated for sentient beings is also different. In the same way also by reflecting on the lack of natural existence of sentient beings they will also appear differently to the meditator's mind, and then the compassion that is induced through that will also be different.

We can finish at this point for tonight, and then finish the remaining two points with regard to the three types of compassion, the etymology, and the boundaries of the three types of compassions, next Tuesday.

Geshe-la: First of please, what are the three types of

compassion?

Student: Compassion merely focussing on sentient beings, compassion focussing on dharmas, and compassion focussing on non-focus.

Geshe-la: Is there a pervasion that if it is compassion focussing on sentient beings, that it is the first type of compassion?

Student: No.

Geshe-la: So what is the meaning of the 'merely'?

Student: Compassion that is not qualified by impermanence or inherent existence.

Geshe-la: Very good. What do we understand under the compassion focussing on dharmas?

Student: Compassion focussing on the impermanence of sentient beings.

Geshe-la: What type of person is needed for that type of compassion?

Student: A person who has realised subtle impermanence.

Geshe-la: What do we understand under compassion focussing on non-focus?

Student: One who has realised emptiness.

Geshe-la: Which type of selflessness do we talk about here?

Student: The selflessness of phenomena.

Geshe-la: The lack of inherently existing person is the selflessness of person isn't it, not the selflessness of phenomena.

Student: [answer inaudible].

Geshe-la: In the Prasangika school the two types of selflessness are differentiated by the way of the focal object, and not by way of the object of negation. In the Svatantrika-Madhyamika school the two types of selflessnesses are differentiated by way of the object of negation. For the Prasangika school, whether it is selflessness of person, or selflessness of phenomena depends on the object itself.

Is the selflessness here subtle or coarse selflessness?

Student: Subtle selflessness.

Geshe-la: What is the coarse selflessness?

Student: Lack of a person being a self-sufficient substantial existent.

Geshe-la: Is the impermanence coarse impermanence or subtle impermanence?

Student: Subtle impermanence.

Geshe-la: What is subtle impermanence?

Student: That which is recognised by yogic direct cognisers that recognises that things change moment by moment.

Geshe-la: Other types of impermanence are not understood by direct yogic perception? If you posit subtle impermanence, you just posit it from the side of the object actually, you don't need to identify the subject. Direct yogic perception will realise a glass, but the glass is not

subtle impermanence.

Subtle impermanence is the momentariness of impermanent phenomena. There's no moment of abiding, as impermanent phenomena are changing moment by moment continuously. Coarse impermanence is something we can observe. We can observe that a person changes from year to year, or even from week to week. We can directly observe that the person is not the same this week as they were last week. That weekly change comes about only because the person is changing moment by moment. Let's say a person has a life span of one hundred years. Even after one minute has passed in the life span of that person, they will have changed.

Actually the person who goes to bed in the evening is not the same person who wakes up in the morning. Even though intellectually we say that it is the same person, and we accept that the person is changing moment by moment, we will not really have the feeling that the person is changing moment by moment. Maybe it is because the momentariness is not something we can observe directly. So even though superficially we will assert that we are changing every moment, we will not actually have the feeling that this is the case. Rather we will have the feeling that we are always the same.

If it is any of those three types of compassion there is a pervasion that it is great compassion. It has to be compassion that arises in the aspect wishing to rescue all sentient beings from their sufferings. This type of compassion is higher than the compassion one can find in the continuum of arhats.

Where do the hearers and self-liberators come from? Where are they generated from?

Students: From powerful able ones.

Geshe-la: How are the hearers and self-liberators born from the powerful able one? Are they born as in the same way as a baby is born from the mother?

Student: They are born from the teaching on dependent arising.

Geshe-la: Where are the buddhas born from?

Students: Bodhisattvas.

Geshe-la: What do we understand by 'a bodhisattva'? Is a person who has bodhicitta in their mental continuum a bodhisattva?

Student: What type of bodhicitta?

Geshe-la: Any of the two types.

Student: The second.

Geshe-la: What do you mean by the first and second?

Student: Contrived or wishing bodhicitta, and actual bodhicitta.

Geshe-la: Take the subject 'arya buddhas³': does it follow that it is a bodhisattva?

Student: To be an arya one has to be on the path of

³ A difference is made between buddha and arya buddha. Buddha is synonymous with resultant dharma kaya, permanent, and encompasses the four buddha bodies. Arya buddha is impermanent and refers specifically to the person that became enlightened.

seeing.

Geshe-la: The question is whether an arya buddha is a bodhisattva?

Student: Buddhas are born from bodhisattvas.

Geshe-la: Think about it. It actually becomes very simple. The bodhisattvas are those who practise the Mahayana path, at the time of the learner stage. Once one becomes enlightened, one has gone beyond that stage, so one is no longer a bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas will always be sentient beings, so a bodhisattva is necessarily a sentient being. Buddhas are not classified as sentient beings any more, they have gone beyond that. So therefore if a being has bodhicitta there's no pervasion that they have to be a bodhisattva.

It is good to know this distinction but don't worry about it, there are many who also think as you do.

If we look at it in reference to the five paths, the paths of accumulation, preparation, seeing, meditation, and no-more-learning, then the first four paths are the learner's path. As long as a practitioner is on any of those four paths then they are a bodhisattva. Once the practitioner has attained the path of no-more-learning then the practitioner goes beyond the learner's path and become a buddha. They are no longer a bodhisattva, however they still have bodhicitta.

Once a practitioner becomes a buddha then they have completed the practice of the path. The development of all the qualities is done at the time of the learner's stage. This has been completed and achieved to the final stage by the time of the path of no-more-learning. So there's no question that a buddha has great compassion and bodhicitta

Geshe-la: How would you qualify a bodhisattva?

Student: A practitioner with bodhicitta, on the final learner path and a sentient being.

Geshe-la: If you said, 'a sentient being with bodhicitta' then that perfectly captures it. Also that person's Mahayana lineage has to be ripened by great compassion. We explained previously the Mahayana lineage becomes ripened through great compassion.

We have established how the hearers and self-liberators are generated from buddhas. Where are the buddhas born from?

Students: From bodhisattvas.

Geshe-la: How are they born from bodhisattvas?

Student: From bodhisattvas of their own previous continuum and from bodhisattvas that became their teachers.

Geshe-la: Where are the bodhisattvas born from?

Students: The mind of compassion, non-dual awareness and bodhicitta.

Geshe-la: What is the root of non-dual awareness and bodhicitta?

Students: Compassion!

Geshe-la: By reflecting on this sequence then we can see how everything depends on the root of great compassion.

Why did Chandrakirti expressively praise only great compassion alone at the beginning of the text, and not pay homage to buddhas, bodhisattvas and so on expressively.

Student: Because compassion is the one factor that makes a Buddha. Without it one cannot become a buddha.

Geshe-la: Because great compassion is important at the beginning, middle and end. What is the compassion that is the direct object of the homage?

Student: Great compassion by itself.

Geshe-la: Does it specify the great compassion of bodhisattvas?

Student: No.

Geshe-la: So it doesn't pay homage to the great compassion in the continuum of bodhisattvas?

Students: No, yes.

Geshe-la: Some say no, and some say yes. Even though it doesn't pay homage expressively to the great compassion in the continuum of bodhisattvas, that compassion is still included implicitly.

I have the feeling that you are following the classes and listening to them very well. Thank you for following the classes so well. Thank you very much.

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Edited Version

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