

Study Group - *Madhyamakavataranama*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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First establish a virtuous motivation thinking, 'I have to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings. In order to achieve that purpose I am going to listen to the profound Mahayana Dharma, and then I will to put what I have listened to into practice.'

Of the four outlines of the text we have completed the meaning of the name, and the homage.

MEANING OF THE TEXT

2. The Actual Body of the Text

The next major outline is the actual body of the text, which has two subdivisions, the causal grounds and the resultant ground.

2.1 The Causal Grounds

Causal grounds has three subdivisions, the way of practising the path on the basis of one's present rebirth, the way of practising the path as an ordinary bodhisattva, and the way of practising the path as an arya bodhisattva.

2.1.1 The Way of Practising the Path on the Basis of One's Present Rebirth

As already mentioned, the text *Entering the Middle Way* explains the *Root Wisdom* both by way of the profound as well as the extensive. The extensive refers to the conventional aspect of progressing along the bodhisattva path, and this explanation was taken from other texts of Nagarjuna.

From *Illumination* :

If it is asked: 'If this commentary conveys both the profound and extensive bodhisattva paths according to Nagarjuna then what does the graduated path leading to the ground of a Buddha according to the school of the protector Nagarjuna look like?'

Understanding the school of the second Buddha Nagarjuna etc. through hearing and contemplation is for the purpose of oneself ascertaining and finding great conviction in the way a perfect path is practiced so that a mistaken path can't mislead one. Therefore, listening and contemplating without having ascertained the way one has to practice the path won't become meaningful, even though one trains in the school of the great pioneers. Therefore, if one doesn't properly take the essence of the Mahayana path even though one practices zealously, then one should make effort to understand the steps of advancing on the path.

Chandrakirti explains the method aspect of the path by relying on other scriptures by Nagarjuna. What is the significance of this? The significance is that Chandrakirti did not just make up the method aspect of the path that

is explained in *Entering the Middle Way*, but he took it from Nagarjuna, who is regarded as the second buddha. By relying on the unmistakable source of Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti explained the method aspect of the path unmistakably.

Clearly ascertaining the unmistakable path will prevent one from entering a mistaken path. As I have explained to you many times before, the importance of studying the correct Buddhist path is that it prevents us from following a mistaken or wrong path. We have to practise the three steps of listening to, contemplating and meditating on the teachings of the great pioneers. The purpose of these three steps is so that we ascertain for ourselves the unmistakable path to enlightenment. Through ascertaining the unmistakable path to enlightenment we won't follow a mistaken path. Here the importance is that we ascertain the unmistakable path.

If we don't generate an understanding of the unmistakable path through our practise of listening and contemplation then we will not have taken the essence of listening and contemplating the teachings of Nagarjuna.

There are many texts by Nagarjuna that deal with individual aspects of the path and three that deal with the whole body of both the profound and the extensive. From those, the Precious Garland of Madhyamaka, 'Its root is bodhicitta' and 'Compassion preceding all practices' have already been quoted.

As we explained before the three dharmas of individual beings are compassion, non-dual awareness, and bodhicitta. The text gave various quotations, which we have already completed, such as *'Its root is bodhicitta'* and *'Compassion preceding all practices'* and so on.

Further:

*Showing briefly the qualities;
Of a bodhisattva;
Generosity, morality, patience and enthusiasm;
Mental stabilisation, wisdom, compassion and so forth.*

*Generosity is giving up completely selfish aims;
Morality is to benefit others;
Patience is having abandoned anger;
Enthusiasm increases white dharmas.*

Mental stabilisation is single pointed and free from delusions;

*Wisdom understands the meaning of truth;
Compassion is wisdom regarding;*

All sentient beings of one taste with compassion.

Then the *Precious Garland* condenses the qualities of bodhisattvas into seven. The text goes very briefly through the individual natures of the six perfections and great compassion, which make seven qualities in all.

1. First of all, generosity is having a generous attitude, giving ones own possessions to others. Of course here possession includes much more than material possessions. Being generous is giving up one's own purpose.
2. Morality is abandoning working for one's own purpose alone so that one can work for the benefit of others.
3. Patience means abandoning anger.
4. Enthusiastic effort means being joyful or enthusiastic

in practising virtue.

5. Mental stabilisation is single-pointedness of mind, free from the faults of mental excitement and sinking, and not being obscured by the delusions.
6. Wisdom refers to comprehending the various truths such as ultimate truth and conventional truth, the four noble truths, and so on.
7. Compassion is wishing all sentient beings to be free from all suffering.

Then Nagarjuna then listed some of the results of those seven qualities.

*From generosity wealth, from morality happiness;
Complexion from patience, charisma from
enthusiasm;
Peace from mental stabilisation, liberation from
awareness;
Compassion accomplishes all aims.*

Those are the individual results. Then Nagarjuna explained the result shared by all those seven qualities thus:

*By practising all of those seven simultaneously
At the time of the learner's path
One will attain the incomprehensible
transcendental wisdom
Of the protector of the transitory realms.*

This came from *Precious Garland* where it first identified the six perfections, then mentioned their benefits, and advised that one has to practise the six perfections in conjunction with great compassion. Then, after first generating bodhicitta, and then practising those six perfections in combination with great compassion, the practitioner will advance along the ten bodhisattva grounds.

Here *Illumination* goes onto a quote from Nagarjuna's *Praise to the Dharmadhatu*:

After having gone for refuge then one generates the mind of enlightenment and then by extensively practising the ten perfections one will attain the ten bodhisattva grounds. Nagarjuna's Compendium of Sutra elaborates on this rough explanation of the body of the path more extensively:

It is difficult to find faith in the freedoms and endowments and in the dharma. It is even more difficult to be able to generate the mind of enlightenment. It is also difficult to find great compassion for sentient beings.

Further from the above:

It is also difficult to abandon the karmic obscuration of criticising a bodhisattva, the intention wanting to criticise, demonic activities and abandoning the dharma.

With regard to the first it is difficult to find someone who has faith in the existence of a precious human rebirth. Nagarjuna says it is very rare to find a person who has faith in those eight freedoms and ten endowments. If we think about it, having faith in those eighteen qualities is something very special. However, in general it is very difficult to find, and then, of course, it is also very difficult to find someone who has faith in the teachings. If it is difficult to find someone who has faith in the precious human rebirth, then we don't have to mention

that of course it is also difficult to find someone who has faith in the teachings of the Buddha. It is even rarer to generate Bodhicitta. Even though we might not, of course, have generated bodhicitta, we practise as best as we can in our present situation by applying it to our own situation.

This, together with the other two is indeed clear. However in order to clarify them for those who have difficulty in comprehending the sequence of progressing along the path, the great pandit Shantideva, who was a master in those various schools composed the Compendium of Training as well as his Entering the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. He composed the Compendium of Training in particular to clarify the meaning of the Compendium of Sutra, which has just been quoted.

You have already received many teachings on the *Compendium of Training and Entering the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* from His Holiness, who taught them in Bodhgaya.

Then *Illumination* goes on to say:

In Shantideva's Compendium of Training it explains clearly that, having first contemplated the great potential and rarity of finding the eight freedoms and ten endowments one then intends to benefit by taking the essence of this life. Building on that, one trains one's mind in faith in general, and in particular, by reflecting on the qualities of the Mahayana path, one generates stable faith in that path. Then one generates aspirational bodhicitta, which is followed by taking the engaging bodhisattva vows. The it explains the modes of giving ones body, possessions and roots of virtue, protecting, purifying and increasing.

The way the lam-rim explains how to practice the six perfection in unison and this present explanation are slightly different. Generosity can be the generosity of ones body. According to the lam-rim practising morality combined with generosity means protecting one's mind at the time of practising generosity from the egotistical thought wanting to have benefit for oneself alone. Here however it refers to protecting what one is giving - some people use their body senselessly. Purifying refers to purifying though meditation on the emptiness of the three circles. Increasing means combining one's practices with bodhicitta. In this way one practises the four steps with regard to generosity. One can also apply the four steps to other situations. If you want to know more about practising the six perfections in combination look it up in the lam-rim teachings. One can also practice the combination of the six perfections in conjunction with the seven limbs, which is also very good to know.

From *Illumination*:

Aryadeva also taught the body of the profound and extensive aspects of the path in his text Four Hundred Stanzas on Madhyamaka, where he combined the sequence of the path relying on the three texts called Essence of Madhyamaka by Bhavaviveka, Ornament of Madhyamaka by Shantirakshita and Sequence of Meditating on Madhyamaka by Kharmalashila. Taking the meaning from those three texts Aryadeva then condensed them into his Four Hundred Stanzas on Madhyamaka. In general, the body of the path he outlined agrees with the general outlay of the path as described by those three scholars, but there are some

slight differences with regard to the view of emptiness. The great Atisha (who was proficient in the schools of the pioneers Asanga and Nagarjuna), composed his graduated path to enlightenment, Lamp to the Path, to assist beginners to easily ascertain the gradual path to enlightenment that is outlined in the texts mentioned above.

As you have just received teachings from His Holiness on the *Lamp to the Path* you have all already ascertained all of that very clearly, haven't you?

2.1.2 The Way of Practising the Path as an Ordinary Bodhisattva

Illumination goes on to ask a question:

This text conveys both the profound and extensive aspects of the bodhisattva path, as well as the end result. So having completed the homage it should explain the very important path of the ordinary bodhisattva, but it doesn't do that. Why?

When we look at the text, following the homage it starts straight away with the first bodhisattva ground, which is an arya path, and doesn't spend any time explaining the grounds of an ordinary bodhisattva. So the text asks, why aren't those very important paths of an ordinary bodhisattva explained after the homage, prior to the explanation of the grounds of an arya bodhisattva? Why isn't it a fault that Chandrakirti didn't do that.

The answer is that the practices of an ordinary bodhisattva have actually been already explained during the homage. As you will remember, the homage explained what we call the three dharmas, or practices, of ordinary beings, which are great compassion, non-dual awareness, and bodhicitta.

First of all, why did it need to explain those practices during the homage? It is because those three practices are the basis or main cause for becoming a bodhisattva. Furthermore, after one has become a bodhisattva those three dharmas form the main practice of the bodhisattva. Even though it outlines the perfection of wisdom, which is the practice of the non-dual awareness, as the main practice of an ordinary bodhisattva, this is only an example. If we look at the deeper meaning, then even though explicitly it only talks about the practice of the perfection of wisdom, of course this implicitly means that the bodhisattva has to practise all six perfections. So in short, since all of this is already contained within the homage, there is no need to repeat it again.

Here again Lama Tsong Khapa gives a quote from the *Compendium of Sutra* where it says that bodhisattvas shouldn't have a partial practice. This means, for example, training only in the profound nature of emptiness but not being proficient in the method aspects of the path, or being proficient in the method aspect of the path, but not knowing about suchness. Rather a bodhisattva should practise the unification of both method and wisdom. If the bodhisattva practises method and wisdom in unification, then their practice will be pure.

Next time we will go onto the bodhisattva grounds. We have now finished the three dharmas of the ordinary beings. Tonight we talked about the practices of ordinary bodhisattvas, and next week we can move on to the

bodhisattva grounds.

End of commentary

On Wednesday I had the opportunity of a private audience with His Holiness, where I mentioned to him that you are all studying very well. When His Holiness asked me what I was presently teaching I said that on one day I was teaching the *Madhaymakavatara* and His Holiness was very happy about that. Then he asked me the commentaries I was relying upon in teaching *Madhaymakavatara* and I told him I was using *Illumination of the Thought* by Lama Tsong Khapa, and *Mirror Clarifying the Meaning of Madhyamaka* by Gyalwa Genden Drup, and again His Holiness rejoiced. He liked that very much and said, 'That's very good, that's very good'. Then he asked me how many people come to the teachings, and I said 70 to 80 people, and he said, 'Do they understand the teachings?' and I said, 'Yes, they understand it very well'. I also mentioned that on Wednesdays I was teaching *The Thirty Seven Bodhisattva Practices*, and again His Holiness was very happy. He said, 'Very nice, you teach texts relating to both practice as well as view. That is a very good combination.'

His Holiness very briefly visited Geshe Loden's centre and in answer to a question, Geshe Loden he told him that he didn't have the Kangyur and Tengyur. In answer to His Holiness' question, I was able to tell him that Tara Institute has the Kangyur and Tengyur, so again His Holiness was very happy and pleased.

His Holiness couldn't come to Tara Institute but through my explanations of what we do in Tara Institute he was very happy. So if His Holiness is happy then that's good enough.

Because there was a queue outside and many people waiting, I had to leave, so His Holiness blessed me, and then I had to go. Before I left, His Holiness took me by the hand and asked me whether I would also be going to Sydney, and I said, 'Yes, I'm also coming to Sydney', and as His Holiness was very happy, I am also satisfied.

Before His Holiness arrived in Australia we recited the Tara Praises on Thursday evenings, so I think it is good if we also start with reciting Tara's mantra.

I'm wondering if it's possible for us to accumulate one million Tara mantras? You can pledge 5,000 or 10,000 or 50,000 or whatever. The minimum pledge is 5000¹. We have one month to accumulate those mantras, because on the 6th July, when it's his birthday, I was planning to send a letter to His Holiness in general to request him to live long, to come again back to Australia, and also to explain to him what practices we have done for his long life.

So maybe someone can write up a list of various pledges? I pledge 100,000 mantras.

*Transcribed from tape by Mark Emerson
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¹ Approximately two malas per day over one month.