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## Study Group - *Madhyamakavataranama*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Lama Tsong Khapa said that everyone is certain to die, and then when they die they're certain to fall into the lower realms. Therefore one should recognise that one needs to rely on refuge with a strong mind. By wholeheartedly taking refuge in the Three Jewels one has to then practise the precepts of refuge, which is the practise of watching one's karma - avoiding negative dark actions and practising white positive actions.

The key to not falling into the lower realms is to practise the law of cause and effect correctly, which means practising white karma correctly and avoiding the non-virtuous karma correctly.

When one dies one doesn't become non-existent, and since one doesn't become non-existent at the time of death that means that one continues after the death. If one continues after death then there are only two possibilities, either one goes up or one goes down.

So one either takes rebirth in a happy realm or one takes rebirth in a suffering realm. In order to take rebirth in a higher realm one has to practise the ten virtuous actions, and avoid the ten non-virtuous actions. If you look at it in some detail that is really quite a difficult practice. One may be able to stop the actions of killing, stealing, and adultery but there are also other non-virtues that are actually quite difficult to give up. Then, recognising that one is in a danger of falling into a lower state of existence at the time of death, one should wholeheartedly go for refuge.

Everyone has to go through the process of death and rebirth so while one has the opportunity to do so, it pays to make some preparations for death. These preparations include actually remembering death. Without remembering one's death then one doesn't become inspired to practise the Dharma. Even if one does become inspired to practise the Dharma, without remembering death then one procrastinates, putting off one's practice of the Dharma to a later time. Even if one doesn't procrastinate about one's practise of the Dharma, one doesn't practise purely, or one doesn't complete one's practice. So there are many faults that occur if one doesn't remember death. If one investigates one's mental continuum then one will find there is a very great need for purification and for Dharma practice. If one investigates one's own mind it seems as if the only thing that is present within the mind is non-virtue and afflictions.

There can be two types of people. There are those who say, 'I'm a Dharma practitioner'. This person regards themselves as a Dharma practitioner but actually what is primarily in their mind is afflictions and non-virtue, and

not very much fear regarding the creation of non-virtue. There are others who, even though they say, 'I am not a Dharma practitioner', have within their mind a natural fear regarding the creation of non-virtuous karma. They're naturally very fearful about the creation of non-virtue and don't want to create non-virtue. If one wants to avoid rebirth in the lower realms, then one has to be like this and avoid the accumulation of non-virtuous karma.

Out of the three refuges the actual refuge is the Dharma refuge. At one's present level, the actual Dharma refuge is probably not yet generated in our mind. As a substitute for the actual Dharma refuge however, one can take refuge in the potential for virtue in one's mind. Within the mind there is a potential for being able to abandon non-virtues, for example one can abandon the action of killing. One prevents rebirth in the lower realms and attains rebirth in the higher realm, by abandoning the action of killing. However even if one takes rebirth in a higher realm one wants to have good conditions like a good material conditions and so forth. So one needs to practise generosity.

Here then, the practice of abandoning killing, and the practice of practising generosity become one's Dharma refuge. The Buddha said, 'My Dharma is the Dharma of non-violence and non-aggression'. So if someone practises aggression and is harmful to others, then that is not Dharma practice. That's what the Buddha said. Even if one has the status of a Dharma practitioner and is regarded as such, one won't be actually be a Dharma practitioner without following what the Buddha said.

One needs to make use of the potential of one's mind and abandon the ten non-virtuous actions, for example, lessening and stopping the intention to harm others. If one doesn't do so then it also gives the religion that one is practising a bad name. If one is regarded as a Dharma practitioner by some but one doesn't stop the action of harming others then other people will think, 'Oh, the negative actions of that person come about through the Dharma that they practise.

They don't realise that those people are not actually practising the Dharma. This is a very important point that brings lots of confusion into the life of many people. As a practitioner one thinks one practises the Dharma, but at the same time all one does is constantly engage in harming others. That is really the fault of the individual, not of the religion, and that is the same for Buddhism as well as for any other type of religion.

The Buddhadharma can be narrowed down to two points, which are basically abandoning giving harm to others, and benefiting others as much as one can. Those are the two essential points that contain the whole of the Buddhadharma, as Lama Tsong Khapa said, and as you have been told over and over many times.

Engaging in that practice of abandoning giving harm to others, while giving as much benefit as possible to others, will also create an atmosphere of peace and happiness within one's own mind. Then one will become internally more comfortable and happier, and on that basis one can also practise the Dharma even better.

Non-harmfulness is the essential Buddhist practice. If one

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has strong faith in non-harmfulness and then practises non-harmfulness and compassion then that becomes Buddhist practice.

Of course there's also the other view of Buddhist practice, which is that by first going for refuge to the Buddha then one practices the Buddhadharmas. That is one view of what constitutes Buddhist practice. However I think that if someone has a strong faith in the practice of non-harmfulness and on that basis they abandon giving harm to others, then regardless of what religion they profess, that becomes a Buddhist practice.

One needs to improve the potential within one's mind. By doing so, then one lessens more and more the harmful side within one's mind. If one goes around disturbing the minds of other people then also one's own mind will naturally be disturbed. It is not possible for one's own mind to remain calm and peaceful if one is engaged in disturbing the minds of others. So one has to be considerate of others, and one has to abandon giving harm and trouble to others. In such a way one's own mind will develop peace and happiness.

So one needs to slowly, slowly improve and increase one's positive potential and the positive aspects of one's mind. One has this potential for improvement, and for virtue, and for positive thinking and so forth, and this potential is like an inner friend, or a conducive condition or one's refuge. By applying these methods, and by viewing harmful and disturbing thoughts as one's enemy, then one improves and increases the virtuous and positive aspects within one's mind.

It is important that one constantly engages in the practice of purification and investigation, because it is always possible for the harmful side of the mind to arise. At the beginning one may investigate one's mind and decide to change and to purify one's mind but then if one doesn't continue to check up on and purify one's mind, then pride, competitiveness, jealousy and so forth arise again. One started to practice the Dharma but then one begins to feel, 'Oh, now I have become quite a good Dharma practitioner already', or one generates jealousy, or one generates a competitive attitude to others and so forth. One has to take care and to purify. By progressing slowly, slowly in this way then the mind will improve.

We have been talking about the benefits of teaching emptiness and receiving teachings on emptiness. Lama Tsong Khapa said that both the teacher and the student should possess the appropriate qualities, and have a good motivation. He is speaking first of all of the teacher having a good motivation for teaching the Dharma and the student also having a good motivation for listening to the Dharma. Then the teacher should teach the subject correctly, and the student should understand the subject correctly. If those conditions come together then there's great merit created both for the teacher, as well as for the disciple.

First of all, it is important that one generates a virtuous and a good motivation, and then one needs to understand the subject.

## **THE SIXTH GROUND, 'MANIFEST'**

Last time we reached sixth chapter, the sixth mind generation 'Manifest'. That chapter was subdivided into four main subdivisions, and third division had five subdivisions. Of those five subdivisions we have finished four, and now comes the fifth subdivision, which is the explanation of the suchness of dependent arising.

### **3. Explaining the Suchness of Dependent Arising**

#### **3.5. The Way Suchness of Dependent Arising Is Explained**

According to *Illumination*<sup>1</sup>, this has three subdivisions: how the ultimate meaning is explained through scripture; establishing the meaning of scripture through reasoning; explaining the divisions of the emptiness so established.

In *Mirror*<sup>2</sup> the first subdivision found in *Illumination*, 'how the ultimate meaning is explained through scripture', isn't present.

##### **3.5.1. How the Ultimate Meaning Is Explained Through Scripture<sup>3</sup>**

Explaining the meaning of suchness through scripture again has two outlines: stating how suchness is explained through scripture; identifying what is discordant with knowing suchness.

##### **3.5.1.1. Stating How Suchness Is Explained Through Scripture**

Which quote is used here? It is a quote from the *Sutra Of The Ten Bhūmis*.

It says,

*If the fifth ground bodhisattva enters the sixth ground they do so through entering the ten equalities of phenomena. Those ten are:*

1. *the equality of all phenomena as signless,*
2. *the equality of all phenomena as lacking characteristic,*
3. *likewise the equality of not having generation,*
4. *of not being generated,*
5. *of being isolated,*
6. *of being eternally pure,*
7. *of lacking elaboration,*
8. *of lacking acceptance and of lacking rejection,*
9. *the equality of all phenomena being like an illusion, a dream, a shadow, an echo, the reflection of a moon on water, a reflection of form, and an emanation;*
10. *the equality of all phenomena not being the two, phenomena and non-phenomena.*

*If one thus thoroughly realises the nature of all*

<sup>1</sup> Lama Tsong Khapa, *Illumination of the Thought, An Extensive Explanation of Chandrakirti's 'Entering the Middle Way'*.

<sup>2</sup> HH the First Dalai Lama, Gyalwa Gedun Drub, *Mirror Clearly reflecting the Meaning of the Madhyamakavatara*.

<sup>3</sup> As it is based on *Illumination* this numbering will therefore vary a little from that distributed on page 2 of the *Mirror, Sixth Mind Generation* booklet.

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*phenomena one will subsequently attain the sixth bodhisattva ground Manifest through sharp and concordant forbearance.*

1. The first of the ten equalities is the equality of all phenomena as signless. The various types of conventional signs such as the different colours of yellow, blue, and so forth are all equally absent in the face of the arya's meditative equipoise. They equally don't appear to the arya's equipoise, and this absence of conventional phenomena to the arya's equipoise is emptiness.

2. The equality of all phenomena lacking characteristics. Even though conventionally they have various types of characteristics such as being impermanent and so forth, ultimately they all equally don't have any characteristics.

This is all just being gone through very briefly and later it will be elaborated upon more extensively.

3. The third characteristic that all phenomena equally lack generation means that in the future they won't be generated. So they lack a future generation.

4. The equality of all phenomena not being generated - they haven't been generated in the past and in the present.

5. The equality of isolation means the lack of inherent existence. So it refers to the equality of lacking inherent existence, or being isolated from inherent existence.

6. The quality of being eternally pure. Being eternally pure means phenomena are pure from the beginning, and that there has not been a time when phenomena didn't lack inherent existence. Sometimes one might get the idea that the lack of inherent existence is something that has to be first established, maybe through scripture, through quotations, or that it has to be something that is established through reasoning. One might then think, 'Oh, first phenomena were inherently existing, and then when one applied reasoning, all at once they started to lack inherent existence'. It is not like that. Phenomena are pure eternally, meaning they lack inherent existence from beginningless time.

7. The equality of lacking elaboration means the lack of conventional elaboration in the arya's meditative equipoise. So the absence of conventional elaboration within the arya's meditative equipoise is also emptiness.

8. The eighth equality is the equality of the lack of that which is to be accepted and the lack of that which is to be rejected or abandoned. This of course means there is nothing inherent to be accepted or rejected.

For example there are things that have to be accepted such as the Truth of the Path and the Truth of Cessation. So when it says, 'the equality of the lack of that which is to be accepted', it doesn't mean that that there's nothing that has to be accepted. Likewise when it talks about the absence of that which has to be rejected, there are plenty of things that have to be abandoned. In the first two Noble Truths we have different types of sufferings, and also the causes of suffering such as the different afflictions, and the different types of karma that were created through those afflictions and then the sufferings that follow those karmas. They are all things that have to be abandoned.

Again and again in different texts you will find statements saying, 'There is nothing to be accepted and there is nothing that has to be rejected'. What this means is that there's nothing inherent to be accepted, and that there is nothing inherent to be rejected.

9. The ninth equality refers to the equality of all phenomena lacking inherent existence. Even though here in the verse it refers to the equality of all phenomena being like an illusion, being like a dream, being like a shadow etc. etc., it doesn't mean that illusion, dream, and so forth are the same. What it means is that all phenomena are like an illusion, or are like a dream, and so forth. So the ninth equality is the equality of all phenomena lacking inherent existence.

10. The tenth equality is the equality of everything being neither of the two - functioning phenomena and non-functioning phenomena. This does not refer to just phenomena and non-phenomena, but to functioning phenomena and non-functioning phenomena.

Functioning phenomena and non-functioning phenomena refer to compounded phenomena and non-compounded phenomena. Generation means that something compounded is generated. If it has come about through the aggregation of causes and conditions, then it has been generated, and so it is a functioning phenomena. Likewise if something is non-compounded it hasn't been generated, which means it exists but it didn't come about through the aggregation of causes and conditions. So therefore it is a non-generated phenomena or a non-functioning phenomena.

The equality of generation and non-generation or functioning phenomena and non-functioning phenomena means that there is no inherent generation, and there's no inherent non-generation. There is generation and non-generation, but there's no inherent generation and no inherent non-generation.

That completes a definition of the ten equalities. There are different explanations of the ten equalities, one explanation follows the teaching of Asanga and another explanation follows the teaching of Nagarjuna. However the teaching of Asanga of the ten equalities relates the Mind-Only<sup>4</sup> point of view. The explanation that has just been given was according to the Prasangika point of view following the lineage of Nagarjuna.

Next time we will continue with the next outline which is identifying the opposite of suchness. This means identifying the object of negation. It's not an outline that is present in the root text but it is present in *Illumination*.

The text that we are studying is called *Entering the Middle Way*. In general the Middle Way refers to that which abides freely from the two extremes - the extreme of eternalism and the extreme of nihilism. That is what is called the Middle Way.

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<sup>4</sup> This refers to the four schools of tenets: Vaibashika, Sautrantika, Mind-Only, and Prasangika

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The middle or the centre is the middle between the two extremes - the extreme of eternalism and the extreme of nihilism. The middle way is when one doesn't fall into either of those two extremes.

The **extreme of eternalism** refers to the eternity of inherent existence, which means that things exist from their own side, not depending on the imputing mind. The mind that grasps at phenomena as existing from their own side, not depending on the imputing mind, is called the eternalistic view. This eternalistic view it is basically true grasping. However if one has true grasping that doesn't necessarily mean that one has fallen into the extreme of eternalism, because there are high-level bodhisattvas who still have true grasping within their continuum, but they haven't fallen into the extreme of eternalism.

To fall into the extreme of eternalism the person actually needs to accept that view. We previously talked about the different types of true grasping. Here it is actually the true grasping that is generated in the person's continuum through acceptance. The person has fallen to the extreme of eternalism when they accept true existence. Just having true grasping doesn't mean that the practitioner has fallen into the extreme of eternalism. The object of the view of eternalism is true existence or inherent existence, existence from its own side, and not being dependent on the mind.

The other extreme view is **view of nihilism**. Here the nihilism is a view of denial or negation. Negating or denying the existence of cause and effect, denying the existence of the Three Jewels and so forth would be called nihilism.

If one falls into either of those two extremes it is really like falling into an abyss. If one negates or denies the existence of cause and effect, if one denies the existence of the Three Jewels then it is really like falling into an abyss, because we'll fall into the abyss of the lower realms through our actions. Likewise if one falls into the extreme of eternalism one won't be able to attain pure wisdom. So, in order to be able to practice pure method and wisdom one has to take care not to fall into either of those two extremes.

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