

Study Group - “Buddhist Tenets”

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

གྲུབ་མཐུན་རྒྱུ་མ་གཞག་བཤམ་པ།

1st May 2001

Begin by generating a strong wish to achieve full enlightenment for the sake of all beings. Think that it is for this reason that you are receiving these teachings, and also strongly think of putting them into practice.

3.7.2 Actual Teaching on Grounds and Paths

Manner of Accumulating Merit

Last week we learned about the differences between followers of the three vehicles in terms of the manner in which each of them proceeds on their path. Another difference between beings of the three vehicles is the manner in which each accumulates merit.

Bodhisattva Vehicle

We start with beings of the bodhisattva lineage or vehicle. The first path which the being of the bodhisattva lineage follows is called the path of accumulation. The path of accumulation can be divided into three levels - the great path of accumulation, the medium path of accumulation, and the small path of accumulation. A being of the bodhisattva lineage accumulates limitless merit of three great aeons before they enter the great path of accumulation.¹

During that path of accumulation such a being will mainly devote their effort to listening to, and contemplating the meaning of selflessness of person. That is their main object of meditation.

When they reach the stage of the calm-abiding realisation of the selflessness of persons, he or she moves to the next path, which is the path of preparation. There are four stages of this path of preparation:

1. Heat-like path of preparation
2. The level of peak of path of preparation
3. Patience-like path of preparation
4. Supreme dharma path of preparation.

Technically the beginning of the path of preparation (the heat-like path of preparation) is when the meditator gains the union of calm-abiding and special insight on the realisation of the selflessness of person.

In the same meditation sitting they proceed from the first level of the path of preparation (heat-like path of preparation) to the path of seeing, then to the path of meditation, and finally actualise the path of no-more-learning. So in other words, from the heat-like path of preparation the bodhisattva achieves complete enlightenment in one continuous state of meditative equipoise.

Recall the deeds in the life of the historical Shakyamuni Buddha. After he entered the celibate life he engaged in the deeds of ascetic practice. Then, under the bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, it is said that the actual time when he reached complete enlightenment is at dawn of the 15th day of the lunar month, which is the full moon. On the previous night, at around dusk, he performed the deeds of conquering the evil forces. Then, in the one meditation sitting lasting

throughout the night, he achieved complete enlightenment on the next morning.

Solitary Realiser Vehicle

The being of the solitary realiser lineage finishes accumulating merit over 100 aeons before entering the great path of accumulation. They enter the first path of preparation, which is the heat-like preparation, and then in the one meditation sitting they achieve the path of no-more-learning through actualising the paths of seeing and meditation.

Hearer's Vehicle

A being of the hearer lineage, it says, accumulates merit while on the four paths of learning (the paths of accumulation, preparation, seeing and meditation). So during each of those stages the being would be accumulating merit. Having achieved the status of superior being through gaining the path of superior beings, it still takes fourteen rounds of birth before actualising the path of no-more-learning. When it says fourteen lifetimes (or rounds of birth), it includes seven lifetimes of the bardo state of being and seven of the stage of the birth. For such a being, the path of no-more-learning begins after the last moment of the path of meditation, which is, called vajra-like meditative concentration. It is after that moment that the being of the hearer lineage enters the path of no-more-learning.

3.8 Fruit of the Path: Nature of a Form Body

According to the root text the Great Exposition school hold that the form body of a buddha is not a state of full enlightenment or state of perfection. This, it says, is because the form body of a buddha is the same body that you had while you were on the path of preparation. Therefore the form body is an object of abandonment, and something to be discarded.

The fact is that the form body, which was possessed by the bodhisattva who was on the path of preparation, is the body that was propelled [into existence] as a result of karma and delusion. When the bodhisattva achieves full enlightenment they still have the same body. Therefore the [form] body is an object of abandonment and not a state of a buddha.

The other thing that the Great Exposition school asserts is that you can abandon something but still possess it. To clarify this assertion, the term in Tibetan is *pang den*. *Pang* means abandonment and *den* means possessing. The assertion is that it is possible that you can still possess something, even though you have abandoned it.

[This assertion results from] this school distinguishing between contaminated and non-contaminated objects. Any object that we call a contaminated object is an object of abandonment; we need to abandon it in order to achieve enlightenment. According to this school this table is a contaminated object. Therefore when you achieve the state of buddhahood it is said you have abandoned the table. What does this mean? Usually to abandon a table you just throw it away, or break it up into pieces. [In the spiritual context it usually means uprooting something as a result of applying a remedy.]

In this case [abandonment] is not a question of applying a particular remedy or antidote to the table. Rather, part of this school's definition of a contaminated object is that it is an object which serves as a suitable [basis for delusions] to arise and which increases mental delusions².

¹ Editor: Note an error was made in the translation at this point and was subsequently corrected. The corrections have been incorporated into this final text.

² Editor: A definition of contaminated according to the Vaibhasika school is: A phenomenon that is amenable to the increase of contamination from the point of view of being either an object of observation or an [afflicted] concomitant.

When you achieve enlightenment you abandon all delusions, including desire or attachment for a particular object like this table. Since you have abandoned subjective desire for the table, [according to this school you have] you have abandoned even the object itself.

Here we are particularly concerned with the form body of a buddha, which we said is a contaminated object. In fact the form body is the truth of suffering. Yet the buddha has by definition abandoned the truth of suffering. So abandoning and yet possessing suffering so is not mutually exclusive [according to this school].

Types of Bodies

The root text next discusses the Great Exposition school's position on the various types of bodies of a buddha. One type of body of a buddha is called the enjoyment body or the fully endowment body. This school does not assert this type of body. They do however assert the supreme body of the buddha. The reason they do not assert the enjoyment or endowment body is because you achieve the supreme body of buddhahood in the same body in which you achieve complete enlightenment. It says that when you leave your last body you go into the state called nirvana without remainder. In that state, it is said that even your continuum, your mind, your consciousness also ceases to exist. Therefore this school does not assert the enjoyment body.

It is not mentioned in any text, but it appears that according to this Great Exposition school taking a rebirth or new life can be only possible due to the force of karma and delusions. So it does not look logical for this school to accept the case of a bodhisattva taking rebirth due to the force of their aspirational prayer of benefiting other beings.

One other uncommon assertion that this school makes is with respect to the primary consciousness, or primary mind, and the mental factor that associates with that primary mind. This school says that the primary mind and the mental factor that accompanies this primary mind are cause and effect, but they also exist at the same moment.

With regard to the twelve deeds of a buddha, the Great Exposition school maintains that the first nine deeds are the deeds of an ordinary or common being, and the last three deeds that are the deeds of a fully enlightened being or buddha.

Types of Nirvana

There are two types of nirvana achieved by foe-destroyers - nirvana or liberation with remainder, and nirvana without remainder. A Hearer who has achieved the state of foe-destroyer, or state of liberation attains the state of liberation with remainder. This lasts for as long as that being still possesses a form body, which is associated with the truth of suffering. After you leave this truth-of-suffering body then you achieve the state of liberation without remainder.

For this school the state of liberation can be the means to the state of abandonment where you completely overcome the two types of obstructions, that is, afflictive obstructions and non-afflictive obstructions. The hearer or foe-destroyer who has achieved nirvana or liberation with remainder still possesses the form body of suffering, because he or she has not abandoned non-afflictive obstructions, even though afflictive obstructions have been abandoned.

However this school says that when these same beings leave their bodies and enter into nirvana without remainder they abandon all obstructions, even non-afflictive obstructions. Of course they are not abandoned as a result of applying a remedy. They just become non-existent because of losing their base. This is because after you enter into nirvana without remainder there is no life base.

Therefore there is no base for the obstructions, and so in that sense you abandon non-afflictive obstructions upon achieving nirvana without remainder.

Acceptance of Scriptures

Finally the root text mentions this school's position on defining particular scriptures as the word of a buddha. According to this school there are two types of scripture - definitive sutra and interpretive sutra. From the point of view of this school, the distinction between definitive and interpretive literally determines whether the scripture is acceptable or not.

The text says that both the school of the Great Exposition and also the school of Sutra do not accept of the sutras of the Mahayana, or the Great Vehicle, as the authentic word of the Buddha. Both of them only accept the texts we call sutras as being literally acceptable as the word of the Buddha. If it is literally acceptable to them then they accept it as a sutra. In other words they only accept the definitive type of sutra.

However in some other commentaries on the schools of tenets, there is mention of some proponents of the Great Exposition school who lived after the great master Nagarjuna who in fact accept [Nagarjuna's work] and some parts of the Mahayana sutras as the word of the Buddha.

Before the arrival of the great Mahayana scholars like Nagarjuna and Asanga the Mahayana teaching was almost unknown. It flourished in other worlds like the realm of the godly beings and the land of the Nagas, but in the human world it existed in a very concealed way. Vasubandhu was the great pioneer of the lower school of tenets, and in particular he was a proponent of the Great Exposition school. However in the latter part of his life there are indications that he became a proponent of the Mind-Only school.

As a strong proponent of the lower school Vasubandhu directly challenged and criticised Asanga and other great Mahayana masters. The great renaissance of the Mahayana teachings brought about by Nagarjuna and Asanga not only proved the authenticity of the Mahayana teaching using the Buddha's work, but also through a great length of logic and reason they established the Mahayana teachings. So later on, influenced by the work of Asanga and Nagarjuna, even some of the proponents of the lower school were convinced that the Mahayana teachings were sutras, the word of the Buddha. That is why it is said that there are some proponents of this lower school who accept the Mahayana teachings as sutras.

In fact the main scriptural source for the two lower schools of tenets is Vasubandhu's text *Treasury of Knowledge*. What is interesting however is that there are many indications in Vasubandhu's text that even while he was composing the *Treasury of Knowledge* he was already a proponent of the Mind-Only school of Cittamatin.

So with this we have roughly completed our discussion on the Great Exposition school. Next week we begin with the school of Sutra.

© *Tara Institute*

Note on authentication

Transcribed from the tape by Kathi Melnic
Edited by Adair Bunnett and Alan Molloy
Checked by Alan Molloy
