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# Ornament for Clear Realisation

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Commentary by Venerable Geshe Lobsang Dorje

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Today we will begin studying a very important text – a commentary on the Perfection of Wisdom sutra known as *Abhisamayalamkara* or the *Ornament for Clear Realization*.

To begin with, I recited the refuge prayer to establish a proper motivation, after which I recited the *Heart Sutra*, which is considered the main Perfection of Wisdom sutra on which the commentary for *Ornament for Clear Realization* is based.

As the great Tsongkhapa said, in the beginning, one should acquire much learning; then, in the middle, recognise what one has learned as pithy advice to be put into practice. So, we must initially engage in learning the Dharma through studying, then contemplating the meaning of what we have learned, to the point that we recognise all the Dharma as a means for us to achieve complete enlightenment. Studying this text is a part of our learning of the Dharma and a very important part of our spiritual journey. So, I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has joined this online class for putting in an effort to acquire knowledge of the Dharma.

This opportunity to study the *Ornament for Clear Realization* comes about as a result of advice from our most Venerable Geshe Doga, and also as a result of discussions with students from Tara Institute. Because of all these good conditions coming together, I will take this opportunity to really thank everyone who has been involved with the centre, supporting and facilitating it.

We will be studying this important text every Friday night from now on, and I must also say that it gives me tremendous pleasure and joy to discuss this text with you. I will do my best to present an explanation of the text as clearly as possible, and, given the limited time, in a condensed way, while at the same time including all the essential points.

One piece of advice I would like to give you in studying this text is to approach it in the same way you would approach a subject that you are studying in a formal education system. I'd like to encourage you to regard this as an opportunity to educate yourself about this subject and enrich your spiritual knowledge. As part of the learning process, it is vitally important to contemplate and analyse the meaning of the subject matter.

Without doubt, the subject of this text is one of the most extensive and profound subjects of study. I understand that here at Tara Institute, we are studying this text for the first time. In our monastery, among all the other major texts relating to the five main topics for study, this one, *Prajnaparamita* or the Perfection of Wisdom, is the most extensive.<sup>1</sup> As part of learning this subject, the students initially have to memorise the root text by heart. After this, they study this text, exclusively, for six to seven years.

If, when you study this text, you find any areas of my presentation that are not clear enough, or if you are unsure or have any questions, please send me your questions. This will also be useful for others. As part of my presentation, I will also try to raise some critical points for you to think over and delve deeper into the topic.

## Background to *Ornament*

Let's begin by looking at the background of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras such, as the *Prajnaparamita in One Hundred Thousand Lines*, the *Prajnaparamita in Twenty-Five Thousand Lines*, and the *Prajnaparamita in Eight Thousand Lines*.

Shakyamuni Buddha came into the world more than 2,500 years ago and created the Buddhist doctrine. The Buddha taught extensively and skilfully according to the diverse needs of, and in accordance with each and everyone's individual background. The way Lord Buddha transmitted his teachings was very skilful, likened to the way an experienced doctor would prescribe or diagnose a patient according to their particular problem. Similarly, the Buddha taught precisely according to the needs of the individual: their predisposition, their interests, their capacity, and so forth.

Later on, a great many followers of the Buddha taught and wrote commentaries on the Buddha's teachings, so that the Buddha's teachings would become more accessible and last for a long time. Among all the commentaries on the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, the most popular is the *Ornament for Clear Realization* by Maitreya Buddha.

From here on, instead of using the full name – the *Ornament for Clear Realization* – I will use the shortened form, *Ornament*. The main sutra sources for *Ornament* are the Perfection of Wisdom sutras. The Buddha himself stressed the importance of the Perfection of Wisdom when he said to Ananda<sup>2</sup>: 'With respect to my teachings, other than this Mother (Perfection of Wisdom) sutra, if you memorised all others by heart and gained a complete understanding of them and then, later on, forgot those teachings and lost them I would not consider that too much of a blunder. However, Ananda, if, after having held this profound Mother in your mind and having fully understood it, you forgot or lost even a single word of it afterwards, I would consider that you had made a blunder.' Here, we can clearly see how important the Mother, Perfection of Wisdom, was to the Buddha.

To whom did Lord Buddha teach the Perfection of Wisdom sutra and where did he teach it? The sutra was taught in the second turning of the wheel of Dharma at Vulture's Peak, Rajgir, and those present at this second turning of the wheel included a large number of bodhisattvas, including Avalokiteshvara, and hundreds of arhats.

After the Buddha passed into parinirvana, his principal followers convened Buddhist councils to preserve and perpetuate the Buddha's teachings. Their main agenda was to compile a collection of all the words of the Buddha. At the time of the first compilation of the teachings, no formal system of writing or script existed. However, the assembly included many who had directly heard the Buddha, such as the five hundred arhats present at the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, who, because of their attainment of perfect

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<sup>1</sup> The five great canonical texts in Tibetan Buddhist monastic colleges are: *Prajnaparamita* (Perfection of Wisdom); *Madhyamaka* (Middle Way); *Pramanavartika* (logic); *Abhidharma* (names and categories of phenomena); and *Vinaya* (monastic discipline).

<sup>2</sup> Ananda was one of the Buddha's main disciples.

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recollection, recalled the words they had heard from the Buddha in their entirety. Likewise, many of the other participants had also attained the state of perfect recollection. Later, after the development of writing, many of the Buddha's words and teachings were compiled into texts.

Later still, Buddhism went through a period of decline. It is said that during this time, some of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras – for example, the *Prajnaparamita in One Hundred Thousand Lines* – were saved by the nagas, who became the custodians of the sutras.

Four hundred years after the passing of the Lord Buddha, the protector, Nagarjuna, came into the world. He managed to rescue the Perfection of Wisdom sutras from the nagas and also wrote commentaries on them. Thereby, it was said, the teaching of the Buddha once again shone in the world.

In fact, Buddha himself prophesied the arrival of Nagarjuna. The *Descent into Lanka Sutra* says: 'In the southern land of Vedali, a most glorious and renowned bhikshu will come. His name will be Shrimanta. He will destroy the extremes of existence and non-existence and promulgate the unsurpassed great vehicle of my doctrine. Attaining the Joyous Level, he will go to the Land of Joy.'

Regarding the contents of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, generally, it is said there are two categories of content – the explicit meaning or subject matter, which is emptiness or objective reality; and the implicit or hidden meaning, which is the stages of meditation and inner realisations or development of the subjective mind. It is said that Nagarjuna's writings illuminate the explicit meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras – that is, emptiness. Arya Asanga's writings, on the other hand, illuminate the hidden or implicit meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras.

Arya Asanga came to the world around 900 years after the passing of the Lord Buddha. After meditating for 12 years on Maitreya Buddha in a cave called the Bird's Foot near Bodhgaya, Asanga had a direct vision of Maitreya in the pure land of joy and received from him the teaching on *Ornament*. Asanga then wrote the commentary on *Ornament* and played a significant role in extensively disseminating the Buddha's teaching. As with Nagarjuna, the Buddha prophesied Asanga's coming into the world in the *Manjushri Root Tantra*: 'Nine hundred years after my going beyond sorrow, a monk named Asanga learned in many treatises, will differentiate the many aspects of the interpretive and definitive meaning of the sutras.'

In short, Nagarjuna illuminated the explicit meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, which is emptiness, whereas Asanga illuminated the implicit or hidden meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, which is the stages of inner realisations. In the major scriptures, Nagarjuna and Asanga are referred to as the two charioteers or pioneers of Mahayana.

### **Mahayana charioteer and chariot analogy**

Why are only Nagarjuna and Asanga called Mahayana charioteers. Obviously, the term 'charioteer' is used here as a metaphor. A chariot is a wheeled cart, like the tourist carriages pulled by horses that we see today in the city. After attaining complete enlightenment, the Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma and left a kind of track for us to navigate our way to enlightenment, just as a track is left behind by a horse-drawn cart driven through bushland. Nagarjuna and Asanga made that track or path clearer, wider, and easier to

follow. Because of this, they are known as the two Mahayana charioteers or pioneers.

We need to find out why Nagarjuna and Asanga are called the two charioteers. Why aren't others, such as their followers who were also great learned masters in their own right, similarly acclaimed? Nagarjuna and Asanga wrote many treatises and contributed greatly to the flourishing of Buddha's teaching. So, why wasn't Maitreya also called a charioteer? His *Ornament* was the first to illuminate and clarify the hidden meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras. Between Nagarjuna and Asanga, there were a great many well-known masters such as Buddhapalita, who wrote the explanatory commentary to Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, entitled *Buddhapalitavrtti*; and Chandrakirti, the author of *Supplement to the Middle Way*. In fact, His Holiness the Dalai Lama listed 17 great pundits of ancient India in his praises to the pundits. So, we need to ask why are these two, and other masters, not called charioteers?

*(Translators note: There was an error during the live translation relating to the two charioteers, in terms of the scriptures. The correct version after consultation with Geshe-la version reads as follows.)*

In terms of the scriptures, Nagarjuna's *Six Treatises on Reasoning* and Maitreya's *Ornament for Clear Realization* were called the 'two scriptural charioteers'. Again, the question is, why aren't important works by other later masters – such as Buddhapalita's treatise *Buddhapalitavrtti* and Chandrakirti's *Supplement to the Middle Way* – entitled to be called scriptural charioteers?

I understand that *Ornament* is translated into English and that there are also some explanatory writings on *Ornament* available in English. So, please read those texts and find out why only Nagarjuna and Arya Asanga are given the title 'charioteers'. Also, why are only Nagarjuna's *Six Treatises on Reasoning* and Maitreya's *Ornament for Clear Realization* the only two scriptural charioteers?

We will leave tonight's presentation here. Thank you.

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Edited Version*

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