
Ornament for Clear Realisations

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Precepts are instructions

Currently, we are studying the topic of precepts or *dam-ngak* in Tibetan. Generally speaking, precepts can be understood to mean some kind of spiritual instruction or advice. Normally we receive advice or instructions from others in order to learn new things, find happiness or solve a problem. In this context, precept has a similar meaning. The precepts here were imparted by Lord Buddha, but we didn't have the privilege of receiving them directly from him.

These precepts are complete instructions on how we can achieve full enlightenment; they are preserved in the Buddha's canonical collection of teachings. However, as it might be difficult for us to comprehend the depth and length of the Buddha's instructions by directly reading his words, we need to read commentaries on the Buddha's words such as Maitreya's *Ornament for Clear Realisations*. Furthermore, there are commentaries to Maitreya's texts by later Indian pundits - and then by Tibetan masters on the work of these Indian pundits - thus making the Buddha's teachings even more easily accessible. For example, we are fortunate to have an opportunity to study Lama Tsongkhapa's texts which explain the Buddha's words by depending on the writings of early prominent Indian Buddhist masters.

Mahayana precepts

The topic of Mahayana precepts is presented under ten topics, and we have finished the first eight topics. The remaining two are the precepts that instruct on the path of seeing and the path of meditation.

This indicates that to achieve complete enlightenment we must follow these last two precepts since we must follow the path of seeing and meditation. Why do we need to follow these two precepts? It is because the main obstruction to achieving complete enlightenment is grasping at true existence, together with its imprint or propensity, which we must completely abandon. There are two layers of grasping at true existence - an innate or inborn self-grasping, and an artificial or imputed self-grasping that is intellectually acquired. Of the two, the path of seeing is the direct antidote to the imputed self-grasping whereas the path of meditation is the direct antidote to the innate self-grasping.

Five paths

First, we will examine the general meaning of the path of seeing and the path of meditation according to the Mahayana or Great Vehicle path. Before we go into the specifics of the path of seeing and path of meditation, we should review the general framework of the five paths, even though many of you are probably familiar with these and have studied them in the past.

The five paths are:

- 1 The path of accumulation
- 2 The path of preparation

- 3 The path of seeing
- 4 The path of meditation
- 5 The path of no more learning.

It is very important that you are familiar with the progression on each one of these five paths because as we move forward in this teaching, we will come across the five paths again, and without prior knowledge of them you will be confused. When talking about the spiritual path, there are some who have entered the path and those who have not entered the path.

What does entering the path mean?

All sentient beings are the same in not wanting to suffer. In general, we will find there are three levels of suffering. The first is called the suffering of suffering, which refers to obvious forms of suffering such as sickness, physical pain or any undesirable or unpleasant feeling. All sentient beings can recognise this as suffering, which we naturally wish to avoid in order to be free from that suffering.

The second type of suffering is called the suffering of change. This suffering relates to the experience of the contaminated feeling of pleasure. For example, the comfort of the coolness of air-conditioning when the weather is very hot, or a sense of satisfaction when we obtain our desired object and so on. Why is this feeling of joy or pleasure called the suffering of change? First, it is not true happiness or joy. If that were so, then those who find this happiness should experience it continuously. However, they will find that eventually this pleasurable feeling turns into suffering.

To avoid unbearable heat, we go to a cool place. Even though it initially gives some pleasure because of the relief from the heat, if we stay longer, say a half an hour or more, then we start to feel too cold and then our feelings change from pleasure to displeasure. This displeasure of being too cold didn't happen suddenly; rather we can trace its cause to that initial moment of pleasure. The displeasure begins from the second moment of the pleasure.

Likewise, when we get a desired object, we are initially excited and experience a feeling of pleasure. But later, we start to worry and stress about whether someone might steal it or how we might utilise it. Even though the first moment is the experience of pleasure, the next moment it changes into unhappiness. Therefore, that initial pleasure is called the suffering of change for it has the nature of suffering. Buddhists recognise the contaminated feeling of joy or pleasure as the suffering of change. Non-Buddhists can also recognise the suffering of change as a form of suffering.

The third type of suffering is called the all-pervasive suffering of conditioning, which is the most subtle form of suffering and is not recognised by non-Buddhists. The elimination of this suffering is the state of liberation from samsara.

An example of all-pervasive suffering is the contaminated aggregates that we all possess. It is important to recognise how these contaminated aggregates are suffering. The reason why the contaminated aggregates are called all-pervasive suffering of conditioning is because they are propelled by or under the force of mental afflictions and karma. Because of these aggregates we are subject to the suffering of birth, aging, sickness and death, both now and in the future.

Even though we do not want any suffering, we have no freedom from it. From this point of view, we can understand how these aggregates that we possess are in the nature of

suffering. The experience of taking birth is suffering; even though we do not recall it as suffering, we know that at the time of birth a baby cries as a sign of the pain of suffering. We do not see a baby coming out laughing!

After clearly recognising that the contaminated aggregates are suffering in nature, we need to meditate on that until we cultivate a spontaneous, strong desire or wish to free ourselves from the contaminated aggregates or all-pervasive suffering. When someone has such a spontaneous and definite thought of leaving samsara or the contaminated aggregates, they have cultivated a true sense of renunciation and thus entered into the path. In his text, *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, Lama Tsongkhapa summarises the cultivation of true renunciation as follows:

As you habituate in this way and when not even an instant
Of admiration arises for the prosperities of cyclic existence,
And when the thought aspiring for liberation arises day and night,
At this point, true renunciation has arisen.

Mahayana path of accumulation

Given that a spontaneous wish to achieve liberation from cyclic existence is the cultivation of true renunciation and an indication of entering the path, the next question is whether that path is a Hinayana or Mahayana path? The answer is that if the wish to achieve liberation is merely for one's own sake, then you have entered the Hinayana or the Lesser Vehicle path. Whereas, if this wish is conjoined by bodhicitta, then you have entered the path of the Mahayana or the Great Vehicle. In fact, upon the cultivation of bodhicitta, a person enters the Mahayana path and is called a Mahayanist or bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas of high intelligence gain the realisation of emptiness prior to entering the path, and those of less intelligence gain the realisation of emptiness after entering the path during the initial stage of the Mahayana path of accumulation.

If we focus on someone who has entered the Mahayana path, the first path is called the Mahayana path of accumulation. Here there are two types of person – those who may have previously entered the path of the Lesser Vehicle and are now entering the Mahayana path, and those who are entering the Mahayana path as their first spiritual path. We will talk about it in the context of the second of these two. So, the first path they enter into is called the Mahayana path of accumulation.

Mahayana path of preparation

Next, how do we determine when they enter the next Mahayana path, the Mahayana path of preparation? It lies primarily with their progress in the realisation of emptiness. It is said that when they gain the wisdom realising emptiness not just from contemplation and hearing, but from meditation, they enter the Mahayana path of preparation.

While on the path of accumulation and preparation, bodhisattvas realise emptiness conceptually or through the image of the generic meaning of emptiness (in Tibetan the term for generic meaning is *don-chi*), and not directly. However, there is a significant difference between the path of accumulation and the path of preparation in terms of the level of clarity of that understanding of emptiness. The clarity of the understanding of emptiness gained whilst on the path of preparation is far greater than the clarity of the

understanding of emptiness whilst on the path of accumulation.

Mahayana path of seeing

After entering the path of preparation, bodhisattvas further refine their realisation of emptiness and meditate to see emptiness as clearly and vividly as possible. It is said that when they remove the conceptual veil and cognise emptiness directly and nakedly, they move from the path of preparation to the path of seeing. At this point, their realisation or wisdom of emptiness becomes a direct antidote to artificial or intellectually acquired grasping at true existence together with its seed. Upon entering the path of seeing, the wisdom directly realising emptiness initially serves as the direct antidote to all artificial or intellectually acquired wrong views together with their seeds.

An artificial or intellectually acquired view of grasping at true existence refers to a wrong view that doesn't arise innately or instinctively, but which is posited or affirmed by us based on our own reasons and belief. To have such a view, we don't necessarily have to subscribe or follow a particular school of tenets such as the Cittamatrin or the Mind Only School and assert the view of true existence as posited by that school. So, if you don't believe in any of the schools of tenets or don't have any personal belief system, then like most people you don't have an artificial grasping at true existence or self-grasping.

However, we all have an innate self-grasping. Whatever object we perceive we innately perceive it as having a mode of existence in its own right, an inherent or true existence. For example, if we think of how the I exists, it seems to have a true or intrinsic existence somewhere within our aggregates. The I or self naturally appears to our mind as if it exists inherently and accordingly, we innately grasp at it.

Such a view of grasping is not posited or affirmed by us because of our personal reasons or belief systems. So, it is called an innate self-grasping. For example, when we see a striped rope from a distance, we may instinctively think it is a real snake and fear it. Of course, there is no real snake there, and if we look closer, we will find there is no snake but a rope.

In the same way, just as we see a striped rope in the distance as a snake, we hold on to a view that we exist inherently amidst our aggregates. Just as there is no snake, if we investigate whether we exist inherently in our aggregates, we will find we don't have such an existence. Here, we need to understand that we are not saying that we or I don't exist, we are not negating the existence of the I. The I, self, we, and us do exist conventionally. What we are negating is the way it appears to our mind, thereby eliminating the view of self-grasping.

Maybe we have time for one or two questions.

Question: What is a compositional factor?

In Acharya 'Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosha*, or *The Treasury of Knowledge*, there is a line saying, 'Other than all the four, all the rest are compositional factors'. This is saying that what is not included in the other four aggregates is included in the fifth aggregate – the aggregate of compositional factors. So, if you think of all products and impermanent things, those that are not any of the other four aggregates are the aggregate of compositional factors. For example, there are fifty-one mental factors, two of which – feeling and recognition – are two of

the five aggregates. The remainder of the mental factors are included in the compositional factors.

Question: How do bodhisattvas who, prior to entering the Mahayana path had entered the Hinayana path and achieved liberation, progress from the path of accumulation to the paths of preparation and seeing?

Good question. The usual explanation of the Mahayana path progression is based in the context of the bodhisattvas who have never entered the Hinayana path, and we must bear in mind that the presentation of the *Ornament* text is mainly in accordance with the Svatantrika Madhyamika school. For those who have gained the realisation of emptiness before entering the Mahayana path, the progression on the path has more to do with completing the accumulation of merit through engaging in the perfections of giving, morality and so forth rather than the perfection of wisdom.

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