

A letter of Practical Advice on Sutra and Tantra

Tsongkhapa · Tsong Khapa

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("A Brief Indication of the Graded Stages of the Path", "Lam-gyi rim-pa mdo-tzam-du bstan-pa")

Tsong Khapa

Homage to Guru Manjughosna.

May I always be cared for by you, the foremost of the peerless (Dharma) expounders. Your flawless wisdom is unimpeded even concerning the subtlest points. This is due to your acquaintance with the ways of the widespread (altruistic actions) and the profound (insight of Voidness which you developed) over a long time with many magnificent skilful means.

O my excellent spiritual mentor and friend, first you strove to hear and study many scriptural pronouncements. Then you spread the teachings with your good explanations. In the end, it was over a long period that you made such great effort to realize their practice. May your feet be firm throughout a long life!

I have received the perfectly delightful tree of your letter together with its tasteful fruit of your presents which you have sent, my undying dear friend, out of your affectionate thoughts for me. Not being quenched by the well-explained accounts (already available) as an ocean (cannot be satisfied) by a great cloud full of rain, you have requested that I write and send you in a letter further (practical advice on) how to apply yourself to the two stages (of the highest class of tantra, anuttarayoga. A mind of) little intelligence can easily be filled by hearing (merely a few teachings), as a small pond (can readily be plenished) by a babbling brook. Thus it is awe-inspiring that minds of superior intelligence (such as your own) are so vast they cannot be satisfied by these wonderful accounts.

However, granted that this may be so, it is quite preposterous for there to be any call for someone like myself to appease the mind of a great man like you. I have heard and studied few (teachings). My intelligence is low; my Dharma actions are meager. Although I may have a few words (in my mind), I have been very lax in living up to their meaning. Nevertheless, dandelion seeds, animated by the wind, can soar to compete with the eagles though they lack the power to do so on their own. Similarly uplifted by your ennobling words, I shall try to offer you something in brief.

Well then, (as for lowly people like myself) we have in fact found the excellent working basis (of a human rebirth complete) with all the liberties (for Dharma study and practice). We have in fact met with the precious teachings of the Victorious (Buddhas), and have in fact been cared for by superb Gurus. With such an opportunity and when we do have the power of mind to discriminate between what should be adopted and rejected, we must strive definitely to take advantage of such an excellent working basis. This, of course, depends solely on our becoming involved in the Buddhas' teachings. But to do so merely by having

kind thoughts is not enough. Either we ourselves must know, without any disorder, the (proper) stages for entering the teachings, or we must definitely rely for guidance on someone who does.

Moreover (not any teacher will do). He or she must be a skilful one who knows the nature of the paths, the definite count for their details), as well as their graded order and the disciples' level of understanding. He must be like this because if he mistakes wrong paths for right ones, or right for wrong ones, then even if we were to realize and achieve such (mistaken) paths as he has taught us, we will not accomplish any of our aims. Similar to having been wrongly prescribed some medicine, (in the end) we will have received no benefit and nothing but harm.

But even if he knows the nature of the paths well, it will still be ineffective if he (adds) extra unnecessary (stages) or leaves them incomplete. Thus if he does not know the definite count (of the detailed points of the stages), then even while on the course of these (paths) we will be unable to progress in the most direct fashion. This is, because we will proceed while having omitted certain recognized essentials and will sidetrack onto the superfluous practice of what is unnecessary.

But then even if he does know the nature and the definite count (of the specific details of the paths), still if he does not know which (points) to apply at each stage of our mental development as he leads us from the beginning to the middle to the end (he will be acting as in the following example). Suppose (a doctor) thought here is a medicine and, since it is the best of all medicines, it is proper to prescribe it to (any) patient for (any) disease. If, thinking, (like this) he were actually to give it (to someone it did not suit), then because it was such a powerful drug, not only might it not help (this patient), it might actually cause him the great harm of taking his life. Likewise, suppose he thought here is a sacred Dharma teaching and, since it is the most profound Dharma, what wrong could there possibly be in teaching it? If, thinking like this, he were actually to lead us by means of it, then if he accords it with our level of understanding (and follows the graded order from there) it will bring only benefit. But if he does not accord it with our level, then not only will he not benefit us, he might actually cause us (by our own confusion) to kill our opportunity to attain a fortunate rebirth or Liberation. Therefore it is especially important for him to know the graded order (of the stages of the teachings and the disciples' level of understanding).

Furthermore, even though he may be skilled in these important practical points like this, nevertheless he must also be someone whose certainty gained about the complete stages of the path has come from his own (experience of) having been set straight himself and led by a holy being through not a cursory, nor sporadic, but a thorough (study) of the great classics themselves, as composed by the standard, valid authors. (For you see) the abbreviated guideline instructions for how to lead (disciples) through these (paths) are in fact only what have been condensed from these great classics. Actually, the very meaning of a guideline instruction is that it is something to give us certainty more easily into the classics, which themselves are very extensive, the meanings of which are extremely difficult to comprehend and which, for necessary (reasons), scramble the graded order of understanding (and practice) in their showing of the teachings. Because these (guidelines) have been compiled (with this purpose in mind), then to take the great classics as Dharma for lecturing and the brief guideline instructions as Dharma for practicing, and thereby to hold these two as disharmonious, is not to understand the point of the teachings at all. This is so because Buddha's scriptural pronouncements as well as their (Indian) commentaries are in

fact—like we recite, "hearing, debating and eagerly practicing"¹—only for eager practice and aimed at such practice.

This being so (how should we begin our practice? As Nagarjuna) has said in The Friendly Letter, "O you who are free from fears, it is not necessary (for me) to tell you much. But this is an essential and beneficial piece of advice, 'Tame your mind!' As Buddha has said, The mind is the root of Dharma (practice).'"²

Also as (Aryadeva) has said in The Four Hundred (Stanzas), "Because we cannot see (any action) such as going and so forth (becoming) meritorious and so on except through the thought (that immediately motivates it), the mind therefore is said to be first (before) all karmic actions."⁵

Thus as these Noble Ones, father and spiritual son, have said, the root of everything right or wrong is but the mind. This is because it is definite that the channels for acting wrongly or engaging in what is right are in fact (only) three and (of these) the body and speech themselves are controlled by the mind.

Therefore first of all (before any Dharma practice) it is extremely important for our motivating thought to be one which we have (properly) worked ourselves up to and not one that has (simply) come from mere words. Although the stages for working ourselves up (to a proper motivation) have been explained in many (different ways), the most commonly helpful scheme for minds of superior, middling and all (scopes of capacity is as follows).

-- First (on an initial level) we should make ourselves continually mindful of our (forthcoming) death and not staying long in this world. We should also familiarize ourselves a great deal with the two ways in which we can. go to our next life (either up to a fortunate rebirth or down to an unfortunate one), together with their causes (our virtuous or non-virtuous acts). In this way we should turn our mind from working with keen interest for this life (alone) and thereby develop as much as possible the attitude to work with keen interest for the happiness of future lives beyond.

-- Then (on an intermediate level) we should exert much effort in thinking about the faults of all the various (rebirth states) of cyclic existence and the advantages of the peaceful (attainment of Liberation). In this way we should turn our mind from working with keen interest for the (so-called) good things of cyclic existence and thereby develop the strong and continuing attitude to work with keen interest for Liberation.

-- Then (progressing to an advanced level motivation) we should see that just as we ourselves are benefited from being happy and harmed by suffering, so too are all sentient beings. Thereby we should thoroughly familiarize ourselves with love, compassion and an Enlightened Motive of Bodhicitta. If we do this, we will turn our motivating intentions completely away from eagerly endeavoring for only our own aims, not caring at all about bringing happiness to sentient beings and eliminating their suffering. Thereby we will see the aims of others as actually the (only) aims we strongly wish (to work for). By doing this and also by being certain that the supreme method for accomplishing these (aims) is in fact only if we become a Buddha ourselves and that alone, we will then develop the very firm motivating intention of wishing to attain (the state of) a Buddha because of these reasons. (These then are the actual stages for working ourselves up to having such an Enlightened Motive of Bodhicitta for our Dharma practice.)

But suppose we were to take as the foundation (for our practice) the self-deception of

having only a partial, merely intellectual understanding of the verbal formulations of these (stages for building up our motivation) and then were to engage ourselves in hearing, thinking and meditating (on a certain Dharma practice). We might then say with many sweet-sounding words that "I am doing these for the sake of my future lives" or "I am doing these for Liberation" or "I am doing these for the benefit of sentient beings". But despite (such noble claims), I think the way our mind probably has been working will have in fact been nothing other than one in which it has been aiming for the sake of either (benefits in) this lifetime, or for certain pleasurable fruits of cyclic existence to which we have given the name "Liberation", or for a partial (ultimate) aim for ourselves (and not Enlightenment at all). Therefore to develop these motivating thoughts non-artificially, it is not sufficient to have merely an intellectual understanding (of them). We must meditate (in order to build them up as a natural, instinctive habit). (i.e. To burn these new concepts into our mind, and to develop new habits, new reflexes.)

As for how to meditate, we need to actualize and achieve (these motivations) by acquainting ourselves over and again with the examination meditation with which we meditate by examining, in many aspects, (the situations that are) the causes pertinent for (developing) each of these kinds (of motivations) like this. (For instance, by examining many aspects of others' suffering, we can develop compassion.)

In regard to this, even though cultivating (repeatedly meditating with the proper) aspects and focal objects for these (motivations) is the main cause (for actually developing them, such as focusing on others' suffering with the wish that they be parted from it as the way to develop compassion), just (to do) this much is not enough. In between sessions we should make (our understanding of how to develop them) firm and certain by looking at the stainless expositions (of Buddha), the (Indian) treatises and also the guideline instructions that have been composed around (the themes of) these (motivations). Thus we should read, for example, the accounts of how Buddha developed renunciation, compassion and Bodhicitta in his previous lives.) In addition we must reach the heart (of our problems preventing us from developing them) by doing a great deal of collecting (of merit) and cleansing (of obstacles) in order to eliminate the contrary factors (such as our selfishness) and bring about conducive conditions (such as a kind heart) for (developing) these motivating thoughts (like compassion). This to eliminate our black karmic debts we should openly admit our past wrongs and apply the four opponent powers of regretting them, promising never to commit them again, invoking the Three Jewels of Refuge and a Bodhicitta motivation as our basis and amassing as much counteracting virtue as we can. This might include the accumulation of a hundred thousand prostrations, mandala offerings, recitations of the hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra and of our Guru's name mantra and so forth.)

Like this, then, we need to make the causal factors (for developing these motivations) be never partial, but complete and thus fully effective. In addition, we need also to meditate and examine well with discriminating awareness and in detail (to differentiate) for each individual (type of motivating thought) what is detrimental (such as self-cherishing which would hinder developing compassion) and what is beneficial (for it, such as an attitude of cherishing others). When we have (done both of these), we will then understand deeply (how to assure that if we meditate over and again) by having such and such a focal object, such and such an aspect and such and such a manner in which we work ourselves up (to having this feeling), we will develop on our mind-stream such and such an uncommon imprint as a result. In doing this we will thereby come to gain confidence in (our ability to actualize) even the subtlest points of these practices.

At such a time we should also be aware of the special functions of each (of these motivations) to bring about what is beneficial and end what is detrimental, for in fact we must be certain, of what is to be abandoned and adopted for any and all (of the paths. Thus, for instance, compassion makes us cherish others, which brings about happiness, and also blocks our self-cherishing which has been causing us our unhappiness.) By (knowing this) and also by thinking that (developing) just (some of) these (motivating thoughts) is not enough (for in fact we must generate the entire progression), then for certain it will come about that we will never abandon any of the sacred Dharma (stages for building up our motivation).

(Although) we must indeed generate these motivating thoughts before (any actual session of meditation of puja), yet just to develop them is not sufficient. (We must maintain them) steadily and continuously (throughout). Not only that, we must try to increase them as much as possible. Therefore (it is a mistake) to think that since they are preliminary practices, it is unnecessary to have continual familiarity with them (throughout our session) or that it is not necessary to work at all times for them not to degenerate (because) it is enough just to send (these motivations) ahead once (at the start of our session. Or it is also a mistake) to think, on the other hand, that as these are yogas that are like crusts or chaff, it is all right to leave them (aside) and, not taking them into consideration, to think to familiarize ourselves (only) with the actual practices. (To think in any of these mistaken ways) is not to understand the essential point of the paths at all. This is because meditations in which we have acted out Dharma practices but devoid of these previously explained motivating thoughts, and especially (if devoid of) Bodhicitta in the manner explained above, turn out in fact to be just seemingly Dharma (practices which do not bring about their intended result). And furthermore, even if we meditate perfectly with single-minded concentration on Voidness, it is not at all fit (to be considered) a Mahayana (practice if we lack a Bodhicitta motivation) and this has been said not once.

Meditating on Bodhicitta at the beginning of a session and directing (the merit towards our Enlightenment) with great waves of prayer at the session's end are in fact great skilful means for causing the merit cultivated during the main part of the session to hit the mark (of our intended aim) and become inexhaustible. Therefore as this is the case, we must be certain to integrate them with our mind, never allowing ourselves sometimes to act (negligently) in just any fashion.

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If we cherish enhancing in this way motivating thoughts like these, holding them without ever letting them degenerate, and we would then, on top of this as our foundation, practice the two stages of the secret tantra path (we should do so as follows). In general, when we enter the doorway of whatever (Buddhist) Vehicle it may be, we must set as the basis (for our practice) our own specific moral discipline (of whatever set of lay or ordination vows we hold). And especially when we enter the Tantra (Vehicle) it is very important to have (as our basis) a stable (development of an Enlightened Motive). This is because Bodhicitta, as explained before, is the ultimate essential point of all the Mahayana paths. In addition, there are the (tantra) vows and close bonds (to the Buddha families) which we will have received when we have taken a pure empowerment (into any of the higher deity systems) from a fully qualified Guru. It will be best if we then (also) have (as our foundation these in a state of) their never having been forsaken by giving them up and never having been degenerated by violating them. Otherwise (if we have forsaken or caused them to weaken, then to continue to have a firm basis for practice) we need to have restored or revitalized them, having taken (another) empowerment, and purified and cleansed ourselves of these former

faulty actions and downfalls. And further, having recognized well and with certainty the faulty actions (which violate) our root and branch (vows), we need to restrain ourselves definitely to stop (ever breaking them) again. Thus we should make a strong effort never to be stained by the downfall (of transgressing any) of our root (vows). And further, if we happen to commit any faulty actions (of breaking some) of the rest (of our branch vows), we must, having recognized this, carefully expiate (the consequences by applying the appropriate antidotes).

Thus as I see it (the facts of the matter are these). We must enter into the meditations of the two (anuttarayoga tantra) stages with these (tantra vows and close bonds) indispensably (set) as our foundation. Furthermore, even if we do not meditate on the two stages, still if we have received an empowerment we are required to keep them by all means. As these are the case, we must therefore strive to develop great certainty in this (matter concerning vows). This is because (of two points Buddha has made). He has said that having received an empowerment, if we keep our close bonds and vows purely, then even if we have not meditated on the two stages during this lifetime, we can still reach the supreme attainment (of Buddhahood) in seven or sixteen lifetimes and so on (of consecutively keeping them). And also he has said that if, treating them lightly, we give up the close bonds and vows we have promised to keep, then even having done seemingly meditation on the two stages, we will fall to an unfortunate rebirth and thereby not attain (Enlightenment).

(Another point can be seen from two more of Buddha's statements.) He has said that if our working basis for practicing tantra is as a householder, we must practice while continually maintaining the five (vows of lay) discipline or, if as ordained, then while maintaining either the two or three sets (of novice or full vows). Further he has said that for upholding (and practicing) tantra it is best to be fully ordained, next best a novice and at minimum someone with lay vows. Therefore it follows (from these statements) that (Buddha's) presentation (of this ranking) is by means of the number of vows that are (actually safeguarded and not merely by the (number that are) promised to be kept. This is why (Kamalashila) has said in his Beholding Reality that if someone maintaining both individual liberation and Bodhisattva vows practices tantra, he or she will actualize results more quickly.⁴ (In stating this) he is asserting that the actualizations gained by having taken the tantra vows while already safeguarding Bodhisattva and ordination vows are (gained) much more quickly than those from having safeguarded only the tantra vows themselves.

It is similar also in the case of actualizing paths on the (non-tantric Mahayana) Vehicle of the Perfections. The actualizations gained by having taken Bodhisattva vows while having already been ordained (on one of the levels) according to the Vinaya (rule) are best (compared) to those gained by having maintained only Bodhisattva vows alone. This is what (Buddha) meant when he said in many sutras that if there were two Bodhisattvas equal in all respects (except that) one was a lay person (with no vows of individual liberation) and the other ordained, the latter would be more praiseworthy. (Buddha has clearly set forth all these points) in his presentation of these (vows). But despite this, although people frequently appear who can explain them by expounding forth merely their verbal formulations, and partial ones at that, yet when it comes time to apply these to personal practice, those who do so appear ever so rarely. This falls in the category of something very difficult to understand.

Be that as it may, (Nagarjuna) has said (in The Five Stages), "Those who wish for the completing stage should (first) abide well on the generating stage, for the method to complete Buddhahood is said to be like (climbing) rungs of a ladder."⁵ (This means) that

just as we must depend on climbing the lower rungs of a ladder in order to proceed to the higher ones, (likewise) we must travel (the path to Enlightenment) by meditating on the generating and completing stages in their (proper) order. It will not do to (practice them) in just any order of understanding or to leave out the generating stage. As (this is what Nagarjuna) has said, we must first meditate on the generating stage.

Even though there is no certainty that (while on its stage) its (practice) will smooth away the undesirable occurrences that occasionally befall us (such as sicknesses) or bring us the subtle actual attainments we desire (such as clairvoyance), yet it is a fact that the generating stage can bring us to the attainment of peerless Enlightenment. This point has been established clearly from the tantric texts of scriptural authority and well-attested to by learned masters who themselves are valid sources. Therefore we must please practice (this generating stage) in the circle of a mandala.

Also on this (stage we must perform the actions for accumulating the collections (of merit and insight, such as the yogas for eating, sleeping and waking), and in between sessions be mindful of (viewing everything in a) pure (form, such as ourselves and all others as meditational deities, our surroundings as a mandala palace and so forth. Likewise we must) recite the (pertinent) mantras, make offerings and perform the rituals of the tormas offering cake. Since we must build up (the impressions of) all these, in fact, on our mind-stream at their appropriate occasions while remaining ever mindful of the meanings of this (point) and that, without letting ourselves just merely recite the words (of the ritual texts and mantras mindlessly), why shouldn't we please take pleasure (in so doing)?

Then, as it is very important to know how to meditate with singleminded concentration on (ourselves as) the meditational deities during the actual main body (of our sessions), let me say a little about how to do this. It will be easier to develop certainty about how to meditate on this, in fact, if we know (beforehand) what the single-minded concentration is like that we need to have developed when we have finished accustoming ourselves to meditating on the generating stage. Therefore if we ask what do we need to have developed (it is like this). By meditating now on (ourselves as having) the bodily colors, hand implements, jewelry and garb (of all the deity figures) of the supported as well as of the supporting (mandala of the palace and its surroundings), in short on (our having all) the aspects of their colors and shapes, then at the conclusion (of our training) we need to have actualized being able to visualize ourselves appearing clearly as all of these, in toto and simultaneously, in one state of single-minded concentration. We should meditate (aspiring for this scope of attainment).

Therefore we must train by focusing first on one focal object (out of this entire visualization). If we train by focusing (first), for instance, on (visualizing ourselves as) the main central figure (of the mandala) and ask how we should train (it is like this).

Actually, two traditions for doing this appear (in the literature). One is to train from fine details upwards by focusing (first) on one of the finest details of the body, thereby actualizing its clear appearance (and then building up from there by progressively adding more and more details). The second is to train from the rough stage downwards (by visualizing) the entire body (roughly from the start and then progressively filling in the details one by one. Of these) the former is fit for only a few special individuals, while the more commonly beneficial (method) is in fact the latter, because it is easier to develop.

Therefore, for instance, of the two aspects of the main figure, namely the rough whole and its fine details, we should (first) visualize (ourselves) as the complete (deity), from the head to the feet, in merely the roughest form. When this appears clearly, we must hold (our attention) on just this without letting our mind wander. If the general form of the body is clear, we should hold this, and if the general is unclear but a few of its parts are lucid, we should hold (our attention) on whatever is clear. If these fade as well, we should visualize the (entire) general (rough form once more) and hold that. If some aspect arises that is totally extraneous to what we should be meditating on, we should hold our mind (only) on the main focal object without following out (any spurious ones).

For beginners in these (visualization practices), it has been said that if the meditation sessions are too long, we will not at all progress in the most direct fashion. This has also appeared to be so (from experience as well). Therefore, if we meditate holding as many extremely short sessions as possible, our development of single-minded concentration will proceed without fault.

Furthermore, in the beginning we must also keep our faculty of discernment alert and hold on to it tightly. This is because if we do not meditate while carefully checking whether or not we have come under the power of mental dullness or agitation, we might meditate passing a great deal of time in a muddled state, holding ourselves to our meditation with (only) the roughest discernment. In so doing we will never develop in our entire lifetime any single-minded concentration as we had wished. Therefore we must keep a careful check (with discernment for any meditational faults).

(In this way) we will come to gain a single-minded concentration having four denning characteristics and (focused) on the general form of, for instance, the main figure. (These four are) we must be able to have (the visualization) appear (clearly) whether it takes a strong or an easy amount of effort. Further, we must be able to extend (this concentration on the visualization) throughout our session. During it, we must never come under the power of either mental dullness or agitation and (lastly) we must come in contact with an exhilarating joy and bliss of both body and mind. (Such a concentration, then) is a similar equivalent (for what is developed by training) in the direction of mental quiescence meditation.

Once we have (gained concentration with these four characteristics) and our mind has both maintained (its attention) firmly on this (rough, general form of ourselves as the main figure of the mandala), as well as held (the clarity of) its fine details, we must then extend our focus to (include visualizing ourselves as) the other deities (around the mandala as well). But when we do so, we must expand our focus on top of (the foundation of) still maintaining it on the deity on which we had been previously focusing and not forsake this. If we hold our attention focused on these latter (deities around the mandala) while having given up (our focus on the main, central figure), how will it ever come about that we can (visualize) ourselves appearing as all these deities simultaneously?

Therefore since the generating stage (as explained) like this is in fact an indispensable (part) of the subject matter of the precious tantric texts and is both very important and widely praised as one of the essentials of the tantric paths, it is extremely crucial for us to do its meditations.

The completing stage was known to the earlier (masters) in terms of having two (parts): the non-profound and the profound completing stages.

-- The first of these appears (in their literature) to be constituted of meditations on the energy-channels, winds and vita! drops, and are to be sought in their individual guideline instructions.

-- The latter appears as consisting of meditations on Voidness.

Whether or not these two form (distinct categories for a valid division scheme) for the completing stage (and whether or not they are exclusive to that stage) need to be investigated. But no matter which way it turns out to be, they (both) are similar to what is practiced on the completing stage.

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Concerning this, (Buddha) has spoken in fact about the view of Voidness in exactly the same fashion (and as having the same significance) in both the Tantra and the Perfection (Vehicles). The learned masters have also spelt this out (explicitly). Because of this, then even though differences do exist, such as in the Perfection (Vehicle) the methods for generating single-pointed concentration on (Voidness) are less well-known while they are more abundant and easier in the Tantra Vehicle. Still there is in fact nothing better than the Perfection (Vehicle's teachings) for methods for initially seeking an understanding of it. Since quotations and lines of reasoning (for establishing Voidness) are clearer on the side of the sutras, we must come to have a decisive understanding (of its correct view) by hearing, studying and thinking about (teachings) that accord with what derives from (Buddha's) scriptural pronouncements of the Perfection (Vehicle) as well as from their commentaries. (More specifically) the foundation for this upon which we should base our hearing, studying and thinking should be in fact (Buddha's) scriptural pronouncements about the profound meaning of Voidness and such (Indian) treatises of sound reasoning as the (six) logical works (of Nagarjuna)⁶ and so forth. (Such texts as these latter) can dispel all our doubts concerning extreme (positions) extraneous (to what Buddha intended) and which would lead us to some meaning of (Voidness) other than (the correct one). Thereby in not allowing us to be misled to any aspects (of understanding) other than (the truth), they can bring us certainty (about Voidness) in accordance with reality.

There do exist some special persons who have trained themselves thoroughly (by studying and thinking) like this in past (lifetimes). As a result, then even though they may not train for long in this life, they gain a deep understanding of the meaning of profound (Voidness) because of their instincts). But even so, such cases as these are extremely difficult (to come by). Therefore, for all of us who are other than that, we should seek (our understanding) through (studying and thinking about) such lines of reasoning as "neither one nor many". (This is the line that a person, for instance, is void of existing inherently as something findable from his own side because he does not exist so as either one or many with his basis for imputation.) Even though we might claim something else as the gateway for entering into a quick and easy (realization of Voidness) by ascribing this name to (a method which) cuts off fantasies in general (without such reliance on sound lines of reasoning), we will not be able to please the intelligent (masters with such a claim).

* * *

When we seek (our understanding of Voidness) by training like this in (studying and thinking about) scriptural quotations and lines of reasoning, there are two ways in which such an understanding can be generated

-- a deviant
-- and a non-deviant one.

(1) Of these, the first might be (as follows).

Suppose we had analyzed from the viewpoint of many lines of reasoning the arising, cessation and so forth of phenomena. When (we had done so), the entire presentation of conventional things had fallen apart (for us) and thereby we could not find (any way of) taking anything as being conventionally "this". (Thus we felt there was nothing conventionally true or real.) Because (of that), we might come (to the wrong conclusion) that all bondages and liberations (from cyclic existence) are in fact like only so many bondages and liberations of children of barren women. Then we would go on (to wrongly imagine) that the occurrence of happiness and suffering from virtuous and non-virtuous actions was in fact no different than the arising of horns from a rabbit's head. Thereby we would come to a (completely false) understanding of all conventional objects as being distorted conventional phenomena and all conceptual cognitions as being distorted cognitions deceived with respect to the objects about which they conceptualize.

If we see the meaning of the Madhyamaka Middle Path in this (mistaken manner), there are two (further wrong conclusions we could draw). Of these, the first (would be as follows). If this were the case (that if all things lacked inherent, findable existence, then all conventional phenomena would be distorted), then since the entire presentation (of conventional reality) would be improper, (we would feel that) the view of all phenomena as lacking inherent existence was in fact a view of nihilism and therefore not Buddha's intention. In so thinking, we would be abandoning (the teachings of) the Perfection of Wisdom (by denying that the lack of inherent existence was what Buddha meant by Voidness). Even karmic obstacles that are completely uneradicable by other (means) can be purified away by relying on a (correct) view of Voidness. But even though (that is the case), with this (incorrect view) we become like what (Buddha) said, "He who abandons (Voidness) and thereby comes to lack any refuge, goes in fact to the (Avichi Hell of) Uninterrupted Pain." In other words, since there are no other refuges nor anything else to rely upon (once we have rejected the true meaning of Voidness), we must remain in the Hell of Uninterrupted Pain for a very long time. This was said (by Buddha) in the chapter on hell beings (from the Sutra on the Great Close Contemplations).⁷

The other (wrong conclusion from this misunderstanding would be like this). We might accept the position of Voidness with the highest (meaning as the lack of inherent, findable existence). And (we might also accept that) all mental trainings on the side of widespread actions, such as going for refuge, training to have an Enlightened Motive, meditating on the generating stage and so on, as well as all actions of hearing and thinking (about teachings) are (only) what can be imputed by conceptual thoughts. But by (incorrectly) regarding all conceptual thoughts as (distorted and thus) functioning to bind us in cyclic existence, we would repudiate, ignore and cast away all (such) excellent (and virtuous) karmic actions (as these). In so doing, we would only be opening the door for (us to fall to) an unfortunate rebirth.

These two (mistaken positions) are similar in that both are deep misunderstandings of Voidness (bringing) nothing but the false pride (of inflatedly feeling we have understood something when in reality we have not). But (there is one big difference). With the former (by totally denying that Voidness means the lack of inherent existence) we are in fact divorced from any causes for having fervent regard for (the true meaning of) Voidness (and

thus incentive to study it further and correct our view). With the latter (on the other hand) we have actually still retained the causes for such fervent regard (by at least accepting Voidness as the lack of inherent existence, although misunderstanding its implications).

If, by taking Voidness mistakenly (as not meaning the lack of inherent existence) like this (while still accepting it but with another, more limited meaning), our fervent regard (for correcting our understanding) is burnt away, then what need to mention those who, in taking the totally distorted position (of denying any type of Voidness whatsoever), are thereby hostile (to this view)? This is (the point Nagarjuna was making when he) said in The Precious Garland, "(Consider) someone who has faith (in something but misunderstands it) by his misconception and another who despises (that same thing and totally rejects it) out of (closed-minded) hostility. If it has been explained that even someone with faith can burn away (his incentive to search for a correct understanding of what in theory he accepts), what need be said about someone with his back turned in hostility?"⁸

(Nagarjuna) has also said (in this same work), "This doctrine (of Voidness) when wrongly understood can cause the unlearned to become ruined in fact, for by their (misunderstanding) like this they sink into a mire of nihilism (denying everything). Moreover, because of their having taken (Voidness) incorrectly, these fools with the pride of (thinking they are) clever go headfirst to the Hell of Uninterrupted Pain as they have a nature unfit (now for Buddhahood) because of their rejection (of the correct view of Voidness)."⁹

(2) As for the way to develop an unmistakable understanding,

(Nagarjuna has said in A Commentary on the Enlightened Motive of Bodhicitta),

"Anyone who, from understanding this Voidness of phenomena, can thereby adhere to (the conventional existence of) karmic actions and their effects is more amazing than amazing and more wondrous than wondrous."¹⁰

Also (Matrcheta/Ashvaghosha) has said in Praises Extolling the Praiseworthy,

"You do not act while ignoring Voidness (as irrelevant), but harmonize it in fact with the conventional (world)."¹¹

-- Thus as has been said (in these two quotations), we must see that no matter what (conventionally existent object) we take as the focal aim for our grasping for truly (findable) existence, what is conceptualized (by that mind, namely the appearance of this object as being truly findable) has not even an atom (existing as inherently findable).

-- Then, taking the fact of this Voidness as a (causal) condition, we must thereby find the deepest conviction that (conventionally) "this comes about from that" with respect to everything such as bondage and Liberation, karmic actions and their effects, and so on.

-- When we have taken to be on the side of what is reasonable the first part (of this realization, namely the fact of the ultimate unfindability of everything), we need not (make excuses) about the latter (concerning the functioning of conventional appearances), feeling uncomfortable with it in our own system and therefore ascribing it (to be true only) to the face of others or on the face of deception.

When it comes about that we can see how both (parts of this realization) are reasonable to our own (Madhyamika-Prasangika) system, then something truly amazing and wondrous has occurred.

This is because we will have achieved the skilful means of understanding deeply how what appears as contradictory to ordinary persons is (in fact) non-contradictory.

Therefore, with a (correct) understanding of Voidness we must come to (the conclusion) that the presentations of cyclic existence and the (Nirvana) State Beyond Sorrow are reasonable (and function).

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But suppose, while not understanding what this (Voidness of inherent, findable existence actually means), we came to (the conclusion) that if we were to understand it as being reasonable, then these presentations would not function. If (we were to reason falsely like that), then with (our position) no different from the way of understanding of those who assert truly existent phenomena, we would be formulating lines of reasoning (about Voidness) without understanding at all what Voidness meant. (Thus we would be asserting absurd consequences that follow only from our own mistaken notion of Voidness and not from Voidness as correctly understood.)

(An example would be, for instance, what Nagarjuna has said in (Stanzas of) the Middle Way (called) the Root (of Discriminating Awareness), "(You might argue with us debating that) if all these things were void, then the absurd conclusion would follow for you that arisings would be (totally) non-existent, disintegrations would not exist (at all) and there would be no such thing as the Four Noble Truths."¹² This (verse) presents the charge (based on the misconception that the Prasangika view of Voidness is tantamount to nihilism) that if everything were void of inherent, findable existence, then the presentations of cyclic existence and the (Nirvana) State Beyond Sorrow would be improper.

In answer to this, (Nagarjuna) has said (it is just the opposite),

"If all these things were not void, then the absurd conclusion would follow for you that arisings would be (totally) non-existent, disintegrations would not exist (at all) and there would be no such thing as the Four Noble Truths."¹³

In other words, with such lines (Nagarjuna) has said that these things are improper in terms of non-Voidness (namely, if phenomena either inherently existed as ultimately findable or totally did not exist at all, then they could never arise or fall), but in terms of the (correct) position of Voidness, these are completely reasonable. He has said this even more clearly in the same work through a statement of an implication and its converse,

"Everything becomes proper for those to whom Voidness is proper and everything becomes improper for those to whom Voidness is improper."¹⁴

Therefore if the finding of a (correct) view of Voidness were to entail merely developing the understanding that if phenomena were divested of their spatial and temporal contexts there would be no way for them to be apprehended as anything, then it would be pointless (for the masters to have said that the understanding of Voidness is difficult (to gain)). This is because even extremely dull-witted persons who have not trained (their minds) at all can understand (this point that nothing can exist independent of its context). Thus merely this much (insight) is not enough.

It will only be sufficient when for ultimate truth we have the total stillness (or absence) of any underlying support (for any cognition's being) aimed (at the inherent existence of anything, in other words we understand for ultimate truth the Voidness of inherent findable

existence) and for conventional truth which is like an illusion we accept the entire presentation of cyclic existence and the (Nirvana) State Beyond Sorrow.

What makes the understanding of Voidness so difficult, then, is that it is difficult to hold (the realization of) these two (truths) jointly (without feeling there is any contradiction).

Since it is necessary to have both, it has been said that if we do not know the classification scheme of the two levels of truth, we do not know Voidness as taught (by Buddha), while if we do know it, we are not muddled about what Buddha intended. And also, by accumulating the two collections (of insight and merit) in reliance of the ultimate and conventional (levels of truth) we can go to (a state of Buddhahood which is) the total completion of what is supreme. (These are the points made in the following two quotations. Nagarjuna) has said in The Root (of Discriminating Awareness), "Those who do not understand the division scheme of the two aspects of truth do not understand the profound fact (of Voidness found) in Buddha's teachings."¹⁵ And (Jannagarbha) has said in (The Division Scheme of) the Two Truths, "Those who understand the division scheme of the two truths are not muddled about the words of the Sage (Buddha). By accumulating the complete collections (of merit and insight), they travel to the far shore of perfection."¹⁶

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It is said that this was difficult to understand even for the circle (of Buddha's direct disciples) at the time when the Blessed Buddha was alive. This has been stated in The Compendium of Precious Good Qualities, "This teaching (on Voidness) of the Guiding (Buddhas) is profound and difficult to see. No one has understood it and no one has attained (its realization without the help of a Guru and extensive study, meditation and a vast accumulation of merit). Therefore after (Shakyamuni Buddha), who always had the loving-compassion to benefit others, attained his Enlightenment, he taxed his mind to think who among the masses of sentient beings could come to know it."¹⁷

Concerning how it is impossible for our mind to penetrate into Voidness quickly and easily, together with an example for this, as well as concerning the meaning of the (quotation from the above) sutra, (Nagarjuna) has said in The Precious Garland, "The uncleanness of our body for its own part is something gross, an object (knowable) by bare perception and in fact can be seen all the time. Yet when it is the case that this does not stay in our mind, then how can this sacred teaching of non-inherent abiding (in other words, the Voidness of phenomena) quickly and easily penetrate our mind when it is so subtle, non-obvious to bare perception and profound? Therefore, realizing that this teaching, because it is so profound, is difficult for ordinary people to comprehend, the Sage Buddha turned away (at first) from showing this teaching."

Therefore, since in general a (fully qualified) teacher and student of this (Voidness), and in particular (such) a teacher and student of the techniques for developing on our mind-stream single-minded concentration on this (Voidness), are extremely difficult to find, I think that (these accomplishments) will not come about if we have approached them in just any haphazard manner. (We must study and train in them properly.)¹⁸

An actual finding (of a realization) of the perfect view of Voidness, through faultless hearing, studying and thinking like this, is of course completely necessary and indispensable for developing perfect single minded concentration on Voidness. Otherwise, if we have not deeply understood the Voidness of all phenomena, then on what shall we focus in

order to develop (such concentration on Voidness)? Not only that, but we must also definitely seek either an actual state of mental quiescence realized through the unmistakable methods for achieving one or a state of single-minded concentration having the four characteristics as previously explained and which would be a similar equivalent for mental quiescence. Once we have provided ourselves with these two, we must then actualize the single-minded concentration of a joint mental quiescence and penetrative insight settled single-pointedly on the meaning (of Voidness) devoid of all mentally fabricated (modes of existence).

* * *

In other words,

-- if we lack a (correct) view (of Voidness) as explained above, then even if we have achieved a single-pointed settling (of our mind), it will not be settled on the meaning (of Voidness) devoid of all mental fabrications (or fantasies). Because of that, then except for its being a state of mental quiescence, (our achievement) will not be what penetrative insight means.

-- Likewise, even if we have found an understanding of the unmistakable view, yet lack a stable state of mental quiescence, our mind will waver a great deal about its object. Then no matter how much we might analyze with individualizing discernment, we will be unable to conjoin mental quiescence with penetrative insight. Therefore this is the point (being made) when most standard classics discuss the necessity for having both.

* * *

If I were to have written only in brief about the way to cut off all mistaken deviations and thereby develop an unmistakable view (of Voidness), it seemed I would not satisfy your wishes. Yet if I were to have been very extensive, it seemed that this would have become extremely overburdening with words. Therefore today I have tried not to write (in either of these ways) in this letter.

In general, even if I were to present the (sutra and tantra) paths like this (in a letter form), it did not seem as though it would be of much benefit. Therefore whether these who have requested me to do so have been lofty or humble, I have never in the past consented (to write such a letter). But you, my holy (teacher), are not like the other. Since you have requested me so earnestly to discuss (this topic) and since other pressing reasons appeared as well from your noble letter, I have offered you these brief (words), having dispensed with much correlation with scriptural quotations and elaborate arguments to cut off extreme positions with logical reasoning. After examining over and over again (what I have written), if it seems to accord with reason, I humbly request you please to implement this with your lofty practice.

(In a previous life) when you were the Master Translator Loden Sherab, you traveled with countless difficulties to the Noble Land (of India) and served there many learned spiritual masters. By so doing, you found an exact (realization) of the total and complete points of the Victorious Buddha's teachings. Because of this, whatever marvelous (works and translations) you prepared brought clarity to this land (Tibet) of the darkness of ignorance. The banner of your fame still waves on among all beings, including the gods, for, as this Eye of the World who had a heart of compassionately cherishing others more than himself, you attained the enlightened state of a successor to the Victorious Buddhas.

(Now you have taken birth as) Konchog Tshultrim, someone who keeps vows strictly, is learned, vastly intelligent and who (as your name indicates) has respect for the Supreme Jewels of Refuge and excellent moral discipline. In order to fulfill your wishes, I, Lozang Dragpa, a follower of learned masters who have exactly realized all the points they have heard and studied from many faultless scriptural classics and who am (now) a renunciate meditator favoring quiet places, have exhausted (my meager knowledge and insight in trying to satisfy you) in this way. By the good force of the virtue obtained from this (humble attempt), may all beings understand the classics exactly as (Buddha) the Guru of the Three Realms has well explained and thereby spread a festive array of realizations perfect to the rule.

You with a virtuous and confident mind and I are like (Buddha's disciples, the close friends) Maudgalyayana and Shariputra. I pray that whichever of us receives the nectar (of Buddhahood) first will be able to share it with the other.

Ah, isn't it wonderful to have had the excellent fortune of obtaining (a human rebirth with full) liberty (to study and practice the Dharma) and to have met with the teachings of the Victorious (Buddhas)! Now the (only thing) reasonable is to work day and night to make our body, with which we can accomplish great purposes, have its full meaning. This is because (Buddha) has said that those who make a. marginal (effort) gain marginal results, while those who make a complete (effort) gain a complete result. And what sensible person would be satisfied with something partial?

(In the past) there has never been any living being who has escaped being gobbled up by the cannibal of impermanence. As this is still only the case, mind, how can you sit and relax? Therefore we must give up meaningless activities which, even though we might exert ourselves in, we will have to discard anyway (when we die). Instead we should always think in fact about our two kinds of karmic actions (virtuous or non-virtuous, the effects of) which will follow us no matter where we go. Having thought like this, then with a sense of shame and decency and also consideration, as well as with mindful-ness, alertness and conscientious care, we will in fact be able to tame our mind well, which is so difficult to subdue. May this thereby spread joy to our mind at the time of our death.

May the (Buddhas') teachings, the basis of all happiness and excellence, abide (forever). May no harm come to those who practice the sacred Dharma. May all beings' hopes be fulfilled in accordance with the Dharma and may they never be parted from a heart of loving one another.

This "Brief Indication of the Graded Stages of the Path" has been in response to a letter of request from the holy personage of Konchog Tshultrim, a great renunciate meditator who has exactly realized all the points he has heard and studied so extensively and thus become a sacred close friend of the precious teachings and a guide for many beings. It has been composed by the Buddhist monk Lozang Dragpa in the (Tibetan) district of E at the Teura Monastery."19

[End]