



Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path, Volume One.* Translated by the Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee. Joshua W.C. Cutler, Editor-in-Chief; Guy Newland, Editor. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2000, 434 pages, ISBN 1-5593-9152-9 (paperback), US \$29.99.

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Journal of Buddhist Ethics 8 (2001):24-32

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The *Byang chub lam rim chen mo* is the most famous of the many works by Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419), the founder of the dGe lugs pa order of Tibetan Buddhism. Tsong kha pa presents this work as a guidebook to Mahāyāna Buddhist practice, setting out in detail the various stages of the path that, he says, leads ultimately to omniscient and compassionate Buddhahood.

This translation is an admirable cooperative effort by the Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee, which consists of sixteen of the finest scholars of Tibetan Buddhism. The present volume was translated by Elizabeth S. Napper, Joshua W. C. Cutler, John Newman, Joe B. Wilson, and Karen Lang. Volumes two and three are due to be published in 2001. This will be the first complete English translation of an extremely interesting and important text.

According to the preface, the translation is based on the Tibetan edition published by the Tso Ngö (Qinghai) People's Press in 1985 from the Ja kyung (Bya khyung) block prints. The Tibetan page numbers of this edition are conveniently included throughout the translation in brackets and bold-face. The translators checked this version against the Ganden Bar Nying edition, which is thought to be “the oldest set of wood blocks of the text” (p. 11). They also used the commentary *Four Interwoven Annotations* (*Lam*

rim mchan bzhi sbrags ma) to interpret Tsong kha pa's numerous citations of Buddhist texts.

Without compromising their scholarship, the translators succeed in making what is a scholastic and difficult text accessible to the general reader. Tibetan technical terms are given in accurate yet understandable English, and there is a useful English-Tibetan glossary of the most important words. The translators make the structure of the work transparent by dividing the text into twenty-four chapters adapted from the Tibetan outline (which is also provided). In addition, they helpfully give English translations of the fuller names of the many *sūtras*, *tantras*, and *śāstras* cited, where Tsong kha pa usually gives only an abbreviated title. The name of the text in the original language is also given when it is first cited. Endnotes tell the reader the precise source of the citations, and a bibliography is provided. There are also endnotes that sensitively expand on or clarify points made in the text. An extensive index is provided.

In addition to a short preface by Joshua W. C. Cutler, the editor-in-chief, and a brief foreword by Robert A. F. Thurman, the book includes a scholarly and informative introduction by D. Seyfort Ruegg. He quite rightly comments that the *Great Treatise* is a sophisticated spiritual and philosophical work that “always requires the reader’s very close, and informed, attention” (p. 23). He gives a basic outline of the entire text (including volumes two and three). This provides a useful map to what is a complex and sometimes confusing work, helping the reader to identify the main themes and to avoid the pitfall of failing to see the wood for the trees.

Ruegg sets the *Great Treatise* in its historical context. He surveys the Indian and Tibetan antecedents to the *Great Treatise*, other similar texts composed by Tsong kha pa, and the *lam rim* works by later Tibetan writers, many of whom were influenced or inspired by Tsong kha pa’s thinking. He shows that Tsong kha pa’s ideas, far from being radically innovative, are rooted in Indian Buddhist traditions. The *Great Treatise* presents a synthesis of ideas and practices from diverse Buddhist texts. It draws, with numerous often lengthy citations, on a large number of Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna sources. Ruegg also lists the various previous translations of substantial parts of the *Great Treatise* and related *lam rim* materials into European languages and Japanese.

The Introduction also explains briefly various “thorny, and sometimes controversial, issues” (p. 23) that the *Great Treatise* addresses. For instance, Tsong kha pa vigorously opposes the view attributed to the Chinese monk Hva shang, who took part in the “Great Debate of *bSam yas*,” that all effort and intellectual activity is an obstruction to spiritual progress. He also criticizes the *gzhan stong* doctrine advocated by the Jo nang pa school that (he

thinks) negates the conventional level of truth and also advocates an absolute reality. Furthermore, he advocates what had come to be known as the Prāsaṅgika (*Thal 'gyur ba*) form of Madhyamaka, rejecting the so-called Svātantrika (*Rang rgyud pa*) Madhyamaka that, according to Tsong kha pa, wrongly holds that entities “although ultimately empty of self-existence, are nevertheless describable as being established by self-characteristic...on the surface level” (p. 24). Tsong kha pa also argues, in disagreement with some earlier Tibetan Prāsaṅgikas, that the Prāsaṅgika does hold a philosophical position (*pakṣa*) or thesis (*pratijñā*) of his or her own. These topics, Ruegg notes, are dealt with especially in the sections on tranquility and insight (not included in the first volume). He correctly says that it is in these sections “above all that the very remarkable contribution made by Tsong kha pa to Buddhist thought, and to philosophy and spirituality in general, is revealed” (p. 19). Volume one does not make any significant reference to these issues, except in chapter six, where Tsong kha pa refutes the view that he attributes to the Chinese monk Hva shang, that there is no place for analytical meditation (*dpyad sgom*) on the path, and one should only engage in stabilizing meditation (*'jog sgom*). Tsong kha pa insists that both stabilizing and analytical meditation are required and that the popularity of Hva shang’s view, that conceptual activity is an obstacle to meditation, is “a major cause of the teaching’s decline” (p. 112).

The *Great Treatise* derives its basic structure from a distinction found in Atiśa’s *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment (Bodhipathapradīpa)* between three different types of people who practice the path to different degrees and with different goals. These are described in chapter eight. First, there is the person of small capacity (*skyes bu chung ngu*), who strives for high states of rebirth. Second, there is the person of medium capacity (*skyes bu 'bring*), who, on the basis of disenchantment with cyclic existence, strives for his/her own liberation from cyclic existence. This leads to the Hīnayāna goals of *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha*. And, finally, there is the Mahāyāna person of great capacity (*skyes bu chen po*) who, by way of the perfections and the *tantra*, strives for omniscient and compassionate Buddhahood, “in order to extinguish all the sufferings of all living beings” (p. 131). The goal of the first type of person is high status (*mtho ris*), whereas the goal of the second and third types is certain goodness (*nges legs*). Tsong kha pa is at pains to point out that the stages of the path traversed by the first two types of people are in fact “prerequisites” for the stages of the path open only to the person of great capacity. These latter stages can be developed only on the basis of the practitioner’s experience of the training that makes up the first two divisions of the path. The *Great Treatise* is in essence a detailed explanation of these three broad divisions of the path. Volumes two and three will explain the

stages of the path that are exclusive to the person of great capacity. The present volume explicates the stages of the path that the Mahāyāna practitioner shares with the person of small capacity (chapters nine to sixteen) and of medium capacity (chapters seventeen to twenty-four).

However, Tsong kha pa begins with some preliminary instructions (chapters one to three) and also with a section about developing reliance on a teacher (chapters five to six) and reflecting on one's life of leisure and opportunity (chapter seven). These are practices that are necessary before the student can embark on the stages of the path shared with the person of small capacity.

After some opening verses of homage to the Buddha, Maitreya, Mañjuḥṣa, Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, and Atiśa, chapter one demonstrates the greatness of Atiśa, in order to establish that the instructions in the *Great Treatise* are “of noble origin” (p. 35). Tsong kha pa regards Atiśa's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* as the root text of the *Great Treatise*, going so far as to assert hyperbolically that Atiśa is the actual author of the *Great Treatise* (p. 36). In chapter two, Tsong kha pa sets out to show the greatness of the teaching contained in Buddhist scriptures and especially in the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. These reflections are intended to “engender respect” (p. 45) for the instructions. Clearly a teaching that is to demand so much of the practitioner will require such reverence if it is to be adhered to conscientiously. Interestingly, Tsong kha pa says that one reason the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* is great is because it enables the student “to know that all of the teachings are free from contradictions” (p. 46). Mahāyāna teachings do not contradict those of the Hīnayāna, and the *bodhisattva* must still practice the teachings found in Hīnayāna scriptures. Furthermore, the Vajrayāna tantric practices rely on, rather than negate, the Mahāyāna teachings, most notably the practice of the perfections and the development of the spirit of enlightenment (*byang chub kyi sems*). Chapter three describes the proper way in which the teaching is to be listened to and explained. Here Tsong kha pa identifies a number of methods by which the listener can make him/herself receptive to the teachings and ways in which the teacher can effectively communicate them.

In chapter four, which begins the “actual instructions” (p. 69), Tsong kha pa explains that the practitioner, whether he/she is intent on a better rebirth or final liberation, must rely on a teacher, a virtuous friend (*dge ba 'i bshes gnyen*), who is described as “the root of the path” (p. 69). The teacher is the experienced guide through the terrain of the spiritual path without whom the practitioner would be lost. Tsong kha pa identifies numerous characteristics of the competent teacher. For instance, the teacher must be ethically disciplined, accomplished in meditation, have extensive scriptural knowledge,

be skilled in instructing disciples, and so forth. However, Tsong kha pa, with a spirit of realism, acknowledges that teachers with such characteristics are indeed hard to find in this “degenerate time” and therefore it is acceptable to rely on a teacher who has as little as one eighth of the qualities he has outlined (pp. 74–75)! There follows an explanation of the defining characteristics of the student. He/she must be nonpartisan, intelligent, diligent, focused on the teaching, and have respect for both the teaching and the teacher. Faith in the teacher is said to be utterly indispensable. Among other things, the student is to behave like a dutiful child, giving up his/her independence and submitting to the teacher’s will (p. 78). The teacher’s faults are to be ignored, and one should concentrate only on his good qualities. It is intriguing, however, that Tsong kha pa also says that the student should not obey the teacher if instructed to do nonvirtuous actions, which lead one away from the path. In this circumstance, Tsong kha pa says to the student, “excuse yourself politely, and do not engage in what you were instructed to do” (p. 86). It seems, then, that there is still room for independence of will and critical thinking after all!

Chapter five and six explain how the practitioner is to train his/her mind by means of meditation. The meditation in this context takes as its object the guru and his various good qualities. The purpose is to increase one’s reverence for him. Nevertheless, Tsong kha pa explains that the practical guidance offered in this section, about how to act before, during, and after meditation, is applicable to the many other meditations described in the *Great Treatise*, though these meditations will take different objects. There is also much concrete advice given about meditation. For instance, with rather touching sensibility to human fallibility, Tsong kha pa advises that the practitioner should begin with many short meditations that will leave him/her eager to meditate again rather than over-stretching him/herself with longer sessions that will make the novice “feel nauseated when you see the cushion” (p. 100).

Once the student has developed reverence for the teacher in this way, the guru will exhort his students to take full advantage of their human life of leisure (*dal ba*) and opportunity (*‘byor ba*). This is the topic in chapter seven. One has leisure when free from rebirth with wrong views or without a conqueror’s word, as an animal, hungry ghost, hell-being, an uncultured person in a border region, a stupid or mute person, or a deity of long life. Having opportunity means that one is human, born in a central region, has complete sensory faculties, reversible karma, and faith in the scriptures as well as that a Buddha has visited, the *Dharma* is being taught and remains, and there are practitioners and benefactors of the *saṅgha*. One should, Tsong kha pa says, develop in one’s meditations “the desire to take full advantage”

(p. 124) of such a life.

Chapters nine to sixteen deal specifically with the stages of the path shared with the person of small capacity.

Chapters nine to ten are concerned with “developing a state of mind that strives diligently for the sake of future lives” (p. 143). In chapter nine, the topic is mindfulness of death. Meditation on death is essential, Tsong kha pa contends, if one is to make the most of one’s life of leisure and opportunity. He also urges the practitioner to meditate in detail on the future miserable states of existence that await him/her if nonvirtuous actions are performed. Hence, in chapter ten, Tsong kha pa provides a detailed, graphic, and extremely gruesome account of the miserable states of existence—the animal realm, the various hells, and the hungry ghosts—for the practitioner to meditate upon. The descriptions are the stuff of nightmares. For instance, Tsong kha pa quotes the *Levels of Yogic Deeds (Yogācārabhūmi)*, which says that in the “hot hell” the hell-guardians “throw the living beings into a hot, blazing iron kettle many leagues across and boil them, deep-frying them like fish” (p. 163).

Chapter eleven deals with going for refuge to the Three Jewels as “the means for achieving happiness in the next life” (p. 178). Tsong kha pa says that the resolve to go for refuge to Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Saṅgha* results from the contemplation of the ease with which one falls into miserable states of existence. The practitioner goes for refuge when he/she is convinced that only the Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Saṅgha* can protect one from this fate. Tsong kha pa elucidates in detail the way to go for refuge. Chapter twelve explains the various precepts that one undertakes on the basis of having gone for refuge. Contravention of these precepts causes “weakening and forsaking” (p. 206) of one’s refuge-taking. These precepts are varied, fairly numerous and are categorized in a number of mutually compatible and overlapping lists, each precept being explained in depth.

The next stage of the path, explained in chapter thirteen and fourteen, involves reflecting at length on karma, good and bad, and its consequences. The purpose of this meditation is to obtain “the faith of conviction about *karma* and its effects” (p. 210). It is essentially an extensive explanation of the mechanics of the law of karma. Meditating on karma in this way is intended to produce the certain and detailed knowledge of the effects of bad and good actions.

The practitioner then needs to stop his/her unvirtuous conduct and engage in virtuous behavior, and also to remove the bad effects of the unskillful karma that has accrued over the eons since beginningless time. This is the topic of chapter fifteen, “cultivating ethical behavior” (p. 247), which Tsong kha pa explains in terms of the “four powers” (pp. 251–254). These are great

contrition by means of confessional practices, the application of various remedies (such as worship of the Buddhas, recitation of the hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra, reflection on not-self and the primordial purity of the mind, and so forth), the actual restraint with great effort from the ten nonvirtuous actions, and, finally, going for refuge and the cultivation of the spirit of enlightenment.

In chapter sixteen, Tsong kha pa emphasizes that there is nothing wrong with setting out to achieve a good rebirth, even though scriptures say “you must turn your mind away from all the excellent things of cyclic existence” (p. 261). He maintains that the practitioner needs to secure a good rebirth in order to have the right conditions in which to strive for liberation. Even those who strive to develop the spirit of enlightenment and become omniscient Buddhas need to undertake the practices that ensure high status.

Chapters seventeen to twenty-four deal with the stages of the path shared with the person of medium capacity who develops a “mind intent on liberation” (p. 267) from cyclic existence.

In chapter seventeen, Tsong kha pa says that the practitioner must learn to reject cyclic existence by meditating upon the noble truth that everything within cyclic existence is suffering (*sdug bsngal*). Without developing, through meditation on suffering, a revulsion for cyclic existence, the practitioner’s desire for liberation will be “mere words” (p. 270). He/she must meditate on the eight types of suffering (chapter seventeen), six types of suffering (chapter eighteen), and the three types of suffering (chapter nineteen), all of which Tsong kha pa explains in depth.

Chapter twenty explains how, having become disgusted with cyclic existence, the practitioner must reflect on its origin. Its cause is the afflictions (*nyon mongs*) such as attachment (*’dod chags, mngon par zhen pa*), hostility (*sdang pa*), and, fundamentally, ignorance (*ma rig pa*). Tsong kha pa says that nonmeritorious and meritorious karma is accumulated and keeps one in cyclic existence as long as one operates “under the influence of the [mis]conception of a self” (p. 304). Liberation from cyclic existence thus requires perception of the reality of selflessness. Virtuous activity without this insight cannot put an end to *samsāra*. He then explains the process of death, the intermediate state, and rebirth for those who, in their ignorance of selflessness, continue to accumulate karma.

The mind intent on liberation is also developed by meditating on the twelve factors of dependent-arising (*rten ’brel*), the subject of chapter twenty-one. Tsong kha pa gives a complex and somewhat opaque analysis of the twelve factors. He also stresses that there is no self in the process of dependent origination, and it is by failing to understand the process that a self is wrongly posited. It is this ignorance that is the root cause of the continuation

of the entire wheel of existence. The point of this detailed meditation on the twelve factors of dependent origination is to understand the process of cyclic existence. Tsong kha pa says that the meditation “motivates you toward the path of liberation through exact knowledge of its [cyclic existence’s] characteristics and intense disenchantment with them” (p. 324).

The desire to be liberated is thus stimulated by reflection both on suffering and its origin as well as on the twelve factors of cyclic existence. In chapter twenty-two Tsong kha pa says that the practitioner must “progressively increase this feeling of aversion and desire to escape” (p. 328) so that the determination to be free does not remain superficial and merely intellectual. The rest of the chapter is an answer to the objection that *bodhisattvas* should not develop disgust for cyclic existence, given that they would then “be like the *śrāvakas* and fall into an extreme of peace” (p. 328) rather than remaining in cyclic existence to help other sentient beings. Tsong kha pa replies that this objection is misguided. *Bodhisattvas* do feel disgust with the sufferings of cyclic existence, yet, out of compassion, remain in cyclic existence with “joyous perseverance” (*brtson ‘grus*). Though disenchanted with cyclic existence, *bodhisattvas* find happiness by remaining in cyclic existence “proportionate to the effort they make when they strive for the welfare of living beings” (p. 329).

In chapter twenty-three, Tsong kha pa says that liberation requires that the practitioner destroy the afflictions, the cause of his/her continued suffering in cyclic existence. He reiterates that the time to halt cyclic existence is now, given that one has obtained leisure and opportunity. And he stresses that the life of a renunciate is far superior to that of the householder, for the latter faces “many obstacles” (p. 336) to the practice of the path to liberation. Therefore, the practitioner is exhorted to “contemplate again and again the defects of dwelling in a household, and aspire to the life of a renunciate” (p. 337).

But how is one to eliminate the afflictions? The practitioner must, Tsong kha pa states, undertake the path of the three trainings: ethical discipline, concentration (*ting nge ‘dzin*), and wisdom (*shes rab*). In chapter twenty-four, the concluding section of the present volume, Tsong kha pa says that he will explain concentration and wisdom in detail in the section on persons of great capacity. (This is rather disappointing and anti-climactic given that only volume one is presently available!) However, he gives a brief explanation here. The training in concentration refers to the four meditative stabilizations (*bsam gtan*), whereas the training in wisdom refers to the Four Noble Truths, each of which has four aspects (for example, the truth of suffering has as its aspects impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and selflessness). Tsong kha pa then makes various comments on ethical discipline, a

topic that has already been explored in chapter fifteen. Without a foundation of ethical discipline, Tsong kha pa says, the “city of liberation” cannot be reached (p. 344). Concentration and wisdom are possible only on the basis of such ethical discipline. Touching on a contentious issue of his time, he stresses that this is true also for Tāntrikas, whether they are householders or renunciates. The practitioner must do battle with the afflictions, treating them as enemies, and not letting them remain and take hold of his/her mind. The afflictions must be like “drawings in water” rather than “drawings in stone” (p. 348). The “true hero,” Tsong kha pa says, is the practitioner who, by strict adherence to ethical discipline, struggles against and defeats his/her afflictions (pp. 352–353).

This brief review cannot do justice to the extraordinary nature of the *Great Treatise*. Admittedly, one might object that Tsong kha pa’s highly structured, predetermined form of Buddhism tends towards indoctrination rather than open-ended investigation. And many key ideas, such as the theory of karma and rebirth and the “medieval” cosmology that underpins it, offer important information about Tibetan Buddhism, but will be problematic for the modern mind. Nevertheless, the *Great Treatise* is an indispensable resource for anyone interested in Tibetan Buddhism, as a cultural and historical phenomenon or as a form of still vibrant spirituality. The text is very rich with detailed guidance about practices that form the basis of the dGe lugs pa understanding of Buddhism. In addition, Tsong kha pa’s remarkable grasp of the Buddhist textual tradition and his syncretic brilliance are demonstrated by his ability to draw on so many diverse sources and combine them into a coherent system.

The translators are to be heartily congratulated for their fine work in making this important and fascinating work available to English-speaking readers. The translation has been done with great care and skill. The result is lucid and authoritative. It will prove invaluable for scholars and students of Tibetan Buddhism. I await the coming volumes with enthusiasm and anticipation.