

ATISHA CENTRE EASTER RETREAT 2017



*Lama Atisha's
"A Lamp for the Path
to Enlightenment"*



A Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

by Atisha Dipamkara Shrijnana (982–1054)

Introduction

Homage to the Bodhisattva, the youthful Manjushri.

1. I pay homage with great respect
To the conquerors of the three times,
To their teaching and to those who aspire to virtue.
Urged by the good disciple Jangchub Ö
I shall illuminate the lamp
For the path to enlightenment.

2. Understand that there are three kinds of persons
Because of their small, middling and supreme capacities.
I shall write clearly distinguishing
Their individual characteristics.

3. Know that those who by whatever means
Seek for themselves no more
Than the pleasures of cyclic existence
Are persons of the least capacity.

4. Those who seek peace for themselves alone,
Turning away from worldly pleasures
And avoiding destructive actions
Are said to be of middling capacity.

5. Those who, through their personal suffering,
Truly want to end completely
All the suffering of others
Are persons of supreme capacity.

6. For those excellent living beings,
Who desire supreme enlightenment,
I shall explain the perfect methods
Taught by the spiritual teachers.

1. Higher Training in Ethical Conduct

1.1 Refuge

7. Facing paintings, statues and so forth
Of the completely enlightened one,
Stupa and the excellent teaching,
Offer flowers, incense—whatever you have.

8. With the seven-part offering
By Samantabhadra,
With the thought never to turn back
Till you gain ultimate enlightenment,

9. And with strong faith in the Three Jewels,
Kneeling with one knee on the ground
And your hands pressed together,
First of all take refuge three times.

1.2 Aspiring Bodhicitta

10. Next, beginning with an attitude
Of love for all living creatures,
Consider beings, excluding none,
Suffering in the three bad rebirths,
Suffering birth, death and so forth.

11. Then, since you want to free these beings
From the suffering of pain,
From suffering and the cause of suffering,
Arouse immutably the resolve
To attain enlightenment.

12. The qualities of developing
Such an aspiration are
Fully explained by Maitreya
In the Array of Trunks Sutra.

13. Having learned about the infinite benefits
Of the intention to gain full enlightenment
By reading this sutra or listening to a teacher,
Arouse it repeatedly to make it steadfast.

14. The Sutra Requested by Viradatta
Fully explains the merit therein.
At this point, in summary,
I will cite just three verses.

15. If it possessed physical form,
The merit of the mind of enlightenment
Would completely fill the whole of space
And exceed even that.

16. If someone were to fill with jewels
As many buddha fields as there are grains
Of sand in the Ganges
To offer to the Protector of the World,

17. This would be surpassed by
The gift of folding one's hands
And inclining one's mind to enlightenment,
For such is limitless.

18. Having developed the aspiration for enlightenment,
Constantly enhance it through concerted effort.
To remember it in this and also in other lives,
Keep the precepts properly as explained.

19. Without the vow of the engaged bodhicitta,
Perfect aspiration will not grow.
Make effort definitely to take it,
Since you want the wish for enlightenment to grow.

1.3 Individual Liberation Vows

20. Those who maintain any of the seven kinds
Of individual liberation vow
Have the ideal [prerequisite] for
The bodhisattva vow, not others.

21. The Tathagata spoke of seven kinds
Of individual liberation vow.
The best of these is glorious pure conduct,
Said to be the vow of a fully ordained person.

1.4 The Bodhisattva Vows

22. According to the ritual described in
The chapter on discipline in the Bodhisattva Stages,
Take the vow from a good
And well-qualified spiritual teacher.

23. Understand that a good spiritual teacher
Is one skilled in the vow ceremony,
Who lives by the vow and has
The patience and compassion to bestow it.

24. However, in case you try but cannot
Find such a spiritual teacher,
I shall explain another
Correct procedure for taking the vow.

25. I shall write here very clearly, as explained
In the Ornament of Manjushri's Buddha Land Sutra,
How, long ago, when Manjushri was Ambaraja,
He aroused the intention to become enlightened.

26. "In the presence of the protectors,
I arouse the intention to gain full enlightenment.
I invite all beings as my guests
And shall free them from cyclic existence.

27. "From this moment onwards
Until I attain enlightenment,
I shall not harbour harmful thoughts,
Anger, avarice or envy.

28. "I shall cultivate pure conduct,
Give up wrong-doing and desire
And with joy in the vow of ethical conduct
Train myself to follow the buddhas.

29. "I shall not be eager to reach
Enlightenment in the quickest way,
But shall stay behind till the very end,
For the sake of a single being.

30. "I shall purify limitless
Inconceivable lands
And remain in the ten directions
For all those who call my name.

31. "I shall purify all my physical
And verbal karma.
My mental karma, too, I shall purify
And do nothing that is non-virtuous."

32. When those observing the vow
Of engaging bodhicitta have trained well
In the three forms of ethics, their respect
For these three trainings of ethical conduct grows,
Which causes purity of body, speech and mind.

33. Therefore, through effort in the vow made by
Bodhisattvas for pure, full enlightenment,
The collections for complete enlightenment
Will be thoroughly accomplished.

2 Higher Training in Concentration

2.1 Extra Perception

34. All buddhas say the cause for the completion
Of the collections, whose nature is
Merit and exalted wisdom,
Is the development of extra perception.

35. Just as a bird with undeveloped
Wings cannot fly in the sky,
Those without the power of extra perception
Cannot work for the good of living beings.

36. The merit gained in a single day
By one who possesses extra perception
Cannot be gained even in a hundred lifetimes
By one without such extra perception.

37. Those who want swiftly to complete
The collections for full enlightenment
Will accomplish extra perception
Through effort, not through laziness.

2.2 Calm Abiding

38. Without the attainment of calm abiding,
Extra perception will not occur.
Therefore make repeated effort
To accomplish calm abiding.

39. While the conditions for calm abiding
Are incomplete, meditative stabilisation
Will not be accomplished, even if one meditates
Strenuously for thousands of years.

3 Higher Training in Wisdom

3.1 Method and Wisdom

3.1.1 Perfection of Wisdom

40. Thus maintaining well the conditions mentioned
In the Collection for Meditative Stabilisation Chapter,
Place the mind on any one
Virtuous focal object.

41. When the practitioner has gained calm abiding,
Extra perception will also be gained,
But without practice of the perfection of wisdom,
The obstructions will not come to an end.

3.1.2 Union of Method and Wisdom

42. Thus, to eliminate all obstructions
To liberation and omniscience,
The practitioner should continually cultivate
The perfection of wisdom with skilful means.

43. Wisdom without skilful means
And skilful means, too, without wisdom
Are referred to as bondage.
Therefore do not give up either.

44. To eliminate doubts concerning
What is called wisdom and what skilful means,
I shall make clear the difference
Between skilful means and wisdom.

45. Apart from the perfection of wisdom,
All virtuous practices such as
The perfection of generosity are described
As skilful means by the Victorious Ones.

46. Whoever, under the influence of familiarity
With skilful means, cultivates wisdom
Will quickly attain enlightenment—
Not just by meditating on selflessness.

3.1.3 Four Great Proofs of Emptiness

47. Understanding emptiness of inherent existence
Through realising that the aggregates, constituents
And sources are not produced
Is described as wisdom.

48. Something existent cannot be produced,
Nor something non-existent, like a sky flower.
These errors are both absurd and thus
Both of the two will not occur either.

49. A thing is not produced from itself,
Nor from another, also not from both,
Nor causelessly either, thus it does not
Exist inherently by way of its own entity.

50. Moreover, when all phenomena are examined
As to whether they are one or many,
They are not seen to exist by way of their own entity,
And thus are ascertained as not inherently existent.

51. The reasoning of the Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness,
The Treatise on the Middle Way and so forth
Explain that the nature of all things
Is established as emptiness.

3.1.4 Meditation

52. Since there are a great many passages,
I have not cited them here,
But have explained just their conclusions
For the purpose of meditation.

53. Thus, whatever is meditation
On selflessness, in that it does not observe
An inherent nature in phenomena,
Is the cultivation of wisdom.

54. Just as wisdom does not see
An inherent nature in phenomena,
Having analysed wisdom itself by reasoning,
Non-conceptually meditate on that.

55. The nature of this worldly existence,
Which has come from conceptualisation,
Is conceptuality. Thus the elimination of
Conceptuality is the highest state of nirvana.

3.1.5 Proof from Scripture

56. The great ignorance of conceptuality
Makes us fall into the ocean of cyclic existence.
Resting in non-conceptual stabilisation,
Space-like non-conceptuality manifests clearly.

57. When bodhisattvas non-conceptually contemplate
This excellent teaching, they will transcend
Conceptuality, so hard to overcome,
And eventually reach the non-conceptual state.

3.1.6 Cultivation of Special Insight

58. Having ascertained through scripture
And through reasoning that phenomena
Are not produced nor inherently existent,
Meditate without conceptuality.

3.1.7 Stages of the Path

59. Having thus meditated on suchness,
Eventually, after reaching “heat” and so forth,
The “very joyful” and the others are attained
And, before long, the enlightened state of buddhahood.

4. Tantric Vehicle

60. If you wish to create with ease
The collections for enlightenment
Through activities of pacification,
Increase and so forth, gained by the power of mantra,

61. And also through the force of the eight
And other great attainments like the “good pot” —
If you want to practise secret mantra,
As explained in the action and performance tantras,

4.1 Empowerment

62. Then, to receive the preceptor initiation,
You must please an excellent spiritual teacher
Through serving with respect, make offerings,
As well as following his advice.

63. Through the full bestowing of the preceptor initiation,
By a spiritual teacher who is pleased,
You are purified of all wrong-doing
And become fit to gain powerful attainments.

4.2 Misunderstandings of Tantra

64. Because the Great Tantra of the Primordial Buddha
Forbids it emphatically,
Those observing pure conduct should not
Take the secret and wisdom initiations.

4.3 Prohibited Initiations

65. If those observing the ascetic practice of pure conduct
Were to hold these initiations,
Their vow of asceticism would be impaired
Through doing that which is proscribed.

66. This creates transgressions that are a defeat
For those observing discipline.
Since they are certain to fall to a bad rebirth,
They will never gain accomplishments.

67. There is no fault if one who has received
The preceptor initiation and has knowledge
Of suchness listens to or explains the tantras
And performs fire pujas,
Or makes offering to deities and so forth.

68. I, the Elder Dipamkarashri, having seen it
Explained in sutra and in other teachings,
Have made this concise explanation
At the request of Jangchub Ö.

COLOPHON

This concludes A Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment, by the Acharya Dipamkara Shrijnana. It was translated, revised and finalised by the eminent Indian abbot himself and by the great reviser, translator and fully ordained monk Geway Lodrö. This teaching was written in the temple of Thöling in Zhang Zhung. Translated by Ruth Sonam, Dharamsala, January 1997.

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