TRANSLATED BY THUPTEN JINPA

THE MIDDLE WAY

FAITH GROUNDED IN REASON

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Translator's Preface

This book, based on a series of important Buddhist teachings His Holiness the Dalai Lama conferred in Toronto in 2004, presents a comprehensive explanation of the foundational teachings of Mahayana Buddhism as they are understood in the Tibetan tradition. The teaching in this book is divided into two broad sections. The first section presents the Buddhist path to enlightenment based on an explanation of three key chapters from *Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*) by the second-century Indian teacher Nagarjuna; the second section presents the way to put the understanding of the key elements of the Buddhist path into practice. This second section is based on the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, a lucid verse work originally written as a letter of instruction by Jé Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) to a student in a distant land. These two important classical texts are separated by nearly a millennium and a half yet complement each other beautifully. That both speak so profoundly even to the spiritual aspirant at the beginning of this third millennium demonstrates the universality and timelessness of the insights they embody.

As on numerous occasions in the past, I had the honor of being the Dalai Lama's translator when these teachings were delivered. Right from the first day, I noticed something unique about this particular series of teachings. Unlike on many other occasions,

His Holiness was proceeding through the texts in a particularly systematic fashion. He did this, in part, to substantiate his oft-repeated statement that Tibetan Buddhism is a direct continuation of the scholastic lineage of Nalanda Monastery in the Indian Buddhist tradition. Before Buddhism disappeared from central India, Nalanda was the most important Buddhist monastery there, thriving from early in the Common Era to the end of the twelfth century. The Dalai Lama began his presentation in Toronto by citing a text he himself composed to honor the key Nalanda masters whose teachings lay at the heart of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (the full text of which can be found in appendix 2 of this volume):

> Today, in an age when science and technology have reached a most advanced stage, we are incessantly preoccupied with mundane concerns. In such an age, it is crucial that we who follow the Buddha attain faith in his teaching on the basis of genuine understanding. It is with an objective mind endowed with a curious skepticism that we should engage in careful analysis and seek the reasons [behind our beliefs]. Then, on the basis of seeing the reasons, we engender a faith that is accompanied by wisdom.

A central aspect of what the Dalai Lama calls the Nalanda tradition is an emphasis on approaching the Buddhadharma not just through faith and devotion but also through critical inquiry. This approach, known as the "way of the intelligent person," is emphasized in the writings of numerous Nalanda masters. The faith in the Buddha and his teaching—the Dharma—that is engendered in

such a manner is unshakable and is of the highest kind. So, how do we go about developing such an unshakable faith? The Dalai Lama writes:

> By understanding the two truths, the nature of the ground,
> I will ascertain how, through the four truths, we enter and exit samsara;
> I will make firm the faith in the Three Jewels that is born of knowledge.
> May I be blessed so that the root of the liberating path is firmly established within me.

This stanza from His Holiness's *Praise to Seventeen Nalanda Masters* provides, in a sense, the structure of the first part of this book, the explanation of key elements of the Buddhist path through a commentary on Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way*. The Dalai Lama first gives a commentary on Nagarjuna's chapter on the twelve links of dependent origination, which is the twenty-sixth chapter of that text. That chapter presents in detail the Buddhist understanding of the causal processes that lock us in the cycle of existence. At the root of this cycle of twelve links is fundamental ignorance, which grasps at the inherent realness of our own selves and the world around us.

This is followed by a commentary on chapter 18, which presents Nagarjuna's understanding of the Buddha's teaching on "no-self" (*anatman*), the selflessness of both the person as well as the five psychophysical components of the person. It is this chapter that presents the teaching on emptiness, which, according to Nagarjuna, is the ultimate mode of being of all things. This emptiness, to use

Nagarjuna's own words, is *tathata* ("thatness"), *paramartha* ("the ultimate truth"), and *dharmata* ("reality itself").

Finally, in his commentary on Nagarjuna's chapter 24, the Dalai Lama explains how Nagarjuna's teaching on emptiness is not a form of nihilism but is, in fact, the understanding of reality that enables us to account for conventional reality. Only this explanation of emptiness makes the operations of cause and effect tenable. His Holiness explains how in Nagarjuna's system, emptiness—the ultimate truth—and dependent origination—the relative truth—are inseparably intertwined.

By weaving together lucid exposition and penetrating analysis, along with the insights of such authoritative commentators as Aryadeva (ca. second century), Chandrakirti (seventh century), and Tsongkhapa (writing in the early fifteenth century), the Dalai Lama allows the verses of Nagarjuna's text to reveal their deep insight into the nature of existence. Throughout, the Dalai Lama never loses the sight that, in the final analysis, the teachings on emptiness are meant to be related to our personal experience and bring a deeper understanding of the world around us. As Nagarjuna puts it, the purpose of the emptiness teaching is to pacify grasping at an inherent existence of both our own self and all phenomena so that we may gain genuine freedom.

The second part of this book presents the methods to put the understanding of the Buddhist path into practice. Here, His Holiness offers a beautiful explanation of Tsongkhapa's well-known *Three Principal Aspects of the Path,* the three aspects being true renunciation, the altruistic awakening mind, and the correct view of emptiness. Having cultivated a reliable understanding of the Buddhist path based on critical reflection on the teachings on emptiness, the four

Prologue

The power of compassion

Many centuries ago, humans realized the importance of harnessing the intellect. From that evolved writing and, eventually, formal education. These days, it is a truism to say that education is vital, but it is important to remind ourselves of the larger purpose of education. After all, what good is the accumulation of knowledge if it does not lead to a happier life?

We've all come across people who have received an excellent education but who are not very happy. Education may have brought them more critical thinking power and greater expectations, but they have had difficulty actualizing all those expectations, leading to anxiety and frustration. Clearly, education alone does not guarantee a happier life. I think of education like an instrument, one that we can use for either constructive or destructive ends.

You might think that the goal of education is merely to augment one's ability to increase one's wealth, possessions, or power. But just as mere knowledge in and of itself is not sufficient to make us happy, material things or power alone also cannot overcome worry and frustration. There must be some other factor in our minds that creates the foundation for a happy life, something that allows us to handle life's difficulties effectively.

I usually describe myself as a simple Buddhist monk, and my own formal education has not been that extensive. I know something about Buddhist philosophy and texts, but I was a rather lazy student during my early years of study, so my knowledge of even that field is limited. On top of that, I learned next to nothing of fields like mathematics or world history or geography. In addition, as a young person, I led a fairly comfortable life. The Dalai Lamas were not millionaires, but still my life was comfortable. So when the Chinese invaded and I had to flee my native land, I had only some limited knowledge of Buddhist teachings, and I had little experience of dealing with problems. A great burden and responsibility was thrust upon me suddenly, and what training I had was put to the test. During those years, my most reliable friend was my own inner quality of compassion.

Compassion brings inner strength, and compassion also brings truth. With truth, you have nothing to hide, and you are not dependent on the opinions of others. That brings a self-confidence, with which you can deal with any problem without losing hope or determination. Based on my experiences, I can say that when life becomes difficult and you are confronting a host of problems, if you maintain your determination and keep making an effort, then obstacles or problems become really very helpful, for they broaden and deepen your experience. Thus I think compassion is the most precious thing.

What is compassion? Compassion involves a feeling of closeness to others, a respect and affection that is not based on others' attitude toward us. We tend to feel affection for people who are important to us. That kind of close feeling does not extend to our enemies—those who think ill of us. Genuine compassion, on the other hand, sees that others, just like us, want a happy and successful life and do not want

to suffer. That kind of feeling and concern can be extended to friend and enemy alike, regardless of their feelings toward us. That's genuine compassion.

Ordinary love is biased and mixed with attachment. Like other afflicted emotions, attachment is based not on reality but on mental projection. It exaggerates reality. In reality there may be some good there, but attachment views it as one hundred percent beautiful or good. Compassion gets much closer to reality. There is a vast difference.

The big question is whether we can cultivate such compassion. Based on my own experience, the answer is yes. It is possible because we all possess the seed of compassion as the very nature of our human existence. Likewise, our very survival as human beings, especially in our first few years of life, is heavily dependent on the affection and compassion of others. We have survived up to now only because at the beginning of our lives, our mother—or someone else, of course—cared. Had she been negligent even one or two days, we would have died. As human beings, using our intelligence, we can extend this sense of caring throughout our whole lives.

The need to systematically cultivate and enhance this natural capacity is today more urgent than ever. In modern times, due to population, technology, and the modern economy, the world is now deeply interconnected. The world is becoming much smaller. Despite political, ideological, and in some cases religious differences, people around the world have to work and live together. That's reality. So the role of compassion on the international level is vital.

Every day, the media brings news of bloodshed and terrorist activities. These events do not come to pass without causes or conditions.

Some of the events we face today I think have roots in negligent actions in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. And unfortunately, there are some who deliberately try to escalate people's vengeful urges for political gain. What is the best way to face this violence? I would argue that it is not through more violence and bloodshed. Problems rooted in violence cannot be solved by violence.

Why is this? Firstly, violence by its nature is unpredictable. You may start out with a certain goal of "limited" violence, but then it gets out of control. Secondly, violence harms others, and violence therefore creates more hatred in others' minds. That in turn creates the seeds for future problems. War is like a legalized outlet for violence. In ancient times, when countries were less dependent on each other, the destruction of an enemy could be construed as victory for oneself. But today, due to the profound interconnectedness of all nations, war is ineffective. The destruction of your enemy just ends up destroying yourself.

Therefore, when we encounter conflict or competing interests, the best way—indeed the only effective way—to solve it is through dialogue. You must respect others' interests, others' desires, and make compromises, because if you neglect others' interests, ultimately you yourself will suffer. You must take care of others' interests.

I often tell audiences that the twentieth century was a century of violence, and through that experience we now know that violence cannot solve problems. The only way to solve them is with peaceful resolution. Therefore, the twenty-first century should be the century of dialogue. For that, we need determination, patience, and a broader perspective. Again, this is where compassion has an important role. First, as I mentioned, it brings us self-confidence. Com-

passion brings us deep recognition of others' rights. Compassion also gives us a calm mind, and with a calm mind, we can see reality more clearly. When our mind is dominated by afflictive emotions, we can't see reality, and we make poor decisions. Compassion gives us a more holistic view.

I respect the world's political leaders, but sometimes I think they should have more compassion. If even one of these political leaders cultivates more compassion, then millions of innocent people get more peace. Many years ago, at an official function in India, I met a politician from the Indian state of East Bengal. The meeting included a discussion of ethics and spirituality, and he said, "As a politician I don't know much about those things." He was probably just being humble, but I gently chided him. Politicians need more ethics, more spirituality, I said. If a religious practitioner in a remote area does something harmful, it probably doesn't have much global effect. But when leaders and politicians are not mindful and compassionate, it is very dangerous.

I believe compassion is not a religious matter. Some people think compassion and forgiveness are the domains of religion, and if people have a negative view of religion they may become negative about these things as well. That's a mistake. Whether we accept a religion or not is up to the individual, but as long as humanity inhabits this world, these deeper values are crucial and must not be neglected. Everybody is making every effort for material prosperity. That's fine, but if in the meantime we neglect our inner world or inner values, we will not be happy. We must combine material development with the development of internal, human values. We need to develop respect, love, and a sense of compassion in order to have happier lives, happier families, happier communities, and finally a happier

not so useful you can simply discard. However, in my explanations on Buddhist philosophy, many points of difference will naturally emerge, since I am presenting a Buddhist text that espouses, naturally, the Buddhist outlook. When this occurs, please don't feel that I am somehow disparaging your tradition.

Of course, historically, the great Buddhist scholars of India's Nalanda monastic university had extensive debates among themselves. Proponents of the Mind Only (*Chittamatra*) school, for example, criticized the Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*) position as falling into the extreme of nihilism, while proponents of the Middle Way school criticized the Mind Only position as falling into the extreme of absolutism. Therefore, in this regard, I share the sentiment of the eighteenth-century Tibetan master Changkya Rinpoché (1717–86) who wrote:

> It's not that I do not respect you;
> Please forgive me if I've offended.[1]

The Buddhism that flourished in Tibet is a comprehensive tradition. It contains all the essential elements of all the teachings of the Mahayana and Lesser Vehicle traditions, and on top of that includes the tantric teachings of the Vajrayana as well. From the standpoint of source languages, the Tibetan tradition encompasses many of the key texts in the Pali-language tradition, but is based primarily on the Sanskrit Indian tradition. In terms of the origin of its lineages, the tradition is most indebted to the great masters of Nalanda, the monastic institution that flourished in northern India during the first millennium. For example, the key texts studied in the Tibetan monastic colleges are all composed by the great Nalanda

thinkers and adepts. I have actually composed a prayer, *Praise to Seventeen Nalanda Masters,* to acknowledge the origin of our tradition and the debt that we Tibetan Buddhists owe to their writings. The full text of this prayer appears at the end of this book. In the colophon to that, I wrote:

> Today, in an age when science and technology have reached a most advanced stage, we are incessantly preoccupied with mundane concerns. In such an age, it is crucial that we who follow the Buddha acquire faith in his teaching on the basis of genuine understanding.

It is out of this conviction that the ancient teachings of Buddhism are as relevant and valuable as ever that I present this introduction to the Tibetan tradition.

Part I

An Exploration of Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way*

Buddhist texts speak of four types or qualities of intelligence: great intelligence, swift intelligence, clear intelligence, and penetrating intelligence. Because we must analyze the subject matter carefully, we need *great intelligence;* because we cannot naïvely conclude that something is the case except on the basis of a meticulous analysis, we needs *clear intelligence;* because we need to be able to "think on our feet," we need *swift intelligence;* and because we need to pursue the full implications of a line of inquiry, we need *penetrating intelligence.*

By analyzing in such a manner and seeking what consequences and significance we can draw from our understanding, we will come to see those results. Here, we must first systematically organize the lines of reasoning presented in the texts and then correlate these with our own personal experience so that the reasoning is supported by direct observation and empirical evidence. When, on the basis of relating these lines of reasoning to our own personal experience, we feel "Yes, they are truly helpful" or "This is truly wonderful," we have gained a decisive sense of conviction in the Buddhadharma. Such a confidence is called a faith grounded in genuine understanding.

Sequence of analysis

As for the actual sequence of engaging in analysis, in *Praise to Seventeen Nalanda Masters,* I wrote:

> By understanding the two truths, the nature of the ground,
> I will ascertain how, through the four truths, we enter and exit samsara;
> I will make firm the faith in the Three Jewels that is born of knowledge.

May I be blessed so that the root of the liberating path is
firmly established within me.

Here, when we speak of practicing the Buddhadharma, we are speaking of observing the ethics of refraining from ten nonvirtues and cultivating compassion and loving-kindness within a context of seeking liberation. Merely refraining from the ten nonvirtues or cultivating of compassion and loving-kindness alone do not constitute a specific practice of the Buddhadharma; such practices of ethics and compassion are, after all, a feature of many spiritual traditions. When we speak of Buddhadharma in this context, the term *Dharma* (or spirituality) refers to the peace of *nirvana*—liberation—and to *definite goodness,* a term that encompasses both liberation from samsara as well as the full enlightenment of buddhahood. We use the term *definite goodness* because the peace of nirvana is utterly excellent, pure, and everlasting. When practices such as avoiding unwholesome, harming actions and cultivating love and compassion are part of a quest for gaining liberation from cyclic existence, then they truly become Dharma in the sense of being Buddhist spiritual activity.

"Liberation" here is defined as the cessation of the mind's pollutants through the power of applying their corresponding antidotes. The main pollutant, the very root of our unenlightened existence, is the grasping at selfhood, at self-existence, and all the associated psychological and emotional factors that accompany and proceed from grasping at self-existence. The direct antidote to the self-grasping mind as well its associated mental factors is insight into selflessness. Therefore, it is on the basis of realizing selflessness that we attain true liberation.

This is how the method of attaining definite goodness is pre-

sented, and the spiritual methods associated with the attainment of such liberation are the unique way of Buddhism. Therefore, I wrote, "May I be blessed so that the root of the liberating path is firmly established in me."

The four noble truths

Now to establish the root of the path to liberation firmly within ourselves, it is essential to understand the four noble truths.[2] The four truths are like the foundation for all the Buddha's teachings—both sutra and tantra. When the Buddha first taught the Dharma to his earliest disciples, he taught the four noble truths.

If we reflect deeply upon the way in which the Buddha taught the four noble truths, we see that he first described their characteristics or nature, second their functions, and third the outcome that we will experience once they are realized directly. This is why, in Buddhist teachings, we often find discussions of the three main elements of ground, path, and result. The understanding of the nature of reality is the *ground,* the *path* is pursued based on the understanding of the ground, and finally the *result* is experienced as an effect of cultivating the path.

The Buddha's teaching on the four noble truths is a description of the actual nature of reality. When the Buddha taught the four truths, he began by describing their natures, saying, "This is the noble truth of suffering, this is the noble truth of the origin of suffering, this is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and this is the noble truth of the path." By declaring the truths in this way, the Buddha was making a statement about the way things exist; he was describing the nature of the ground.

Now, the "suffering" in the Buddha's first noble truth, in which he says, "This is the noble truth of suffering," includes all the sufferings that plague us. Within this there are many different levels of subtlety, not just the manifest suffering of pain and hardship but also a deeper and more pervasive quality of our experiences. The statement "This is the noble truth of suffering" recognizes that all these experiences are unsatisfactory, or "in the nature of suffering."

In the second truth, the statement "This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering" declares the cause that brings about suffering or that constitutes the source of suffering. Even though the origin of suffering is itself also a form of suffering and thus included in the first truth, suffering and its origin are here distinguished and described in the manner of a cause and an effect. Again, the primary cause of suffering that the Buddha identifies is our grasping at self-existence, the fundamental ignorance that distorts our view of reality and causes us to relate only to our confused appearances and not to the way things truly are.

The statement in the third noble truth, "This is the noble truth of cessation," declares the nature of freedom from suffering, its complete cessation. It states that the causes of suffering can be deliberately brought to an end. When the seeds of these causes become fewer and fewer and are finally eradicated, naturally the fruits that would otherwise have been produced and experienced cannot arise. So the statement here declares the possibility of a time when our suffering and its origin are totally pacified.

To fully understand the possibility of such a cessation, you cannot rely on your understanding of phenomena on the level of mere appearances; rather, you must penetrate their true mode of being. You cannot rely on the ordinary level of appearances because they

are unreliable. The very root cause of your suffering, fundamental ignorance, is deluded about the true mode of being of phenomena —the way things actually exist—and fundamental ignorance dominates every moment our present experience.

This fundamental ignorance, however, is not inextricably fused with the luminous nature of our minds. Ultimately, ignorance and the mind can be separated; ignorance is not inherent to the nature of our minds. Therefore, the statement in the fourth truth that "This is the noble truth of the path" declares that cessation can be realized within our mental continuum through certain methods. Foremost among these is the wisdom that realizes the nature of reality. To eliminate fundamental ignorance, we cultivate the knowledge of selflessness and meditate upon this truth. The path that directly realizes selflessness can directly attack the deluded mind that falsely perceives selfhood and eliminate it. In this way, the nature of the path is declared.

In brief, by enumerating the identity of the four truths, the Buddha taught the nature of the ground, the way things actually are, which is illustrated by the following analogy. When someone is ill with a curable condition, you have the suffering of the illness itself, the external and internal factors that gave rise to the illness, the potential for healing, and the remedy or medication that counters the illness's causes and brings about its cure. In the same manner, there is a path that leads to the cessation of all sufferings. This is the nature of the ground, the understanding of the way things actually are.

No one has to compel us to seek happiness and try to overcome suffering, and we don't need to logically prove the value of these two pursuits. The inclination to seek happiness and shun suffering

benightedness and enlightenment, are actually functions of whether we are ignorant of or have insight into the ultimate nature of reality. The heart of our journey to enlightenment is developing this insight.

In brief, having first declared the four noble truths, the Buddha then taught how to apply them, explaining the sequence we need to tread the path. The first step the Buddha advises us to take is to "Recognize suffering." The Buddha elaborates, saying, "Recognize suffering, but there is no suffering to be recognized; eliminate the origin of suffering, but there is no origin of suffering to be eliminated; actualize cessation, but there is no cessation to be actualized; cultivate the path, but there is no path to be cultivated." With these statements, the Buddha evoked how knowledge of the four noble truths can reach its culmination—the result of the path. At the path's fruition, we no longer need to recognize any further suffering or to eliminate any further origin of suffering. This reality is the final realization of the four noble truths.

This is how the Buddha presented the four truths in terms of the ground, the path, and the result.

When the Buddha taught the four noble truths, he spoke of two sets of cause and effect—suffering and its origin on the one hand, and cessation and its cause, namely the path, on the other. The first cause and effect pertains to afflicted phenomena—to our rebirth within cyclic existence—while the second cause and effect pertains to enlightened phenomena—to the state where suffering is totally eliminated. The causes and effects of the afflicted class have ignorance as their root, whereas enlightened cause and effect proceeds through the cessation of fundamental ignorance—the purging of afflicted cause and effect. We see here again that both cyclic