Ocean of Nectar
Also by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso

Meaningful to Behold
Clear Light of Bliss
Buddhism in the Tibetan Tradition
Heart of Wisdom
Universal Compassion
The Meditation Handbook
Joyful Path of Good Fortune
Guide to Dakini Land
The Bodhisattva Vow
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Acknowledgements

This book, Ocean of Nectar, is the first authoritative commentary in the West to Chandrakirti’s Guide to the Middle Way, a classic Mahayana scripture that to this day is regarded as the principal text on emptiness, the ultimate nature of reality.

From the depths of our hearts we thank Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso for his inexhaustible determination, compassion, and wisdom in writing such a clear and complete commentary, and in preparing a completely new and authoritative translation of Chandrakirti’s root text.

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Roy Tyson,
Administrative Director,
Manjushri Mahayana Meditation Centre,
July 1995.
Introduction

THE ORIGIN OF THESE INSTRUCTIONS

Buddha presented his teachings in three main stages, called the ‘three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma’. He taught the first Wheel in the Deer Park at Benares, the second on Massed Vultures Mountain at Rajagriha, and the third at Vaisali. During the second turning Buddha taught the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, in which he revealed the stages of the path to enlightenment. These are all included in the stages of the profound path and the stages of the vast path. The stages of the profound path include all the wisdom practices that lead to a direct realization of emptiness, and ultimately to the Truth Body of a Buddha. The stages of the vast path include all the method practices, from the initial cultivation of compassion through to the final attainment of the Form Body of a Buddha.

The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* are difficult to understand, and Buddha himself predicted that after his death great scholars would appear to explain their meaning. As Buddha predicted, four hundred years after he passed away Protector Nagarjuna appeared in this world. Guided by Manjushri, he composed a number of works in which he clearly explained all the stages of the profound path that Buddha had taught in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*. These works include *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (often referred to simply as *Fundamental Wisdom*), and its four limbs: *Sixty Reasonings, Seventy Emptinesses, Finely Woven*, and *Refutation of Objections*. Approximately six hundred years later Superior Asanga, guided by Maitreya, provided a clear explanation of all the stages of the vast path.
Buddha Shakyamuni
INTRODUCTION

Of the two, the stages of the profound path are the more difficult to understand, which is why the works of Nagarjuna are so important. They are like a treasury in which the precious wisdom of emptiness is stored; but to gain access to this treasury great wisdom is needed. Unfortunately, the wisdom of the beings in this world had declined, and so it was as if this precious treasury was locked. To unlock it, Nagarjuna’s principal disciple, Chandrakirti, composed a commentary entitled Guide to the Middle Way. This is an outstanding book that explains perfectly the stages of the profound and vast paths as taught by Nagarjuna. However, because the wisdom of the beings in this world has continued to decline, these days we find it difficult to understand even this text. For this reason I have prepared this book, Ocean of Nectar. I hope that with the help of this commentary many people will be able to study and practise Guide to the Middle Way.

In writing this book I have relied upon the works of Je Tsongkhapa, especially his commentary to Guide to the Middle Way entitled Clear Illumination of the Intention, an Extensive Explanation of the Great Treatise, Guide to the Middle Way.

THE PRE-EMINENT QUALITIES OF THE AUTHOR

Before looking at the Guide itself, it will be helpful to consider the biography of its author. Chandrakirti was born to Brahmin parents in the Salona region of Southern India, about one thousand years after Buddha had passed away. His parents soon realized that he was an unusual child and consulted an oracle about his future. The oracle predicted that he would become a great Buddhist scholar and Yogi. Inspired by this prophecy, Chandrakirti’s parents sent their son to the monastic university of Nalanda, where the Abbot Chandranatha ordained him as a monk, giving him the name Chandrakirti. While at Nalanda, Chandrakirti studied under Nagarjuna, who gave him many teachings on the Sutras and Tantras. He was Nagarjuna’s last and principal disciple, and Nagarjuna said of him:
I gave my final teachings on non-production to my last disciple, Chandrakirti.

Chandrakirti became proficient in all areas of the teachings, and soon developed a great reputation both as a scholar and as a Teacher. He was a conscientious disciple, training day and night according to his Teacher’s instructions. As a result he developed a special meditative concentration and many extraordinary powers. One day, his Abbot decided that it would be beneficial if Chandrakirti were to demonstrate his meditative powers and mental freedom to the other monks. To this end he appointed Chandrakirti as storekeeper to the monastery, a post that involved the great responsibility of looking after the cows and buffaloes kept by the monastery to supply its dairy produce. Chandrakirti however refused to take milk from the animals because he felt it should be saved for their young, and he left them to wander freely on the neighbouring hills. Nevertheless, he still managed to provide the monks with an abundant supply of dairy produce!

One day Chandrakirti and his assistant Suryakirti were summoned before the Abbot and the assembled monks and asked to explain how they managed to provide such an abundant supply of food while the animals were roaming unattended on the hills. To the great delight of the entire assembly Suryakirti explained that Chandrakirti had painted a picture of a cow on a wall, and was drawing from this picture all the milk that was required:

Glorious Chandrakirti perfectly sustains and nourishes the monks
By drawing milk from pictures of cows!

While he was studying at Nalanda, Chandrakirti would often debate with a fellow student called Chandragomin, who was a lay practitioner. Though they were both great scholars and highly respected Teachers, conventionally they held different philosophical views. Chandragomin held the Chittamatra view, and Chandrakirti held the Madhyamika-Prasangika view. Sometimes Chandragomin found it difficult
to give answers to Chandrakirti’s penetrating questions, and so he would ask if he could reply the following day. Then he would retire to his room and speak directly to Avalokiteshvara, who would give him the correct answers. Chandrakirti assumed that Chandragomin was consulting other Chittamatrin Teachers; he had no idea that he was receiving help directly from Avalokiteshvara. Then one day Chandrakirti asked an especially difficult question which Chandragomin could not answer. Chandragomin said ‘I shall give you the answer tomorrow.’ Chandrakirti asked ‘How will you be able to answer tomorrow what you cannot answer today?’ and Chandragomin replied ‘I shall ask Avalokiteshvara tonight, and tomorrow I shall give you the answer. If I cannot answer tomorrow, you will win the debate.’ That night Chandrakirti stole up to Chandragomin’s room and peeped through the window. To his amazement he saw Chandragomin talking directly to a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara! Chandragomin was asking questions, and Avalokiteshvara was patiently giving answers. Chandrakirti was filled with awe, and immediately developed a wish to meet Avalokiteshvara directly. He rushed into Chandragomin’s room; but as soon as he entered, the Deity vanished.

Longing to meet Avalokiteshvara directly as Chandragomin had done, he returned to his room and practised the yoga of Buddha Avalokiteshvara repeatedly for many days. After a while he started to have visions of Avalokiteshvara in his dreams. Urged on by this, he practised even more earnestly, making heartfelt requests to Avalokiteshvara to appear directly to him. Then one day Avalokiteshvara manifested in front of him. Chandrakirti was delighted. He said to Avalokiteshvara ‘Now I can really benefit others. Please sit on my shoulders so I can show you to everyone else in the town.’ Avalokiteshvara replied that even though Chandrakirti could see him, others would not be able to. Chandrakirti, however, continued to request strongly, and so eventually Avalokiteshvara agreed. Chandrakirti took Avalokiteshvara on his shoulders and ran through the town, shouting to everyone to come to see his Spiritual Guide
and make prostrations to him. As Avalokiteshvara had predicted, no one saw a thing, except one person with heavy karmic obscurations who saw Chandrakirti with a dead dog on his shoulders, and a woman wine seller who saw Avalokiteshvara’s right foot. Even so, as a result of this slight vision the woman immediately gained a realization of higher concentration and a very peaceful mind.

Another incident that illustrates Chandrakirti’s extraordinary attainments occurred while a war known as the Dhuruka war was being waged in the region of Nalanda monastery. As the fighting drew close to the monastery, the local people and the ordinary monks became frightened and begged the scholars and Yogis to end it; but the situation was so dangerous that none of them felt able to help. The people were on the point of despair, when suddenly a bird emerged from the heart of the statue of the monastery’s Protector and flew towards Chandrakirti’s house. Taking this as a sign, they requested Chandrakirti to help them. Chandrakirti agreed to their request and told them to make a lion out of stone, which they were to position fifteen miles to the north of the monastery, in the direction of the fighting. He encouraged the Buddhists among them to pray to Buddha and the non-Buddhists to pray to Ishvara. When the battle came in sight they were to shout to the lion to save them.

Very soon, soldiers appeared on the horizon and the people started shouting to the lion, but the lion did not move. Their confidence shaken, they began to doubt Chandrakirti’s abilities, and some even accused him of deceiving them. Chandrakirti reassured them and set off towards the lion carrying a large stick of sandalwood. He beat the lion three times on the head and, to everyone’s amazement, it sprang to life! The lion ran off into the midst of the battle, causing all the soldiers to flee in panic. Not one soldier was killed or harmed, but the war ended and peace was brought to the region. Out of gratitude the king later composed the following verse of praise to Chandrakirti:
INTRODUCTION

Through the power of Glorious Chandrakirti
The mighty stone lion came to life,
And brought the Dhuruka war to an end
Without harming a single person.

There are many other stories that illustrate the remarkable powers that Chandrakirti acquired through his meditative concentration. Right now we may find it difficult even to imagine such powers, but if we consider this sincerely we shall understand that Yogis such as Chandrakirti have many special powers, that they display when the time is right.

Manjushri told Je Tsongkhapa that Chandrakirti had manifested from the Eastern Buddha Land to help the beings of this world. Chandrakirti has helped us in many ways, but his greatest contribution has been to explain the works of Nagarjuna, especially his teachings on the profound view of the middle way and the path of Secret Mantra. Through these explanations we are able to realize the final meaning of Buddha’s teachings.

Chandrakirti composed many books, most of which are commentaries to Buddha’s Sutras and Tantras, and to the works of Nagarjuna. His most famous work is Guide to the Middle Way. In this work, together with its Autocommentary, Chandrakirti clearly illuminates all the stages of the profound and the vast paths revealed in the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. He also wrote another commentary to Nagarjuna’s Fundamental Wisdom called Clear Words, and a commentary to the Root Tantra of Guhyasamaja called Clear Lamp. These two incomparable works are well known to all Buddhist scholars and Teachers. An old proverb says:

In the sky there are the sun and the moon, and on earth there are the two Clears.

Besides these, Chandrakirti wrote commentaries to Nagarjuna’s Sixty Reasonings and Seventy Emptinesses, and a commentary to Aryadeva’s Four Hundred. His other works include Seventy Verses on Refuge, Discriminating the Five Aggregates, a sadhana entitled Clear Realization of Guhyasamaja, a sadhana of Vajrasattva, and praises to Tara.
The actual commentary to *Guide to the Middle Way* is presented under four main headings:

1. The meaning of the title
2. The translators’ homage
3. The meaning of the text
4. The meaning of the conclusion

**THE MEANING OF THE TITLE**

*Guide to the Middle Way* was composed in Sanskrit with the title *Madhyamakavatara*. It was later translated into Tibetan as *U ma la jug pa*. Now it is translated into English as *Guide to the Middle Way*. What is the ‘Middle Way’ referred to in the title? Generally, the term ‘middle way’ refers to anything that is free from the two extremes of existence and non-existence, and more specifically to ultimate truth emptiness. In this context, however, it refers specifically to Nagarjuna’s text *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, which is so called because its main subject matter is profound emptiness. Often when Chandrakirti cites this work he refers to it simply as the Middle Way, and so when he composed the *Guide* as a commentary to *Fundamental Wisdom* he gave it the title *Guide to the Middle Way*. Thus, whereas in the title of Nagarjuna’s book the phrase ‘Middle Way’ refers to emptiness, in the title of Chandrakirti’s book it refers to *Fundamental Wisdom* itself. *Guide to the Middle Way*, therefore, acts as a guide to those who wish to practise the meaning of *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*.

The term *Guide* in the title also has great meaning, for the work acts as a guide to both the stages of the profound path and the stages of the vast path. In the first sense, *Guide to the Middle Way* guides us to an understanding of the meaning of profound emptiness as explained in *Fundamental Wisdom*. Previously some of Nagarjuna’s other disciples, such as Bhavaviveka, had written commentaries to *Fundamental Wisdom* from the viewpoint of the Madhyamika-Svatantrika tenets. In *Guide to the Middle Way* Chandrakirti conclusively refutes this interpretation and establishes the uncommon
Madhyamika-Prasangika view as the most profound view. He also provides an extensive refutation of the tenets of the Chittamatra school, and shows that it is also inappropriate to interpret *Fundamental Wisdom* from the point of view of these tenets. Thus, if we rely upon *Guide to the Middle Way* we shall realize the uncommon view of the Madhyamika-Prasangika school, and as a result our practice of emptiness will be superior to that of practitioners of other tenets. This is the way in which *Guide to the Middle Way* acts as a guide to the stages of the profound path.

How does *Guide to the Middle Way* act as a guide to the stages of the vast path? Nagarjuna explained the stages of the vast path in works such as *Precious Garland* and *Compendium of Sutras*. Chandrakirti took these explanations and added them to the *Guide*. In the *Guide*, therefore, we find not only a faultless presentation of the most profound view of emptiness, but also a clear explanation of the stages of the vast path. These include the three Dharmas of ordinary Mahayanists, the ten grounds of Superior Bodhisattvas, and the resultant grounds of Buddhahood. This is the way in which *Guide to the Middle Way* acts as a guide to the stages of the vast path.

Nagarjuna did not explicitly teach the stages of the vast path in *Fundamental Wisdom*, but this does not mean that it is not a Mahayana text. *Fundamental Wisdom* gives an extensive presentation of selflessness of phenomena using many different forms of reasoning, and such presentations are intended only for Mahayana disciples. Therefore *Fundamental Wisdom* is a Mahayana text. However, if we were to rely upon *Fundamental Wisdom* alone, we would be able to practise only the stages of the profound path; whereas if we rely upon *Guide to the Middle Way* we can practise the union of the vast and profound paths.

If we understand clearly how the *Guide* acts as a guide to *Fundamental Wisdom*, we shall understand the meaning of its title, *Guide to the Middle Way*. 
Homage to youthful Manjushri

The Tibetan translators of *Guide to the Middle Way*, such as Patsab Nyimadrak, included a homage to youthful Manjushri at the beginning of the text. The principal purpose of a translator’s homage is to remove obstacles and to ensure that the translation is completed; but it also performs a secondary function of indicating to which class of scripture the text belongs. Traditionally, Buddhist scriptures are classified according to which of the three higher trainings they emphasize: training in higher moral discipline, training in higher concentration, or training in higher wisdom. A text that mainly emphasizes training in higher moral discipline belongs to the set of Vinaya, or Discipline; one that mainly emphasizes training in higher concentration belongs to the set of Sutra, or Discourses; and one that mainly emphasizes training in higher wisdom belongs to the set of Abhidharma, or Phenomenology. Texts belonging to the set of Vinaya would be preceded by a homage to the Omniscient One, those belonging to the set of Sutra by a homage to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and those belonging to the set of Abhidharma by a homage to youthful Manjushri. Since this text is preceded by a homage to youthful Manjushri, we know that it is included within the set of Abhidharma, that it mainly emphasizes training in higher wisdom, and that its principal subject matter is profound emptiness.
End of preview

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