

THE INNER SCIENCE OF BUDDHIST PRACTICE

Vasubandhu's *Summary of the Five Heaps*
with Commentary by Sthiramati

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The Tathāgata taught the causes
Of entities that are causally produced;
The Great Ascetic is also the one who revealed
The manner of their cessation.

ये धर्मा हेतुप्रभवा हेतुं तेषां तथागतो ह्यवदात् ।
तेषां च यो निरोध एवं वादी महाश्रमणः ॥

ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgato hyavadāt /
teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha evaṃ vādī mahāśramaṇaḥ //

ཚེས་རྣམས་གང་དག་རྒྱུ་རྐྱེད་དེ་དག་ནི།
རྒྱུ་དང་དེ་ལ་འགོག་པ་གང་ཡིན་པ།
དེ་བཞིན་གཤེགས་པ་ཉིད་ཀྱིས་བཀའ་སྤྲུལ་པ།
དེ་སྐོད་གསུངས་པའི་ཚུལ་ཅན་དག་གྲོལ་ཆེ།

Preface

IN THE SPRING of 1972, after having studied Tibetan for barely a year, it was my immense good fortune to meet a truly extraordinary Tibetan Buddhist teacher and almost immediately begin receiving from him an explanation of Vasubandhu's renowned *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* (T: *Chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi bshad pa*), or *Commentary to the Treasury of Higher Learning*. Part of a translation project that lasted for three years, this instruction was in many ways my introduction to the Buddha Dharma.

My teacher, known then as Geshe Lobsang Tharchin, had studied at the Mey College of Sera Monastery near Lhasa, Tibet and earned the Lharampa Geshe title with honors in 1953. He also completed Tantric studies at Gyumed College before escaping to India in 1959. I was his first Dharma student in the United States and maintained a close and ongoing relationship with him that lasted more than thirty years, until his passing in December 2004. If I have learned anything about the teachings of Lord Buddha, it is due almost exclusively to the kindness of this lama.

During the three-year period that I first studied Vasubandhu's great work, I developed a particular interest in a subject that can best be described as Buddhist psychology. In Tibetan it is called *sem sem jung* (T: *sems sems byung*), or "mind and mental factors." My attraction stemmed from the recognition that an understanding of this material brings a greater awareness of the workings of one's own mind, making it a powerful tool in learning to develop mindfulness—*apramāda* in Sanskrit and *bak yö* (T: *bag yod*) in Tibetan—a quality that is central to Buddhist spiritual practice.

I soon also became acquainted with a native Tibetan work on this same topic written by Tsechok Ling Yongzin Yeshe Gyeltsen (1713–1793), an important Gelukpa scholar who served as tutor to the eighth Dalai Lama. Entitled *A Necklace for Those of Clear Mind: An Elucidation of Mind and*

Mental Factors, this work is distinguished by the way that it relates the descriptions of mind and mental factors to the instructions of the teaching system known as *Lamrim*, or Stages of the Path, which is revered for its effectiveness in enabling practitioners of all levels to develop the spiritual attitudes that lie at the heart of the Buddhist Mahāyāna tradition.

Off and on from the late 1980s to 2001, I worked on a translation of a series of edited oral teachings on Lamrim practice that were given by the influential Gelukpa lama Kyabje Pabongka Rinpoche (1878–1941). The effort to translate this work, entitled *Liberation in Our Hands*, engendered a long-standing interest in the extensive body of Indian and Tibetan literature that relates to the Lamrim tradition, as well as a personal devotion to the system of spiritual practice that it elucidates.

Finally, over the years I have found the writings of the Indian Buddhist scholar Sthiramati—such as his commentary on Vasubandhu’s *Summary of the Five Heaps*—to be among the most detailed sources on the topic of mind and mental factors. This is one of the main reasons that Vasubandhu’s root text and Sthiramati’s commentary, which appear in Part Two of this book, were chosen for translation.

A primary aim of this book is to examine the importance of Abhidharma literature, which seems to be largely unappreciated by contemporary Western Buddhist practitioners, particularly those who are drawn to any of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Often viewed as little more than a dry and uninspiring catalog of lists and definitions, this material is in fact a repository of the fundamental concepts and ideas that inform all of the major Buddhist philosophical schools and traditions. Great Mahāyāna figures like Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga should properly be seen as presenting a critical analysis of the early realist tendencies in Buddhist thought, rather than positing views that reject the very framework on which all Buddhist philosophical theories are constructed. On a more practical level, Abhidharma literature contains the subject matter that allows one to investigate and learn with minute precision every aspect of the three Buddhist trainings of morality, one-pointed concentration, and wisdom.

Teachers of the Lamrim tradition viewed learning at least some Abhidharma material as essential to one’s spiritual practice. In his *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*, Je Tsongkapa makes a passing reference to Sthiramati’s work when he states, “I have explained these ten mental afflictions according to the descriptions that are found in *The Compendium of Higher Learning* [i.e., Asaṅga’s *Abhidharmasamuccaya*], *The Levels of Spiritual*

Practice [Asaṅga's *Yogācārabhūmiḥ*], and [Sthiramati's] commentary to the *Summary of the Five Heaps*." Je Tsongkapa also quotes the early Kadampa teacher Gönbawa Wangchuk Gyeltsen (1016–1082) as saying, in part, "To learn the essential characteristics of the mental afflictions, you must listen to teachings on the Abhidharma. At a minimum, you must receive instruction on *A Summary of the Five Heaps*."

While there are several English and French translations of Vasubandhu's *Summary of the Five Heaps*, Sthiramati's commentary on this root text has not been available in English before now. It is hoped that his explanations will be a useful contribution to the body of Buddhist writings available to Western readers. For the benefit of those who read Tibetan and/or Sanskrit, the appendix contains both a critical edition of Vasubandhu's work in its Tibetan translation and a reconstruction of the original Sanskrit text.

As this book was about to go to press, I obtained a copy of *Vasubandhu's Pañcaskhandhaka*, a work published jointly by the China Tibetology Publishing House and the Austrian Academy of Sciences Press. Their critical edition of the Sanskrit to Vasubandhu's *Summary of the Five Heaps* is based on a twelfth-century manuscript that was found in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet. Although I did not have time to examine the text at length, the language of the manuscript appears to differ slightly in a few places from the version that was used for the Tibetan translations that are found in the various Tibetan Tengyur editions. Nevertheless, the differences are only minor and I did rely on it to make a number of last-minute revisions to the text that appears in the appendix. I must, therefore, readily acknowledge that my attempt to reconstruct a Sanskrit version of Vasubandhu's text was greatly improved from having had access to this publication. Any errors that remain are my own.

I would like to express my deep gratitude and appreciation to the Tsadra Foundation, which made it possible for me to prepare these two translations, along with the presentation of my views on their importance. Thanks also go to those friends who read the first draft of the manuscript and offered valuable suggestions for how it might be improved. Lastly, it would be unforgivable not to acknowledge the longstanding support of my dear wife, Bali.