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Primary Sources of the Teaching about the Stages of the Path in the Indo-Tibetan Mahayana

Abstract

The Mahayana concept of gradual Dharma teaching, learning and staged realization of the Path of Enlightenment in Tibet was developed by Tsongkhapa and others as a practical guide to the stages of the Path (Lamrim). However, Lamrim is not a Tibetan teaching and expresses a more general concept of gradualness, which has an Indo-Buddhist origin. The article is to present the system of Indian primary sources of this concept. The novelty of the approach is due to the fact that the authors consider the “internal” position in the systematization and classification of the teachings of the Buddha, presented by the Madhyamikas, especially the reformer of Tibetan Buddhism, Je Tsongkhapa, to be a very significant factor in the reconstruction of the Mahayana concept of gradualness. The authors come to conclusions also containing novelty. First, the concept of the “Three Turns of the Wheel of the Teaching” formulated in the “Samdhinirmochana Sutra” is the first hermeneutical scheme for ordering and classifying the many teachings of the Buddha. It was based on the principle of gradual assimilation of the ontology of emptiness by students. Within this gradualism conceptualization scheme, based on the philosophical (ontological) criteria for classifying the teachings of the Buddha, the Prajnaparamita Sutras are the root source of the concept of gradualness. Secondly, the Mahayana concept of gradualness has both explicit and implicit aspects. The explicit aspect is represented by those Prajnaparamita Sutras, in which the main subject is the doctrine of emptiness and contains the substantiation of the gradualness of the Path, depending on the depth of comprehension of emptiness and selflessness. This aspect of the Prajnaparamita is presented in Nagarjuna's six treatises on the Madhyamaka. Chandrakirti revealed the connection of the deep view with the stages of the Path of the Bodhisattvas. Thirdly, along with the ontological scheme for substantiating gradualness, the Indian primary sources also present practical schemes for the gradual systematization of the Buddha's teachings: the concept of three chariots (“Lotus Sutra”), as well as the doctrine of bhumi (“Yogacarabhumi” by Asanga) and six (ten) paramitas (“Bodhicharyavatara” by Santideva). This article is part of a larger study of the sources of the Mahayana concept of gradualness. Results of this analysis are significant for the correct source systematization of Buddhist doctrines and practices.

Keywords

Primary sources, Gradual Path, Lamrim, Prajnaparamita, Three Turnings of the Wheel of Teaching, Three Vehicles, Nagarjuna, Ontology of Emptiness, “Abhisamayalamkara”, five Paths, Tsongkhapa, historical sources.

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