CHAPTER ONE

THE INTRODUCTION TO THE MIDDLE WAY [MA] AND ITS RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

1 CHANDRAKIRTI AND THE INTRODUCTION TO THE MIDDLE WAY [MA]

The full treatise of the Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakavatara) consists of a set of verses, known as the Madhyamakavatara or Madhyamakavatara-karika, and Chandrakirti’s own commentary on these known as the Madhyamakavatara-saṅgṛṭti or Madhyamakavatara-bhasya. It does not survive in its original Sanskrit, having been lost, as were so many Buddhist scriptures in the Muslim persecution of Indian Buddhism. It exists now in its Tibetan translation which was made in the first case by the Indian Tilaka-kalasha with the Tibetan Nyi ma grags, and revised and improved some time after by the Indian Kanakavarma working with the same Tibetan translator.

Its author, Chandrakirti, is known to us as a renowned Buddhist monk, yogin, and philosophical psychologist. He lived in the seventeenth century and is the author of a number of works, mainly commentaries to earlier Buddhist treatises of which the most famous is his Clear Words [PP], a text elucidating the Principal Verses on the Middle Way [MK] of the second-century saint Nagarjuna. According to the hagiographies of Bu ston and Taranatha, Chandrakirti was born at Samana in the south of India. He became learned in the full corpus of Buddhist scriptures, both sutras and tantras, and was ordained as a monk (bhikṣu). According to Taranatha he subsequently became abbot (upadhyaya) of the great Nalanda monastery (mahavihāra), at that time India’s foremost Buddhist seat of learning and was respected as a “master-scholar among scholars.” By contemporary western scholars, Chandrakirti is regarded as a leading expositor of Madhyamika-Buddhist thought and, alongside Buddhapalita, Aryadeva, and Shantideva, as one of the principal formulators of the Prasangika or Consequential form of Madhyamika philosophy. Contemporary Tibetan dGe lugs scholars regard the Introduction to the Middle Way [MA] as the foremost
Buddhist insight text. In the Tibetan colleges (grva tshang) it is memorised and then studied and debated over a period of five years.9

The Introduction [MA] is based on the seminal thought of Nagarjuna, the initiator of the Madhyamika as a formal system of thought. Chandrakirti acknowledges this several times in the Introduction [MA]. He writes, for example (6.3): "Just as these [bodhisattvas] comprehend the highly profound teaching (gambhira-dharma) through scriptures (agama), and listening through reason (yukti), so I will explain from Saint Nagarjuna's texts in accordance with his system of presentation." In the concluding sections to the Introduction to the Middle Way [MA: Cl] he shows his indebtedness particularly to the Treatise of the Middle Way (Madhyamaka-sastra), i.e. the Principal Stanzas on the Middle Way [MK], stating that the Introduction to the Middle Way "is related in accordance with that treatise." According to dGe 'dun grub (RSM, f.2bl) it is an introduction to the Principal Stanzas on the Middle Way [MK] (Mula-prajna). In that tradition of Madhyamika literature the Introduction to the Middle Way is concerned with establishing the viewpoint of emptiness as the final and ultimate reality of things, and with the salvific nature of knowing emptiness.

Even so the Introduction [MA] differs significantly from Nagarjuna's treatises. Whereas Nagarjuna's works10 exclusively discuss emptiness or metatheoretical issues pertaining to emptiness, the Introduction [MA] has this as just part of its subject-matter, though a substantial and crucial part at that. The Introduction [MA] is divided into twelve chapters. Each of the first ten chapters is devoted to one of the ten so-called steps or levels (bhumi) that a universal vehicle saint is said to traverse en route to achieving the full evolution of a buddha.11 For this infrastructure the Introduction to the Middle Way [MA] is indebted to the Ten Levels Sutra [DS], which it quotes frequently. These ten levels, and hence first ten chapters also, are further correlated with ten special practices that the universal vehicle saint accomplishes during his path. These are the ten perfections (paramita). As the perfection of insight (prajna) is the sixth of the ten perfections the bulk of the Introduction's [MA] discussion of insight and hence of emptiness, occurs in the sixth chapter. This chapter is considerably longer than any of the others and accounts for 226 of the Introduction to the Middle Way's [MA] 330 verses. The remainder of the subject-matter of these first ten chapters is, then, the development of the nine remaining accomplishments; namely, the perfections of giving (dana), good conduct (sila), endurance (ksanti), enthusiasm (viryap), meditation (dhyana), therapeutic techniques means (upaya), powerful capacities (bala), resolution (pranidhana) and knowledge (jnana). In an eleventh chapter titled "The Individual Qualities of the Levels" the Introduction [MA] summarises the characteristics and achievements of the saints on each of the ten levels, as expounded in the previous chapters, and in a final chapter of 42 verses describes "The Qualities at the Level of Buddhas."

This additional content is collected under the rubric of "extensive content" as opposed to the "profound" and so Chandrakirti sees the Introduction to the Middle