
Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇིག་རྟེན་སྐྱོད་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

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With the appropriate motivation, we will do our meditation practice. [meditation]

As usual we set the motivation for listening the teaching along these lines, 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, thus I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice, in order to first subdue my own mind'. This kind of motivation is highly beneficial.

We have covered the topic called Cause and Effect of High Status, which includes the practices that we need try to adopt in our life, which will make our life highly meaningful.

2. CAUSE AND EFFECT OF DEFINITE GOODNESS

This section has two main subdivisions:

- 2.1. How definite goodness is described in sutra
- 2.2. Exhorting the king to train in the profound

2.1. How definite goodness is described in sutra

This has three subdivisions:

- 2.1.1. Brief explanation of the Conqueror's description of definite goodness
- 2.1.2. Extensive explanation of definite goodness
- 2.1.3. Summation

2.1.1. Brief explanation of the Conqueror's description of definite goodness

This section is further subdivided in three:

- 2.1.1.1. How definite goodness is described
- 2.1.1.2. [The difference between] generation and non-generation of fear for the profound meaning by the ignorant and the wise
- 2.1.1.3. The Teacher's saying that fear arises from conception of self

2.1.1.1. HOW DEFINITE GOODNESS IS DESCRIBED

The relevant verse of the root text is:

25. *The doctrines of definite goodness
Are said by the Conquerors
To be deep, subtle, and frightening,
To the childish, who are not learned.*

We have already described what definite goodness implies, however it is good to have a very clear understanding of what it really means if we were to incorporate it into our practice in our daily life. As described earlier, 'definite goodness' refers to liberation. So what does 'liberation' actually mean? We can't just feel satisfied with the word 'liberation'; we need to have a clear understanding of what liberation actually implies. Liberation is the state where one is free from the bondage of the delusions and karma that confine us to cyclic existence. Gaining this clear understanding, and aspiring to achieve that state, actually places a very positive imprint on one's mind, and also serves as a means to accumulate great merit and virtue.

We may have heard of accounts of beings called arhats or foe destroyers, who achieved liberation during the Buddha's

lifetime by relying on his instructions and teachings. We need to understand that the practices that are presented here are the same methods that were followed by those foe destroyers; they will lead any individual being to the state of liberation. The literal meaning of *arhat* is *foe destroyer*, which refers to destroying the ultimate enemy which are the delusions. Thus, achieving liberation means completely overpowering and eliminating the delusions within one's mind, and a being who achieves that state is called a foe destroyer.

Rather than relating to this material in an objective impersonal manner, we need to rely upon it as really profound personal advice on how to achieve the state of liberation oneself. As we go through the subject matter of the text, we find that it consists of very precise instructions that we should not take lightly. Rather we need to make sure that we incorporate them into our daily practice. If you think about it, it is really quite amazing that we have the right conditions now to be able to access the very same practices that the practitioners at the time of Buddha used to achieve the ultimate goal of liberation.

What we are studying now is indeed very profound and sacred teachings, which were followed by the great beings of the past to achieve the goal of liberation. So knowing that we are studying and putting into practice the very same instructions and practices followed by those great beings who achieved the state of liberation in the past, will really inspire us. That is because we can see that it is possible for us to achieve liberation too.

Referring to the teachings in this way can also generate a stronger faith within us. For example when reading the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*, we notice that it begins by describing where the Buddha was residing at that particular time, and which particular disciple requested the sutra. In this way it gives an account of what actually took place at that time. The sutra gives us a vivid image of the time of Lord Buddha and his disciples, and when one reads it with that approach then it can really summon strong inspiration and faith, to the point where one's hair stands on end. Because of their vividness we can relate to the sutra very directly rather than thinking that it occurred in some distant mythical time that does not relate to us right now.

For older students who have been coming regularly to the teachings, this material will not be a cause for fear or doubt. Rather it will be very easy to relate to, because the points in the teaching have already been explained in great detail in the teachings on the lam rim, the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* or *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, as well as the *Madhyamaka* or the Middle Way teachings. So when we refer to the verses, we will have an immediate affinity with them, which will confirm what we have studied in the past. If we put them in practice then, we will be able to establish a clearer understanding and leave a strong and firm imprint in our mind.

Gyalsab Je's commentary explains that the Dharma that serves a cause of obtaining definite goodness is the wisdom realising selflessness, which is divided into the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena. For ordinary beings, those who have not heard or who have no affinity with these teachings, this is a very subtle topic that cannot be understood by the awareness that understands conventionality. So it is very difficult for ordinary beings to fathom the depth and profoundness of the objects perceived by the wisdom realising selflessness.

Because these teachings are so *subtle* and *deep*, they are very *frightening to the childish*, who have not heard these teachings previously, or who have no affinity with them. That was explained by the Buddha himself. The understanding of the doctrine on the profound emptiness and its relationship with interdependent origination, is the cause for achieving liberation.

What is being pointed out here is that when one gains the wisdom realising emptiness, one has successfully developed the causes for achieving liberation. This implies that without developing the wisdom realising emptiness within one's mental continuum, one cannot possibly achieve liberation. Gyalsab Je's commentary clarifies that when the verse mentions the doctrine or Dharma of definite goodness it is referring to the wisdom realising emptiness. Thus the wisdom realising emptiness is referred to as the doctrine or Dharma of definite goodness.

As Gyalsab's commentary explains, the wisdom realising emptiness can be divided into two categories, the wisdom realising selflessness of persons, and the wisdom realising selflessness of other phenomena. The wisdom realising selflessness or emptiness is so deep and subtle that it is frightening for those who have not heard any teachings on it or who have no affinity with these topics, thus they are referred to as child-like.

2.1.1.2. [THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN] GENERATION AND NON-GENERATION OF FEAR FOR THE PROFOUND MEANING BY THE IGNORANT AND THE WISE

The verse relating to this heading is:

26 *"I am not, I will not be.
I have not, I will not have"
That frightens all the childish
And extinguishes fear in the wise.*

Gyalsab Je's commentary poses this rhetorical question: What is the manner of emptiness causing fear for the childish and extinguishing fear in the wise? Why is that so? Here 'the childish' refers to ordinary beings. Of course, this is not to say that all ordinary beings will necessarily have fear of emptiness but, in general, this is usually the case.

In answer to his rhetorical question, Gyalsab's commentary explains that when the meaning of emptiness is presented to some childlike beings, who lack the intelligence to understand it, they interpret it to mean that there is no person or self in this lifetime, thus there is no way to obtain a self in future lifetimes. So the first line, *I am not, I will not be*, indicates that as a person does not exist now, it could not exist in the future.

Likewise when the selflessness of phenomena is presented, then the childish, unwise beings will interpret it to mean that there are no aggregates now, and as there are no aggregates now then there is no possible way to obtain the aggregates in a future lifetime. So the lines, *I have not, I will not have*, refer to the wrong conclusion of the childish, which is that there are no aggregates now or in the future. With such a misinterpretation of selflessness, a childlike being will develop a nihilist view. Thus, the prospect of the 'I' not existing now nor in the future, and the aggregates, including their body, not existing now nor in the future, instils great fear in their mind.

Earlier in our teachings we heard of the story of the king who completely misinterpreted and misunderstood a teaching given on emptiness, and ordered that the scholar who gave the teaching on emptiness be killed, because the

king thought the teacher was misleading people. This verse is referring to the same point; for those who are not ready to understand what selflessness or emptiness implies, their wrong interpretation leads a completely nihilistic view that instils great fear in them.

This misinterpretation can also occur all too easily amongst people now, even for those who have some level of understanding and make the attempt to meditate on selflessness or emptiness. Failing to understand the correct implications of selflessness, becomes a very easy way to fall into the extreme of having the view of a nihilist. The misinterpretation arises from not being able to clearly distinguish the object of negation. It crucial to understand what it is that does not exist (i.e. the object of negation) when things are said to have an identity of selflessness. Not being able to clearly identify the object of negation leads to the fault of misinterpreting the selflessness of 'I', or the selflessness of phenomena such as 'my aggregates', to mean that they do not exist at all. It is really very easy to fall into this fault.

It is explained in the *Heart Sutra* that 'form is emptiness and emptiness is form'. With the second statement 'emptiness is form' one needs to incorporate the understanding of emptiness in relation to interdependent origination. Thus while form is empty, emptiness itself is related to form. By stating that 'emptiness itself is also form' the *Heart Sutra* establishes the conventional existence of form. Without the clear understanding of how the non-existence of the object of negation actually establishes the nominal or conventional existence of the object itself, one will, very likely, be led into the extreme nihilistic view that nothing exists. If one were to meditate on emptiness based on the misunderstanding that nothing exists, then one has definitely missed the point and will be led astray from obtaining the correct view. So it is very important that one has a really clear understanding of what selflessness, or emptiness, actually implies.

The misunderstanding and misinterpretation is quite common these days, as we find many people saying, "Oh, Buddhism sounds very nihilistic, for they keep saying that 'this doesn't exist' and 'that doesn't exist' and so forth". People who claim this show that they are completely ignorant of the implications of selflessness or emptiness. Thus, we also need to be very careful to gain a clear understanding from the very beginning ourselves.

It is really crucial to gain the correct view of emptiness from the point of view of the Prasangika Madhyamaka school, which is the highest Buddhist school. In order to understand the selflessness or emptiness of any phenomena—persons or aggregate—one needs to be able to refute the object of negation which is an inherent existence of persons or aggregates. For an example, when the *Heart Sutra* says that form is emptiness, it is implying that form is empty of any inherent existence, while the second clause 'emptiness is form' means that even though form lacks inherent existence, form definitely does exist nominally or conventionally. Therefore, although form lacks inherent existence it does exist conventionally, as a manifestation of its emptiness. In other words, while it is empty of inherent existence it still exists conventionally.

This is said to be the crux of the Prasangika point of view. It is really the most essential point, and if one misses this point then one has missed the whole presentation of the Prasangika view. If, however, one can understand this point then one has understood the crux of the Prasangika point of view. I have explained this to you on many occasions, as we

have studied the various topics on this teaching. His Holiness also keeps touching on this point again and again in every teaching that he gives, i.e. that phenomena lack inherent existence while at the same time existing conventionally as dependent originations. So this is something we really need to contemplate well in order to get a very clear understanding. Then there will be no confusion.

In relation to this, the *Heart Sutra* says at the beginning that Shariputra asks Avalokiteshvara, 'How does a son of good family engage in the practice of the profound view?' to which Avalokiteshvara explains that a son or daughter engages in the profound view by seeing that form lacks inherent existence, and likewise with the rest of the aggregates. The line where Avalokiteshvara replies that form is to be seen as lacking inherent existence and so forth also applies to all other phenomena, which is the main point of the *Heart Sutra*. If one incorporates that understanding when one recites the *Heart Sutra* then it will be a great source of understanding and inspiration.

Gyalsab Je's commentary explains that the wise person who has gained a profound understanding of suchness or emptiness, understands clearly that cyclic existence can be completely abandoned, and that liberation is definitely possible. Unlike the fears of the childish, there is no fear in those who have a clear understanding of emptiness. They won't be frightened with the prospect there is no self and aggregates. Rather there will be a great understanding that it is precisely because the self lacks inherent existence that it is possible to achieve a state of liberation free from all delusions. That understanding will be definitely achieved by the wise.

Understanding emptiness serves as the means to see the definite possibility of abandoning cyclic existence and obtaining liberation, because with a clear, unmistakable understanding of emptiness or selflessness, one will be able to clearly see that grasping at the self can definitely be overcome. The main point here is that with the profound understanding of emptiness, one naturally will be able to see that there is an antidote for overcoming grasping at the self, and when grasping at self is understood as something to be completely eliminated from one's mental continuum, then naturally the state of being free from all delusions, which is state of liberation, will be seen to be attainable.

2.1.1.3. THE TEACHER'S SAYING THAT FEAR ARISES FROM CONCEPTION OF SELF

This fear, as the Buddha said, actually arises from the conception of the self. The verse relating to this reads:

27. *By him who speaks only to help beings,
It was said that all beings
Have arisen from the conception of I
And are enveloped with the conception of mine*

Gyalsab Je's commentary explains in that the lines, '*It was said all beings, have arisen from the conception of I*', the Tibetan word for living being is *kyegu*, literally means 'that which posses the nine attributes'. As the commentary explains, the nine attributes of an individual being are the five aggregates and the four elements. The five aggregates, as explained previously, are the aggregate of form, the aggregate of feeling, the aggregate of discrimination, the aggregate of compositional factors and the aggregate of consciousness, and the four elements are the elements of wind, earth, fire and water. In any case, the main point is that ordinary beings have a distinctive sense of 'I' and 'mine'. The reason why the aggregates are called the contaminated aggregates

has been explained in earlier teachings; the term 'contaminated' has the connotation of having to repeatedly acquire these aggregates again and again. The contaminated aggregates possessed by ordinary beings arise basically from the conceptions of 'I' and 'mine', which all ordinary beings instinctively have.

With respect to fear in any given situation, if we to look into what it is that we fear, then there is the distinct notion of 'what will happen to me?'. If we investigate further how we perceive ourselves at that time, we will notice that we have a misconception of the 'I'. We will notice that we perceive the 'I' to be a self-sufficient and inherently existent entity that is unrelated to anything else. The misconception of an inherently existent self or 'I' is that it exists independently without relating to anything else. It is as if the 'I' exists solidly and independently by itself, and it is this very misapprehended 'I' that we grasp at. So, all our doubts and fears are a natural consequence of really believing in and holding onto such an inherently, self-sufficiently and independently existing 'I', which in fact does not exist at all.

As explained in the teachings, such an 'I' does not exist, thus we are holding onto a false identity, so to speak, because the perception of an inherently existent 'I' is a wrong conception. Now the question is, does the 'I' exist or not? Does a self exist? The answer is the 'I' or self definitely does exist. The perception of a self in general is not false, therefore not a wrong conception. However the perception of an independent and inherently existent 'I' is a wrong conception, which actually leads to all of the problems, fears and doubts that we experience.

If we really think about it, the 'I' that we hold onto, and all the fears and doubts associated with it do not actually exist in the way that they appear to us. When one realises that what we are holding on to doesn't actually exist then, as a result, the sense of clinging onto it will also definitely loosen. Then all fears, problems and everything else relating to that false 'I' will naturally fade away too. So you can just imagine the great sense of relief and liberation that one will achieve when one gains the correct understanding of how the 'I' actually exists, which is that it is empty of inherent and independent existence.

As Gyalsab Je's commentary further clarifies, all the fears of ordinary beings arise from the misconception of 'I' and 'mine'. The Buddha presented the teaching on emptiness in order to liberate beings from that misconception and thus liberate them from all fears and sufferings. As the Buddha explained, the fears arise from that misconception of 'I' and 'mine', and he presented the teachings on emptiness as a means to achieve freedom from those fears, and thus show the way to liberation. As explained previously, on many occasions, if the question is whether the self or 'I' exists, the answer is yes, an 'I' does definitely exist. Isn't there an existent 'I' when we say, 'I go', 'I sleep' or 'I eat'? It would go against our experience if we were to deny the existence of an 'I'.

When the teachings present selflessness, it is referring to the perception of an 'I' that is an independently or inherently existent 'I', that eats, sleeps and does other things, which does not exist. It is an independently or inherently existent 'I' that does not exist. So the object of negation is the inherently existent 'I' that does not exist. To give an example that I have used previously, when someone asks us to go and fetch the clock, the question is, does the clock actually exist? The answer is that the clock definitely does exist, but our perception of it is that it is an independently and

inherently existent clock. Even though we may not be conscious of it, if we really think about it, an independently and inherently existent clock is what appears to our mind. When we go to fetch the clock, we are subconsciously thinking about fetching a clock that is independently and inherently existent. In fact an inherently and independently established clock does not exist—it is a completely non-existent. So the perception of an object, such as a clock, that appears to us as existing independently and inherently, is the object of negation. When we are able to successfully understand that such an independent clock does not exist in any way, and is completely non-existent, yet it also exists conventionally, then we have touched the main point of establishing a clock that does exist but not inherently.

Identifying the object of negation is essential. In his *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* Shantideva said that without identifying the object of negation there is no possible way to successfully refute that object of negation. One must clearly identify the object of negation in order to establish a clear understanding of emptiness. Likewise the understanding of emptiness as a means to remove our fear is explained in the *Heart Sutra*:

Therefore, Shariputra, because there is no attainment, bodhisattvas abide relying on the perfection of wisdom, without obscuration of thought, and so are unafraid. Transcending perverted views, they attain the end, nirvana. All buddhas existing in the three times, relying on the perfection of wisdom, fully awoken to the highest, perfect enlightenment.

One needs to reflect on this again and again, as it is the crux of the matter.

As you would be aware, the next session is the discussion session, and it is good for you to really engage in that session. The main topics of discussion can be around the clear identification of what selflessness means, and the opposite of that, which is the self of person. What does a self of person imply? If there were to be an inherently existent self then what would that imply? What does selflessness imply? What does the self of phenomena or the aggregates imply? What does the selflessness of the aggregates or phenomena imply? It is important to really clarify and distinguish between self and selflessness to gain a good understanding of their meaning.

How does grasping at a self serve as a root cause of samsara? What is samsara itself, and what does it mean to be free from samsara? How does one actually engage in practices to free oneself from samsara? Contemplating these points will be very, very effective for one's understanding and practice.

It is good to relate to the main logical reasoning or syllogism that is given in the teaching to gain the understanding that grasping at the self is a misconception that can be eliminated. It is precisely because it is the possible to eliminate that misconception that liberation is possible. To really understand how grasping at the self serves as the reason that makes liberation possible, we need to gain an understanding of the possibility of achieving liberation. The reason given for that possibility is because grasping at the self is a delusion or misconception that is adventitious. In other words the nature of our mind is not polluted, to the point of being inseparable from that delusion of inherent existence. Because the delusion is adventitious, it is possible to overcome it.

So each point is backed up with a further reason. It is good to understand that there is a possibility of completely severing cyclic existence, because the root cause of cyclic

existence or samsara, which is grasping at the self, can be eliminated. Why can grasping at the self be eliminated? Because it is adventitious, thus it is separable from the mental continuum. Further, because it is a wrong conception, it is not based on valid cognition as it does not have valid basis. If it were not a wrong conception, then it would difficult to overcome, because it would be based on a solid foundation. Whereas all misconceptions, because of the very fact that they are a misconception and do not have a valid basis, can be overcome. What overcomes that misconception is the valid cognition that directly opposes that misconception, which is the perception of selflessness, or emptiness. So, the wisdom recognising emptiness directly opposes the wrong conception of grasping at an inherently existing self. It is because there is this opposing force, a valid cognition that serves as an antidote to overcome misconception, that it is possible to eliminate it. With this sound, solid reasoning the possibility of attaining liberation is not just a wishful thinking or mere imagination, but a reality and fact.

Having identified the grasping at 'I' and 'mine' as being a cause for the samsaric existence of ordinary beings, the next verse explains how the conception of 'I' and 'mine' is actually a misconception, and not true but in fact false. Because it is false, it can be overcome, thus one can overcome the fears that those misconceptions produce. If this misconception of 'I' and 'mine' was based on truth and reality then we couldn't do anything about our fear, because it would be based on reality. However, because the source of the misconception that causes fear is false, fears and so forth can definitely be overcome.

In our everyday life many of our fears, what we might call paranoia, are based very much on our superstitious mind. We just assume bad things are going to happen. Many doubts and superstitious thoughts cause a lot of fear. Sometimes we can actually realise for ourselves 'I am just afraid because of my paranoiac, superstitious mind'.

For example, when we were very young we might have been fearful about going in a dark room, because there might be a ghost in there. That is clearly a superstitious fear. Of course, later in life we realise that a dark room does not automatically imply that there is a boogie man in there. Nevertheless the fear that was generated when we were a child was very real fear and the discomfort that we felt as children was real. That fear, based on unreality and untruth, does cause real suffering in one's mind.

As children in Tibet, our parents used to warn us to be quiet otherwise the owls would call us, meaning that they were summoning a ghost to call us. Our parents would say, keep quiet otherwise the owl is going to call you. When you think about it, the hoot of an owl is actually quite a sinister sort of sound, especially at night!

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