
Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇིགས་ཀྱི་ཆེན་མོ་ལ་བཞུགས་པའོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual, we will begin the practice with the appropriate motivation. (*Meditation*)

With a clear and relaxed state of mind we adopt the motivation, 'in order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment myself, so therefore I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well'.

2.1.2.2. REFUTATION OF INHERENTLY EXISTENT BONDAGE AND LIBERATION (CONT)

2.1.2.2.2. Order of ceasing cyclic existence

Here verse 37 states:

37. *Because this wheel is not obtained from self,
other,
Or from both, in the past, the present, or the
future,
The conception of I is overcome
And thereby action and rebirth.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains that because the interdependent origination of the cyclic existence is not produced inherently from *self* or *other* or *both*, nor from any of the three times, it lacks inherent production. Through understanding this and meditating on it, grasping at the self perceived by the view of the transitory collection will be extinguished. Thus karma and rebirth will also cease.

As the commentary clearly explains, when one realises that just as the very causes, as well as the effects of samsara don't have even an atom of inherent establishment, the conception of the 'I' as perceived by the transitory collection, as well as the grasping at that self will also naturally cease. When the conception of the 'I' is extinguished, the cause and effect sequence of karma will also naturally cease. Thus, that which leads us into cyclic existence will cease. This is quite easy to understand isn't it? As explained here in the teachings, it is good for us to reflect upon how the cessation of samsara is actually possible in general, how that can occur, and thus achieve the cessation of one's own samsaric existence.

The main point to reflect on is how one enters into samsara, which is by grasping at the aggregates as being truly existent. This grasping at the aggregates produces the conception of 'self', and grasping at the 'I' and 'mine' of one's own continuum, which is called *view of the transitory collections*. By grasping at our 'I' and 'mine' we create the karma that leads us into cyclic existence.

Having understood how we fall into samsara, we then go on to consider the reverse, which is the cessation of samsara. When the misconception of the aggregates as being truly existent is eliminated, then that will naturally stop the grasping at 'I' and 'mine', which will in turn stop the process of creating the karma. What is being specifically mentioned here is that the cessation of samsara is achieved by developing wisdom, specifically the wisdom realising emptiness; this is the main point.

However it should also be understood that as an aid to developing the wisdom realising emptiness, we also need meditative stabilisation, particularly calm abiding focussed on emptiness. In order to achieve calm abiding one needs to firstly train in moral ethics. Based on the practice of morality, one is then able to develop the meditative stabilisation leading on to calm abiding. Based on calm abiding, one will then be able to achieve the special insight focussing on emptiness. That then becomes the complete method to achieve the cessation of the cyclic existence of samsara. We need to be able to follow these points in order to understand that the earlier preliminary trainings are needed in order to gain the wisdom realising emptiness.

The main point being related here is that the process of extinguishing cyclic existence is dependent on extinguishing true origins. Within true origins, it is the ignorance of grasping at the self that must be overcome in order to end samsara. This will also be explained in the next verses.

One needs to be able to relate to this very profound logic, which shows us how to overcome cyclic existence or samsara. In particular we need to understand the logic of how overcoming the very root of cyclic existence will lead to the cessation of cyclic existence. The analogy is that cutting off the branches will not get rid of a tree, because the more you cut the branches the more the branches will grow. However if you destroy the very root of the tree, then the plant will be destroyed.

The next verse states:

38. *One who sees how cause and effect
Are produced and destroyed
Does not regard the world
As really existent or really non-existent.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains, those who have gained the understanding of suchness or the emptiness of phenomena, and who understand the production and the cessation of the cause and effect of samsara, will not be influenced by either the ultimate existence, or total lack of existence of the phenomena of the world. That is because such beings would have gained the full understanding of independent origination as being free from the extremes of permanence and annihilation.

2.1.2.2.3. Benefits of realising emptiness

The verse relating to this reads:

39. *One who has heard thus the doctrine
extinguishing
All suffering, but does not examine it
And fears the fearless state
Trembles due to ignorance.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains, understanding independent origination, which is free from all fabrications of all extremes, overcomes suffering entirely.

The commentary then goes on to further explain that by failing to recognise these benefits, foolish beings will develop a *fear* of the cause of the *fearless state* of complete freedom. In other words they will fear emptiness itself. This is due to the *ignorance* in the minds of the foolish beings. If the presentation of emptiness evokes fear in those who are foolish, then the implication is that this is not the case for the wise. In fact it actually brings about great joy to the wise.

In summary, verse 39 is explaining the benefit of the realisation of emptiness or the interdependent origination that is free from all fabrications and extremes. Gaining that realisation will bring about the complete cessation of all

suffering. In brief, the benefit of emptiness is the cessation of all suffering.

A foolish being, unable to analyse and thus understand this, will feel fear. Rather than seeing the benefits and relating to it in that way, great fear arises in their mind. It is not that emptiness has no benefit, but the fact that foolish beings fear emptiness because of their lack of understanding or ignorance. The verse explains this quite clearly. The first part explains the benefit of the *doctrine* expounding emptiness as *extinguishing all suffering*. Those who are frightened of this are afraid due to their ignorance. The point here is to understand that without gaining the wisdom realising emptiness, there will be no way to completely overcome suffering.

2.1.2.2.4. Nature of liberation

This is sub-divided into four:

2.1.2.2.4.1. Unsuitability of fearing the extinction of the conception of a self at the time of nirvana without remainder

2.1.2.2.4.2. Liberation as the extinction of all conceptions of true existence

2.1.2.2.4.3. Difference between wrong and right views

2.1.2.2.4.4. Liberation as the extinction of the conception of true existence even during the nirvana with remainder

2.1.2.2.4.1. Unsuitability of fearing the extinction of the conception of a self at the time of nirvana without remainder

Nirvana is classified into two types, nirvana without remainder and nirvana with remainder. Older students will recall that this was explained in earlier teachings. According to the two lower Buddhist schools, the Vaibhashika and the Sautrantika, the difference between nirvana with remainder and without remainder is that when an arhat attains nirvana with remainder, he still retains contaminated aggregates (or aggregates in the nature of suffering). When those contaminated aggregates are completely eliminated then the arhat attains nirvana without remainder.

For the Prasangika (or Middle Way school), the distinction between nirvana with remainder and nirvana without remainder is whether there is an appearance of true existence or not. An arhat who still has the appearance of true existence would be an arhat in nirvana with remainder. When they obtain the complete cessation of all appearance of true existence, then they have obtained the nirvana without remainder. According to the lower schools, nirvana with remainder is obtained first, followed by nirvana without remainder. However, according to the Prasangika, nirvana without remainder is obtained first followed by nirvana with remainder.

40. *That all these will not exist in nirvana
Does not frighten you.
Why does their non-existence
Explained here cause you fright?*

In explaining the meaning of this verse, Gyaltsab Je's commentary posits the questions that other schools would ask the Prasangika. In an earlier verse it was established that there should be no fear caused by either the realisation of emptiness, or the actual presentation of emptiness. The lower Buddhist schools now say to the Prasangika: 'It cannot be established that there is no fear associated with the explanation of emptiness. That is because the most intimate objects in relation to one's existence, namely 'I' and 'mine' are completely eliminated in the presentation of emptiness. How could that not cause fear?

Of course the reason why emptiness causes fear for the lower Buddhist schools is because they posit inherently established persons and phenomena. So when the Prasangika present the view of the lack of inherent existence of all phenomena, then for the lower schools (who establish inherent existence) that implies the annihilation of the self of persons and phenomena. Thus for them it means that there is no self of persons and phenomena, and that causes great fear.

As a response to that, the Prasangika ask the lower Buddhist schools: 'Then why doesn't obtaining nirvana without remainder, which according to you the aggregates cease to exist, cause fear for you?' This question arises from the assertion of the lower Vaibhashika and the Sautrantika Buddhist schools that when an arhat with remainder (meaning an arhat who still has the physical contaminated aggregates within their continuum) dies, they obtain the nirvana without remainder, and their continuum actually cease to exist; their aggregates as well as their mental continuum are totally extinguished. In other words there is nothing left of the continuum of that arhat.

So the Prasangika posit this question in relation to their explanation: 'Doesn't the fact that the continuum of their aggregates is completely extinguished cause fear? It should!' The Prasangika further say: 'Rather than being afraid of what we present, we are saying that the view of emptiness completely extinguishes the delusions, particularly the delusion relating to the appearance of inherent existence; so the cessation of the three root delusions, should not cause any fear. What brings that cessation about is the wisdom realising emptiness, and so there should be no fear of emptiness'.

Here, we need to understand the conflicting views in the presentations of the Prasangika and the two lowest Buddhist schools. According to the lower Buddhist schools grasping at true existence is a valid consciousness, whereas according to the Prasangika, grasping at true existence is completely erroneous and a wrong consciousness. This is where another conflict arises. According to the lower schools the perception of the aggregates, the perception of the 'I' itself and other phenomena, as being inherently existent is a valid perception. Whereas according to the Prasangika, it is a completely invalid and wrong perception. According to the Prasangika when one obtains nirvana, that misconception is completely eliminated. When the Prasangika say that there should be no fear in overcoming the very root of the delusions, they are referring to overcoming the very misconception of grasping at true existence or inherent existence.

Here we need to understand that the lower Buddhist schools cannot establish a liberation that extinguishes the misconception of grasping at true existence, specifically inherent existence. They assert that at a substantially, self-sufficiently existent 'I' is the root delusion or the root cause of our ignorance. So therefore overcoming that will be realising selflessness or emptiness.

2.1.2.2.4.2. Liberation as the extinction of all conceptions of true existence

This section refutes the assertions of the lower Buddhist schools with respect to the nature of liberation, and it has three sub-divisions:

2.1.2.2.4.2.1. Impossibility of an inherently existent non-thing as liberation

2.1.2.2.4.2.2. Impossibility of a thing as liberation

2.1.2.2.4.2.3. Meaning of liberation

2.1.2.2.4.2.1. *Impossibility of an inherently existent non-thing as liberation*

One of the assertions by the two lower schools is that not only is liberation a non-thing, but it is also an inherently existent non-thing. That is the assertion that is being refuted by the Prasangika.

The verse relating to this is:

41. *"In liberation there is no self and no aggregates."
If liberation is asserted thus,
Why is the removal here of the self
And of the aggregates not liked by you?*

In relation to the earlier question posed by the Prasangika, the lower Buddhist schools then say: 'I do not fear inherently established liberation, which is free from all suffering. I do not fear such liberation.' To that the Prasangika respond: 'If you assert that you do not fear the attainment of liberation, which is a state of the complete cessation of the person and aggregates, then the assertion that the aggregates and person are not established as being inherently existent should not cause any fear. To fear one and not the other is completely contradictory. How could the lack of inherent existence cause any fear?'

The verse argues: 'You assert that obtaining *liberation*, particularly *nirvana* without remainder is a complete extinction of the *self*, the person and the *aggregates*. Why then do you not like the *removal* of the *self*, which refers to gaining the understanding of a lack of an inherently established person and aggregates? In fact this presentation should suit you, and give you joy'.

2.1.2.2.4.2.2. *Impossibility of a thing as liberation*

This refutation particularly relates to the Vaibhashika system, which also establishes permanence as 'a thing'. It is covered in the first two lines of Verse 42, which reads:

42ab. *If nirvana is not a non-thing,
Just how could it have thingness?*

As Gyaltsab Je comments in his commentary, if the cessation of the aggregates is considered as being a 'thing', then how could liberation also be a 'thing'? The answer is that it is because a thing cannot be an inherently existing thing.

In asserting that liberation is a thing, the Vaibhashikas are asserting that it is actually an inherently established thing. To refute liberation as being an inherently established thing, the Prasangika ask: 'How can there an inherently established thing when there cannot be an inherently established non-thing? Both "thing" and "non-thing" equally lack inherent establishment. So it is not possible to establish an inherently existent thing as liberation'.

2.1.2.2.4.2.3. *Meaning of liberation*

42cd. *The extinction of the misconception
Of things and non-things is called nirvana.*

Having refuted the assertions of the lower schools, the last two lines of verse 42 explain how liberation is established by our own Prasangika system. As explained in Gyaltsab's commentary, liberation is when one reaches the state of completely overcoming the misconception of perceiving bit things and non-things as being inherently established.

2.1.2.2.4.3. **Difference between wrong and right views**

The difference between right and wrong views is established in the next two verses.

43. *In brief the view of nihilism
Is that effects of actions do not exist.
Without merit and leading to a bad state,
It is regarded as a "wrong view."*

Firstly the Prasangika present their qualm, saying: 'If you assert that if liberation lacks inherent establishment, then liberation could not exist, that is not possible.' What is implied here is that according to the lower systems, the Prasangika view of the lack of inherent existence is a nihilistic view. In response to that, the Prasangika state: 'The view of the lack of inherent existence is not nihilism. If you deny the cause and effect relationship of karma, the four noble truths, and the existence of the three jewels, then that is what I would call a nihilistic view'.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary further explains that if one were to adhere to a view that karma and its effects do not actually exist, then one is actually creating a non-meritorious karmic cause. As a result, one would then be reborn into the lower realms. Such a being is then called 'a being of a lower realm.'

According to the sutras, adhering to views such as the non-existence of the four noble truths, the three jewels and so forth is holding on to the wrong view of nihilism. It is good to understand these points, which establish what a wrong view is. It is clearly explained that holding on to a view that denies the relevance of the four noble truths, the three jewels and karma is considered to be a wrong view. It is also clearly explained that denying the existence of the cause and effect sequence of karma is what creates the non-meritorious karma that is the cause to be re-born in the lower realms. So, according to the teachings, holding that the four noble truths and so forth are non-existent is a dangerous view to have.

Having explained that adhering to the view of nihilism is adhering to a wrong view, the next verse explains the right view:

44. *In brief the view of existence
Is that effects of actions exist.
Meritorious and conducive to happy
transmigrations
It is regarded as a "right view."*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains that *in brief*, refers to adhering to a view that establishes the existence of karma and its effects, which is considered as the right view. His commentary further explains that adhering to the view that establishes the cause and effect sequence, such that positive causes bring about positive results, and negative causes bring about negative results, creates meritorious or virtuous karma. The result of having created such karma is to be reborn in the higher realms. Therefore holding to such views is, as explained in the sutras, adhering to the right view.

Here the commentary is reiterating the main point, which is that the cause and effect sequence of karma does actually exist; it exists conventionally but not inherently. So it is presenting here the distinction between wrong view and the right view.

2.1.2.2.4.4. Liberation as the extinction of the conception of true existence even during the nirvana with remainder

45. *Because existence and non-existence are extinguished by wisdom,
There is a passage beyond meritorious and ill deeds.
This, say the excellent, is liberation from
Bad transmigrations and happy transmigrations.*

Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary that not only in nirvana without remainder is there the lack of a conception of true existence, but even in nirvana with remainder, there is also this distinction between the right and wrong view of the conception of true existence.

The verse is establishing that in both states of nirvana, (with remainder and without remainder), there is a lack of the perception of true existence, i.e. the view that things exist inherently is completely extinguished. As Gyaltsab's commentary further explains, it is by extinguishing this view through wisdom that one gets to the *passage beyond meritorious and ill-deeds*. This means that nirvana is the state where one has moved beyond creating the karma to be re-born again. This is in accordance with the literal implication of the word 'liberation', which is *shi-wa* in Tibetan. This has a connotation of being peaceful, as it is a state of not having to take rebirth again in subsequent lifetimes.

What is being established is that as long as there a conception of true existence in state of nirvana with remainder, then that will be the cause to be re-born again in the cyclic existence. Reaching the state of liberation where one has completely extinguished the very root of one's rebirth, which is the conception of true existence, means that an arhat does not have to be re-born again into cyclic existence.

As it is quite easy to relate to the meaning of the verses, I tend to go through them quickly now. The Vaibhashika system asserts that nirvana with remainder and without remainder are differentiated by the extinction of the aggregates. The more profound Prasangika point of view is that both liberation with remainder and liberation without remainder is a complete cessation of rebirth all together.

It would be good to familiarise yourselves with the text in preparation for the classes. If one pays some attention whilst reading the text, and really tries to think about its meaning, then that is actually a very good meditation, which will bring an immediate sense of joy. So as well as bringing a long-term benefit, there is definitely a temporary benefit as well.

Normally we refer to the blessings of the Dharma, which are none other than the joy that one feels when one reads a text and gains some understanding from it. We cannot establish any other blessing than that. The real blessing is when the misconceptions and confusions in the mind begin to reduce, and one gains a little bit more understanding. Then the confusion and distortion in the mind is replaced by some understanding and wisdom. That is the real blessing.

This transformation of the mind is reflected in the literal meaning of *jin-lab*, which is translated in English as 'blessing'. In Tibetan *jin-lab* carries the connotation of that which is established and transformed, which refers to establishing the right views that remove the wrong views, and thus transforming one's ignorant mind into that of wisdom and understanding. The word *jin* has the

connotation of to establish or to give, and it refers to implanting a very good potential in the mind. The word *lab* has the connotation of transforming a negative state into to a positive state.

I don't think that we have an actual English word for *jin-lab* other than 'blessing'. I think that sometimes translators may not be able to find a direct equivalent of the literal meaning of words and so they use a word with similar, but not equivalent meaning. That is not to say it is wrong, but it doesn't convey the literal meaning of the words.

Of course, when we study we bring to light a deeper meaning of the words and thus a gain a deeper understanding. That is how one actually gains an extra understanding of the text. The English words may not convey the deeper connotation of the text. For example, I have heard that the Tibetan word *ngye-jung* is normally translated as renunciation, which has the connotation of giving up everything, and that you should not possess anything. But that fails to reflect the actual connotation of the Tibetan word *ngye-jung*. No wonder people sometimes get frightened and feel hesitant about developing renunciation.

The main thing is to do some self-investigation as well as study. If one can understand some of the Tibetan words and their meaning, then that will give a bit more flavour to the teachings. Otherwise one might miss out a bit.

Translators have different opinions about this problem. Apparently the prominent translator Alexander Berzin presents a more literal explanation of the connotations of the Tibetan words. Jampa Ignen commented either to me personally, or maybe I heard the comment, that he was finding some fault with Jeffrey Hopkins' translations. I made the passing remark 'I don't know if Jampa Ignen is really qualified to oppose Jeffrey Hopkins!' My understanding is that Jeffrey Hopkins uses words that are more of a direct literal equivalent to the Tibetan words. These can sometimes be a bit obscure, and hard to understand.

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