
Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷན་པོའི་བཀའ་སློབ་ཀྱི་རྒྱུ་རྐྱེན་ལྷན་པོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

1 June 2010

Along the lines of the motivation prayer we have just recited, we will do the meditation. (*Meditation*)

As we usually do, we also generate the appropriate motivation for receiving the teachings. Our motivation is very important and is definitely not to be taken lightly, and the very act of generating a motivation serves the purpose of subduing the mind. When we generate a motivation such as, 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment; for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice', we try to ensure that it actually serves the purpose of helping to overcome negativity in our mind. When we generate this motivation appropriately, it actually serves as an antidote to the self-cherishing mind within ourselves.

As we have learnt, self-cherishing is really the root cause of all of our problems and is an obstacle for generating bodhichitta within our mind. Thus generating an altruistic motivation of bodhichitta serves as an antidote for overcoming the self-cherishing mind. Adopting that motivation for practising Dharma is a very appropriate way of applying the techniques to subdue one's mind. Every part of our practice then becomes very meaningful, and in that way we can slowly improve our mind.

We need to analyse the state of our own mind, really looking into what kind of attitudes we have; essentially to check whether we have a strong self-cherishing mind or not. In a normal state of mind we may feel that we are quite okay, thinking, 'As far as I'm concerned, things are fine, I don't have any faults, it is really others who cause me problems and difficulties'. That is the fault of not thoroughly analysing our mind. If we were to spend time in analysing the state of our mind, we would begin to detect the faults within ourselves, which is really important.

It is good to reflect upon the very personal instruction that Atisha gives us. He said, 'When one is alone, check the state of one's own mind, and when with others, check one's speech'. This is very sound advice, as it helps us to maintain our composure at all times.

When one engages in the practice of investigating one's state of mind along the lines of Atisha's advice, then that very process of investigating one's own state of mind by focussing inward, and not allowing the mind to become distracted, is a form of meditation. It will give a sense of fulfilment and joy. Thus when one is alone one will not have to experience the suffering of loneliness, as one will actually be quite contented and happy to engage in that practice. To that extent, this practice definitely has great benefit for oneself.

The second part of Atisha's advice refers to checking one's speech when one is with others. We will have noticed that on many occasions when we are involved in casual conversation and gossip with others, we often say hurtful things, that disturb others and lead to conflict and so forth.

A lot of useless, hurtful and damaging speech occurs when we are not careful.

Using these methods and techniques in our daily lives is an essential tool to bring about more clarity in our mind. Restoring and ensuring such clarity, as well as a more peaceful and joyous state of mind, will ultimately lead to a more virtuous state of mind. In this way, our own characteristic ways of thinking become a source of encouragement as we pursue the path of accumulating virtue. So it is beneficial in that way. In particular, the technique of looking within and investigating one's own mind as a form of meditation, is a way to bring back a sense of joy, particularly when we feel weighed down and disturbed.

It is of course normal to feel a bit down or disturbed at times, as that is part of our samsaric existence. However, if we allow ourselves to remain in a disturbed state and allow that situation to escalate, then it becomes more difficult to handle the situation. It is when we notice that we have a disturbed or unhappy state of mind, that we need to take the initiative to engage in the practice of analysing why that is so, to check our attitudes, and then try to cultivate a positive state of mind.

The most supreme meditation is that which helps to cultivate love and compassion in one's heart. Our motivation at the beginning of our practice is the very important method for further cultivating love and compassion within our minds. As I mention regularly, love and compassion are the very essence of our practice. When we work at developing love and compassion, we don't miss out on anything, as we are incorporating the very essence of the Mahayana teachings into our practice. If our love and compassion decreases, then our Mahayana practice has also decreased, and if love and compassion increases then our Mahayana practice will increase as well. That is really important to understand.

Love and compassion, particularly love, are cherished by everyone, regardless of whether they are religious or not. Love is something that everyone appreciates and values, thus it is not restricted to any religious belief. For example, if there have been some bad feelings or conflict with your relations, and later on one of them continues to display some concern and kindness towards us, then at a certain point our whole attitude will turn around. We will really appreciate that person, because they have extended their love towards us, regardless of previous conflicts or behaviours or mistakes. That shows us the value of love. We really appreciate anyone who shows us genuine concern and love. So we can think along these lines about why love is considered very valuable, which everyone recognises.

We need to ensure that we listen to the teachings and study the text because we know that they are a method to help subdue our mind. Otherwise they don't really serve any great purpose. If we listen to the teachings and study the text, but retain negative and selfish attitudes, then listening to the teachings will not have served its purpose. As explained in *Precious Garland*, by listening to the teachings one gains the profound advice they contain and leaves the positive imprints on the mind. But if we don't actually make an effort to utilise the teachings to change and transform ourselves then, as I mentioned earlier, there isn't really much benefit.

The fact that we don't experience real joy and happiness is because we have an unsubdued mind. As Buddha Shakyamuni said, 'A subdued mind is a happy mind'.

Conversely, an unsubdued mind is an unhappy mind. Buddha Shakyamuni also said, 'One is one's own teacher, and one is one's own protector'. Here he is referring to taking the initiative to apply the teachings in order to transform oneself by subduing one's mind; then one becomes one's own teacher and protector. This particular point of the Buddha's teaching is that one's happiness and sadness is dependent on the state of one's mind. It is crucial that we understand how our own happiness or misery is dependent on the state of our own minds. When we recognise that, we have found the crux of our problem.

What I'm relating to you now is in accordance with the advice in *Precious Garland*. At the beginning of the text it explains that we need to practise the Dharma in order gain temporary as well as ultimate benefits. In fact, the whole text is a presentation on how to solve our immediate problems by practising morality, which also brings about a happy rebirth in the future. The ultimate benefit is to obtain liberation and enlightenment.

With respect to the temporary benefits of Dharma practice, when we examine our state of mind now, we will be able to detect that many of our problems and negative states of mind are dependent on the particular attitude that we adopt at that time. When we make an effort to change an attitude by analysing our mind and meditating, then we will gain a temporary relief. However, even though there is that temporary benefit from our practice, when we resume our normal daily life activities, we are again affected by negative states of mind, emotions and tainted attitudes. Once again we experience a sense of unhappiness or sorrow. If we wonder, 'Why is that so? Why am I constantly affected by these negative attitudes, worries and problems?', then we need to remember the explanation presented in the teachings, which is that the root cause of our problems is the conception or grasping to the 'I', which comes from the imprints of previous lives.

That root problem can only be overcome by gaining the realisation of emptiness, which serves as a direct antidote for overcoming the misconceptions we hold within ourselves — which is the conception or grasping of 'I'. When we relate to the teachings in that way, we begin to gain a better understanding of our own situation. We will also gain a profound appreciation for the teachings on emptiness, and how crucial it is to gain the realisation of emptiness. We might think that the wisdom realising emptiness is a bit beyond us right now, and that we may not be able to attain it immediately. However what is worth acknowledging is the fact that we definitely gain a strong imprint of emptiness in our mind. Hearing about emptiness now, and making an effort to study emptiness, will definitely implant a very profound and positive imprint on our mind, which serves as a condition to actually gain the wisdom realising emptiness. For that reason we must recognise and appreciate the value of the teachings.

We need to try to approach the more profound aspects of the teachings by first of all relating to the obvious and practical way in which the teachings reflect our own experience. Once we see the benefits of the teachings at a practical and obvious level, we will be able to approach the more subtle aspects of the benefits of the teachings, which can be obtained with further practice.

The same valid being who shows us how to gain temporary benefit also explains the more long-term and subtle benefits of the teaching. The supreme teacher would not give a false presentation. Therefore if we can relate to and accept his

advice on the temporary benefits, there is no reason why his teaching on the ultimate benefits would not be true as well. Thus by recognising the immediate obvious benefits that we gain, we will be able to understand and accept the benefits of the more subtle and obscure levels. For example the law of karma is that positive actions bring about positive results in the future, and that negative actions will bring about negative results. At the more subtle levels, this is quite obscure and difficult for us to understand right now. The workings of the cause and effect sequences of karma are said to be hidden phenomena, which is why it is more obscure and difficult to understand now. However based on some experience that we have now, and through the use of sound reasoning we can accept that karma also works on more subtle levels. That is how we develop our understanding and faith in karma.

It seems like we have side-tracked a bit, however with the positive motivation explained earlier, we will cover the next few headings in the text.

2.1.2.3 ALL PHENOMENA AS FREE OF THE EXTREMES OF PERMANENCE AND ANNIHILATION

This is sub-divided into four:

2.1.2.3.1. Extensive exposition

2.1.2.3.2. Absence of the fallacy of thereby falling to the view of annihilation

2.1.2.3.3. Freedom from extremes as an uncommon feature of Buddhism

2.1.2.3.4. Refuting inherently existent things

2.1.2.3.1. Extensive exposition

This is further sub-divided into four:

2.1.2.3.1.1. Refuting inherently existent cause and effect

2.1.2.3.1.2. Avoiding contradiction with what is renowned in the world

2.1.2.3.1.3. Liberation through realising the meaning of non-duality

2.1.2.3.1.4. Illustrative example

2.1.2.3.1.1. Refuting inherently existent cause and effect

This heading has two sub-divisions:

2.1.2.3.1.1.1. Cause and effect as free of the extremes of existence and non-existence

2.1.2.3.1.1.2. Refuting inherently existent cause and effect

2.1.2.3.1.1.1. Cause and effect as free of the extremes of existence and non-existence

Here the root text states:

46. Seeing production as caused

One passes beyond non-existence.

Seeing cessation as caused

One also does not assert existence.

To understand this, one needs to first of all understand the views of the different Buddhist schools. The Svatantrika-Madhyamaka, Chittamatra, the Sautrantika and the Vaibhashika schools all assert inherent existence. It is only the highest Prasangika-Madhyamaka school that completely denies the inherent existence of all phenomena. As explained in earlier teachings, the reason why the schools below the Prasangika-Madhyamaka assert inherent existence is because they say that when you do a thorough analysis and search within any phenomena, you will always find something existing from the side of the object. Whereas according to the Prasangika, when you analyse and thoroughly search any phenomena, ultimately you cannot find an inherent existence.

According to the Prasangika-Middle Way school, all existence is thus merely imputed by conception. Whatever object it may be, there is no inherent existence from the side of the object, therefore all phenomena are merely imputed by conception. Whereas the lower Buddhist schools such as the Svatantrika-Middle Way school assert that the mode of existence is a combination of an inherent existence from the side of the object as well as the imputation from the side of the conception. So for Svatantrika-Madhyamaka phenomena exist through the mode of that combination.

To put it in another way, the Prasangika assert that things cannot exist from the side of the basis of imputation. Whereas according to the lower schools, if something did not exist from the side of the basis of imputation, then it couldn't possibly exist at all. They say that to deny inherent existence would completely annihilate the actual existence of that thing. So, this is the profound difference between the Prasangika school and the lower Buddhist schools.

These are points for discussion, where you can clarify the distinction between the Prasangika assertions of reality and those of the lower Buddhist Schools. What is the distinction? How are they different? Why do the differences occur? These questions and their answers need to be clearly understood, based on that understanding the rest of the explanation in the text will become much clearer.

In its explanation of verse 46, Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains that according to our Prasangika system, samsara definitely does have causes and effects. This presentation refutes the argument by the lower schools that if you assert the lack of inherent existence of phenomena that would completely annihilate the cause and effect of samsara, and thus samsara couldn't exist.

In response to that, the Prasangika say that it is not the case that cyclic existence lacks causes and effects. That is because the fact that suffering is produced by the conception of a self can easily be validated. So in this way the cause and effect of samsara is established. However, the cause and effect of samsara is not established inherently, because the cessation of samsara is achieved by realising the path.

More specifically, the cause and effect of samsara cannot be inherently established, because the cessation of suffering is achieved by the truth of the path, which can be validated. This explains why both samsara and nirvana (or liberation) lack inherent existence. If samsara and its causes were to be inherently established, then one could not produce the other. The main point is that if samsara were to be inherently established, then it would not depend on any causes and conditions. Likewise if liberation were to be inherently established, then it would not depend on any causes and conditions.

What is being established here is that as samsara is dependent on the cause of the conception of the self, it cannot be inherently established. Likewise, as liberation is dependent on the cause of the realisation of the truth of the path, it too cannot be inherently established. That is because if something were to be inherently established, then it could not arise as a result of a cause. As there are causes and conditions for both samsara and liberation, neither can be inherently established.

The presentation of the outline, *cause and effect as free of the extremes of existence and non-existence*, is clearly explained in the verse itself, and do not require too much further explanation. The first two lines, *Seeing production as caused, One passes beyond non-existence*, refers to removing the

extreme of non-existence. While *Seeing cessation as caused One also does not assert existence*, refers to being free from the extreme of permanent existence.

So the verse clearly explains freedom from the extremes of both non-existence and permanent existence.

2.1.2.3.1.1.2. Refuting inherently existent cause and effect

The root text states:

*47. Previously produced and simultaneously produced
[causes]*

*Are non-causes; [thus] there are no causes in fact,
Because [such] production is not confirmed at all
As [existing,] conventionally or in reality.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains that there is no inherently established cause, and goes on to explain the reason for that. Why is there is no inherently established cause?

Students: No response

When I pose a question, it is good to speak up if you know the answer. Some may be pompous and think, 'Well, I know the answer but I don't really need to reply', but it is good to answer if you can. Sometimes someone may ask a question when they already know the answer, in order to assess the understanding of another. There have been instances where someone asks a question of another geshe, and then in response to the answer, they reply 'yes, I know that'. To that the geshe responds, 'Well why did you ask that question if you already know the answer?' However, in general, if someone asks a question then it is good to share one's knowledge.

Others have talked about the video where Tenzing Palmo asks His Holiness some questions. Half way through His Holiness' answer she says, 'I know, I know!' [*Geshe-la laughs*]. That is an indication that she may have already gained the answer at that point, but she interrupts half way through saying, 'I know the answer'. Some people have indicated that this is discourteous.

In explaining the meaning of verse 47, Gyaltsab Je states in his commentary that as there cannot be an inherently established cause, there cannot be a cause and effect that are produced simultaneously, and nor can there be a cause and an effect that is produced at a later stage. So there is no instance where there is an effect that is inherently established.

The verse refers to the fact that there cannot be an effect that was *previously produced* by a cause or *simultaneously produced* at the time of the cause. The main point being explained here is that there cannot be an inherently established cause, because there is no inherently established effect. The reason why there is no inherently established effect is because an inherently existing effect is not confirmed either conventionally or ultimately. Thus, there is no valid cognition that can establish the inherent existence of effects. Neither a conventional valid perception, nor a perception that sees the ultimate, can establish the inherent existence of effects. Because of the fact that no valid conventional or ultimate perception can establish inherent effects, therefore an inherently existing effect cannot exist.

2.1.2.3.1.2. Avoiding contradiction with what is renowned in the world

This outline refutes the assertion that the lack of inherent existence goes against worldly conventions. The relevant verses from the root text are:

48. *When this is, that arises,
Like short when there is long.
Due to the production of this, that is produced,
Like light from the production of a flame.*

49. *When there is long, there is short.
They do not exist through their own nature,
Just as due to the non-production
Of a flame, light also does not arise.*

The objection raised by the lower Buddhist schools is that if you assert the lack of inherent establishment of causes and effects, then that would be contrary to worldly convention. In other words, the world accepts the convention of causes and effects. Due to causes such as planting a seed, an effect will arise, which is the sprouting of a plant. These causes and effects are something that everyone accepts. So, the lower Buddhist schools object to the Prasangika point of view regarding the lack of an inherent establishment of cause and effect, saying 'That goes against worldly convention'. The Prasangika reply, 'That is not so'.

The Prasangika system doesn't reject worldly convention; they say that worldly conventions establish that cause and effect do exist at a nominal or conventional level, however they do not exist from their own side. These conventions as to how things function and work occur without any in-depth analysis. It is also explained in the teachings that Chandrakirti established that while the presentation of the lack of inherent existence doesn't contradict normal convention, it is nevertheless a unique presentation, where, through thorough analysis, one comes to understand that what is conventionally established also lacks true or inherent existence. That is the unique quality of the Prasangika presentation.

Not contrary to normal convention

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains, our system is not contrary to normal convention. However that which is presented in accordance with normal convention (the cause and effect sequence for example) is free from inherent establishment. Furthermore, when the verse states, *when this is, that arises*, then that relates to compositional karma arising from ignorance. The second line of verse 48, *like short when there is long* refers to the normal convention that shortness is always established in relation to something longer. You cannot establish something as being short if there is nothing longer than it. In other words, short is established in relation to long.

Due to the production of this, that is produced relates to compositional karma being produced as a result of the production of ignorance. The example used is *like light from the production of a flame*. Rays of light cannot be produced without a flame, thus light is related to the flame and can only be established in relation to the flame. This cause and effect relationship is accepted by worldly convention.

Gyaltsab Je further explains in his commentary that due to ignorance there is compositional karma. This is presenting the interdependent origination of cyclic existence. The presentation of interdependent origination, (for example, ignorance and its result of compositional karma) is also a presentation of the lack of inherent existence. Therefore, in this presentation, all phenomena are established as originating interdependently and thus lacking inherent existence (i.e. existing from its own side and not depending on causes and conditions).

Interdependent origination of phenomena

In order to further establish the interdependent origination of phenomena and thus the lack of inherent existence, verse 49 gives examples. *When there is long, there is short* means that *short* cannot be established inherently, as it always depends on *long*. Thus *they do not exist through their own nature*. The second analogy is *just as due to the non-production of a flame, light also does not arise*. If a flame is not produced, then light cannot arise, and there cannot be any illumination. So the illumination of light is dependent on the flame of a butter lamp. Thus both *short* and *light* have arisen interdependently, but not independently and inherently by themselves.

The main point to be understood is the lack of inherent existence in relation to cause and effect. Causes and effects do exist, but not inherently. They exist interdependently due to the effects arising from causes. The very fact that cause and effect depend on each other, proves that they are not established inherently. Likewise the lack of permanent existence is illustrated in the example of light coming from a flame; light cannot exist permanently, as it has to exist in dependence on the flame. So, that interdependent connection negates the extreme of permanent existence as well.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*