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# 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

6 July 2010

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With a good motivation we can engage in the practice of meditation. Maybe you could make a roster so that those of you who feel comfortable in doing so can take it in turns to lead the prayers. This is a good way to train for someone to lead when the usual chant leader is not around.

As I regularly mention, when one goes to a puja (for example a Guru Puja or a Tara Puja) one should go with the intention of learning how to lead it as well. In this way one can be ready in the event that one needs to lead a puja or even to do the practice oneself. In the past I asked Thubten Donyo to teach you the rituals and mudras of the Guru Puja. Also, during a visit to India I took a group to learn how to do the fire puja mandala drawing, which some of you, like Wayne, would know. It is good to retain that knowledge. I indicated then that when I returned I would test you, and to that effect you have studied and practised it.

Also, I have on many occasions taught you how to conduct the Tara Puja, including the chanting, and how to lay out the offerings as well as how to do the mudras. Likewise with the Guru Puja, I have taught you how to conduct the tsog offering, and how to receive the preta offerings and so forth, down to when and how to offer the tea. Also with the nyung nye retreat, on two occasions I had taught how to set up the altar, lay out offerings, and the practices and mudras of the nyung nye, as well how to visualise the six deities.

When we did practices for Lama Zopa Rinpoche's long life, which included the eight Mahayana precepts, I taught you what the eight Mahayana precepts entail, the motivation that we need to generate and how to take them.

The way I taught these practices was not just by pointing them out to you, but rather by doing the practice together with you. So I have taught them on a level that would be an experiential transmission. It will be good for those who learnt it at that time to continue with the practice, so that you do not forget what you have learnt and so that you can also pass on that knowledge. What I am also implying is that because I have already taught you these practices many times before, I am not really inclined to go over them again now.

In relation to the lam rim meditation, I taught you on quite a few occasions how to combine the *Jor-cho* practice with visualising the stages of the path.

The main point here is that you need to actually use what you have been taught for your practice. In relation to the meditation practice that we are about to do, it is important to really try to implement the meaning of the words, by incorporating it into your practice. Try to really

think about how to generate love and compassion within oneself, rather than thinking about how others need to practice love and compassion. There is an expression in Tibetan [and indeed in English] that one should not engage in practices as if one is blowing a horn, i.e. the mouth of a trumpet faces outwards and thus the sound travels outward. With practices, however, one should focus them inward rather than outwards, which means applying the practice to oneself.

So in this case, the manner of meditating on love and compassion is to generate it within one's own mind. Love and compassion is one of those objects of meditation where one actually generates it within one's own mind, in contrast to other meditation practices where one focuses on a separate object. These are also points that I have previously mentioned.

Personally, I regularly check my own mannerisms and thoughts, and if there is any danger, I remind myself, 'Geshe Doga, be careful, be careful'. This is actually an essential instruction. If there is any danger of lapsing from virtue and engaging in negativity, then the warning bells should ring, and you should say to yourself, 'Be careful, be careful, there is danger of falling into negativity'.

By practising in that way one can become more alert, which will help to prevent you from engaging in negativity and danger. Whereas when you engage in virtue, then just as you would pat someone on the back, or stroke a cat, you can pat oneself thinking, 'OK, I have done some good, I have done well today', and in this way encourage yourself in the practice. This is the way to take personal responsibility in one's practice.

Even though I can't claim that I am very good at it, I do try my utmost to use whatever knowledge I gain from the Dharma to subdue my mind. In whatever way I can, I make a serious attempt to subdue my mind; this seems to help me on a personal level.

The ultimate reason for the Buddha's teachings is to provide us with the means to combat the delusions and subdue the mind. The Buddha didn't give the teachings merely to display his knowledge and show off what he knew. The renowned Kadampa masters of the past, such as Geshe Potowa, mentioned very clearly that the teachings have served their purpose when they become a means to subdue the mind.

Along those lines, one needs to really contemplate every aspect of the teachings as the means to overcome, or at least minimise, attachment and anger within oneself; this is the key to subduing one's mind. It is not as if we can leave anger and attachment on one side while we try to practice on the other. It will not be very beneficial if we engage in some formal practice leaving attachment and anger as they are without making any attempt to overcome them.

Rather, the practice we do needs to become the antidote to overcome the negative states of mind within oneself. In that way it serves its purpose, because it transforms one's own mind. If we try to subdue someone else's mind and find that it doesn't work, that is because the practice needs to be done on a personal level first. We need to

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focus on subduing our own mind, and then we will have the means to benefit others.

Some older students have been very honest, and confided in me that after many years of studying and trying to engage in practice, they are finally getting some sense of what refuge really means. This shows that it takes time, many years even, to really understand and implement it in one's life. It is also an indication that real understanding comes slowly. We may assume that we have understood something, but until we see the transformation taking place in our own mind, we have not really incorporated the practice into our life. However if we do pay attention, and put some effort into thinking constantly about how the practice should serve to transform ourselves, then we will slowly begin to notice that there is definitely some real taste of the Dharma.

When we begin to see how the Buddha's teachings are the means to really transform oneself and develop a positive mind, and how that transformation is beginning to take place within ourselves, then we will gain a true sense of how the Buddha gave the teachings out of sheer love and compassion for ourselves and all other sentient beings. Compelled by love and compassion the Buddha gave the teachings for no other reason than to benefit oneself and other sentient beings. When we develop that understanding then we will have a genuine faith in the Buddha.

We cannot fake faith in the Buddha; rather, real faith arises when one sees that the intention behind the Buddha's teachings is to benefit others. When we understand the Buddha's love and compassion, then we will see the great value of love and compassion and the need to generate it within ourselves.

The point is that when we understand how the Buddha gave the teachings out of love and compassion, then we can see that his only intention was to benefit others.

By identifying with the Buddha's love and compassion in imparting his valuable instructions, we will be able to see how wonderful it would be if, out of sheer love and compassion, we could also impart whatever knowledge or wisdom we have for the sake of benefiting others; to do so without any sense of self-cherishing attitude or self-interest would be a wondrous act indeed. *[pause for meditation]*

In order to receive the teachings one generates the following motivation, 'For the benefit of all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So, for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well', just as has been indicated earlier.

#### *2.1.2.3.3. Freedom from extremes as an uncommon feature of Buddhism*

In his teachings His Holiness the Dalai Lama emphasises the unique feature of Buddha's teaching, which is that it is free from both extremes.

*61. Ask the Samkhyas, the followers of Kanada,  
Nirgranthas,  
And the worldly proponents of a person and  
aggregates,  
Whether they propound  
What passes beyond "is" and "is not".*

*62. Thereby know that the ambrosia  
Of the Buddha's teaching is called profound,  
An exclusive doctrine passing  
Far beyond "is" and "is not".*

In his commentary, Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of the second verse first. *The ambrosia of Buddha's teaching* that leads to the infinite state of enlightenment is the *doctrine* that is free from all mental fabrication, and free from all extremes. It is important to understand this uncommon feature of the Buddha's doctrine. In brief, the unique feature of the Buddha's doctrine that it is free from the extremes of both externalism and nihilism, in other words free from duality.

The essence of this verse is that the path that leads to liberation, the state of ambrosia (which implies a state of infinite bliss and happiness), is the middle way, which is free from duality or both extremes. This indicates that without relying on the middle way path, free from both extremes, there is no possibility of achieving the state of liberation. This middle way path that is free from both extremes is the unique path of the Buddha's teachings. Furthermore, as the commentary explains, there is no other unique Dharma apart from this middle way path.

Turning now to verse 61, most proponents within our own Buddhist system, as well as other non-Buddhist systems, assert either a substantially existent person, or substantially existent aggregates. Thus the whole world, the environment and all beings, are asserted with the fabrication of being substantially existent.

Those who don't assert a view that is free from mental fabrication, a view of the ultimate reality of phenomena, include the non-Buddhist Samkhyas, who are also known as the Kapilas as they follow a sage called Kapila. The Samkhyas assert that all objects of knowledge can be enumerated in 25 categories of phenomena. In the past I have also presented the views of the Samkhyas and the 25 categories of knowledge according to their system.<sup>1</sup>

Another group of non-Buddhist proponents are the Vaisheshikas who are also known as Baby Owls. This refers to the fact that they followed a seer who worshipped an owl as a manifestation of the Indian god Shiva (which is a false perception). In any case it is important not to confuse the Vaisheshikas with the Buddhist proponents called the Vaibhashikas.

The Vaisheshikas, also known as Particularists, are followers of the sage Kanada, who asserted that all objects of knowledge fall into six categories. We covered these six categories of knowledge when we studied *Four Hundred Verses*.<sup>2</sup>

Another group of non-Buddhist proponents are the Nirgranthas, also known as the Jains. The literal translation of the Tibetan word for the Jains is 'naked ones'. Following a conference with the Jains His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that their views are actually quite profound. The Samkhyas are also known as having quite profound views. However, as Gyaltsab Je's commentary states, if you were to ask proponents of these systems

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically on 31 May 2005, and also 31 May 2004. See also *Cutting through Appearances*, pp. 158-167.

<sup>2</sup> See 17 July 2007.

whether phenomena are free from the extremes of existence or non-existence, none of them will be able to correctly explain how phenomena are actually free from both extremes.

As the root text explains,

61. *Ask the Samkhyas, the followers of Kanada,  
Nirgranthas,  
And the worldly proponents of a person and  
aggregates,  
Whether they propound  
What passes beyond "is" and "is not".*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary further explains that these non-Buddhist schools, as well as some who claim to be proponents of the Middle Way, but adhere to the view that things are neither existent nor non-existent. This view was also explained in the Mahamudra teachings. In particular, some followers of Drukpa-Kagyü assert this view of neither existence nor non-existence. If you were to ask them, 'do things exist?' they would say that things are not existent, and if you were to say then, 'Well then, are things non-existent?' they would say they are not non-existent either. These views, which we have discussed in the past, fall short of the view of non-duality—the view that is free from both extremes.

Thus, by abandoning such views one comes to the point of understanding the view of non-duality, which is that while things lack inherent existence they do not lack conventional existence. As the commentary explains, in our (Prasangika) system one needs to definitely accept the existence of both samsara and nirvana, thus one must become knowledgeable in the two essentials: 1) gaining the understanding that while all phenomena lack inherent existence they are yet able to perform the functions of causes and effects, and 2) without gaining the wisdom that realises emptiness, it is not possible to obtain liberation. Thus the view of non-duality is the unique view of the Buddha's doctrine, which leads to liberation.

#### 2.1.2.3.4. Refuting inherently existent things

This is subdivided into four:

2.1.2.3.4.1. Refuting inherently existent going and coming

2.1.2.3.4.2. Refuting inherently existent production, staying, and disintegration as characteristics of products

2.1.2.3.4.3. Tangentially refuting the assertions of non-Buddhists

2.1.2.3.4.4. Refuting inherently existent moments

#### 2.1.2.3.4.1. Refuting inherently existent going and coming

This presentation is similar to that of the *Four Hundred Verses*, which I have covered in the past.<sup>3</sup>

It might seem that we are just endlessly repeating different ways of refuting inherent existence. However this is because we need to eliminate the doubt of any possibility of inherent existence. One needs to understand how things would exist if they were to exist inherently. When one is able to fully comprehend the absurdity of things existing inherently, then refuting inherent existence will be easier to grasp.

*The definition of a Middle Way school is a Buddhist Mahayana proponent who does not assert true existence even nominally.* There are two Middle Way schools i.e. the Prasangika or Consequentialist Middle Way school and the Svatantrika or Inference-Validator Middle Way school. Neither of these schools accept true existence, so what is essential to understand here, as I have clarified many times before, is the difference between the two.

According to the Prasangika, 'inherent existence', 'true existence', 'independent existence' and 'existing by way of its own characteristic', all mean the same thing. Thus, they assert that all phenomena equally lack inherent existence, true existence, as well as independent existence and phenomena do not exist by way of their own characteristics. Whereas according to the Svatantrika, while things lack true existence they do. However, assert that things do exist inherently, and exist by way of their own characteristics. It is good to gain a clear understanding of this distinction.

If one can reflect upon that distinction in relation to the meaning of these verses then one will gain a greater understanding. If I were to ask you, 'What is the difference between the Svatantrika Middle Way school and the Prasangika Middle Way school?', then you should be able to readily answer that question.

The verse relating to this is:

63. *How could the world exist in fact,  
With a nature passed beyond the three times,  
Not going when disintegrating, not coming,  
And not staying even for an instant?*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains this with a syllogism:

Take the subject 'worldly existence': it cannot exist ultimately, because if it were to exist ultimately then it would have to exist ultimately in either of the three times.

There is also the implication that it would have to exist in the three times permanently. The syllogism is pointing out that if something were to exist then there is no other way for it to exist other than in one of the three times, either in the past, the present or in the future. So the reason why things lack inherent existence is because if they did exist inherently then they would have to exist inherently in any of the three times.

Further on in his commentary, Gyaltsab Je adds to the reason why they do not ultimately exist: When things disintegrate, they don't go anywhere, when they are produced they are not produced from anywhere, and when they stay or remain they do not remain even for a second (as inherent existents). Thus things cannot be found to exist inherently in any of the three times. The commentary explains that the word 'how' in the verse carries the implication that while things do not exist inherently, they nevertheless do exist nominally. Thus the full implication is that while all things in worldly existence could not exist inherently in any one of the three times, their nominal or conventional existence can not be denied.

The next verse is also relevant to this outline:

64. *Because the coming, going, and staying  
Of the world and nirvana do not exist  
As (their own) reality, what difference  
Is there in fact between the two?*

<sup>3</sup> See 18 September 2007 and 25 September 2007.

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Gyaltsab Je's explanation is actually very close to the actual words of the verse itself. Having presented all phenomena in the worldly existence as lacking inherent existence in either of three times, the doubt may arise that maybe the phenomena in nirvana actually exist inherently. In response to that this verse states that all things in the *world* (worldly existence) as well as in *nirvana* equally lack any inherent existence. The rhetorical question '*what difference is there...between the two?*' implies that there is no difference whatsoever. The reason, as Gyaltsab explains, is because both equally lack inherent existence in the *coming, going and staying*. This is referring to the fact that all phenomena equally lack inherent existence in every instance of the three times—the past, present and future.

#### **2.1.2.3.4.2. Refuting inherently existent production, staying, and disintegration as characteristics of products**

As has been explained previously to the older students, but to refresh your memory and to help the newer students, all products equally have the characteristic that its existence is based upon its production, remaining and disintegration. All products have these characteristics in common—that they are produced, they remain and then disintegrate.

Here we need to understand that while something may seem to remain for a long time, it actually remains only momentarily, which is the characteristic of impermanence. How do we resolve this apparent contradiction? We combine the understanding of things remaining with an understanding of its characteristics of impermanence, which is that the very next moment after something is produced it begins to disintegrate. However short it may be, there is a moment just after it is produced where it remains, but in the very next moment it disintegrates. Thus, every product that comes into existence has the characteristic of production, staying and disintegrating.

The point to be understood here is that refuting the inherent existence of products refers to refuting the inherent existence of production, staying and disintegration. The reason why the production of a product lacks inherent existence is because if things were to be produced inherently then they would have to lack causes. The very term 'inherent existence' implies that something exists from its own side without having to depend on anything else. Thus if there were inherent production then that would imply that it does not depend on prior causes and conditions. But because production does have to depend on causes and conditions, it therefore cannot exist inherently.

Just as production lacks inherent existence because it depends on earlier causes and conditions, staying also lacks inherent existence because for anything to remain it has to depend on production; without being produced it could not stay, thus staying or remaining is dependent on production. Likewise for anything to disintegrate it has to depend on the characteristic of staying. There cannot be disintegration of something which has not stayed or remained earlier. So what is being indicated here is the interdependent-origination nature of products.

As Gyaltsab's commentary explains, production staying and disintegration cannot possibly exist inherently. What is being pointed out here is that as the staying characteristic of a product lacks inherent existence, so too production and disintegration also have to lack inherent existence. The point one needs to understand here is how the lack of inherent existence of production is the emptiness of production, the lack of inherent existence of staying is emptiness of staying, and the lack of inherent existence of disintegration is the emptiness of disintegration. That is how one understands the emptiness in each instance.

#### **2.1.2.3.4.3. Tangentially refuting the assertions of non-Buddhists**

This has two subdivisions:

2.1.2.3.4.3.1. Refuting the Vaisheshikas' assertion of permanent atoms

2.1.2.3.4.3.2. Refuting the Vaishnavas' assertion of a permanent person

These views have also been discussed in the past in some detail, possibly during Fedor's time. So referring back to those teachings and trying to refresh your memory on these points would be beneficial.

What I am trying to say here is that these points have been presented in our teachings on other texts. Now we find that even though it is a different text, these points have come up again. If one has some prior understanding, or even acquaintance, with the earlier explanations, then it becomes easier to relate to what is being presented here. So it is really worthwhile that we acquaint ourselves with this presentation. The Vaisheshikas' assert permanent atoms, which I did explain in quite detail previously, but we will give some explanation in the next session.

Of course I am not trying to boast about what I have presented in the past, but you should be able to see that the details from earlier presentations come up in many different texts. When I mentioned earlier that you should look at your notes, you will realise that you need to keep your notes so that you can refer to them again and again. It is good to remember that earlier presentations do come up in other texts.

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Edited Version*

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