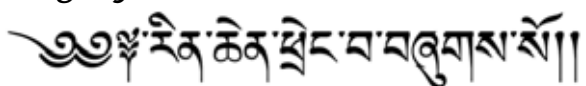

Nagarjuna's Precious Garland



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

10 August 2010

Let us begin with our usual meditation. [meditation]

We can now generate the positive motivation for receiving the teachings. There is no more supreme a motivation than the technique for generating love and compassion in our hearts that we have just meditated on. Thus it is essential that we try to cultivate love and compassion in our everyday lives. The more we familiarise ourselves with love and compassion, the more it becomes part of our nature.

2.1.2.3.4.4.4 Reason for not holding the world as having an end

73cd. *Asked whether the world has an end
The Conqueror remained silent.*

74. *Because he did not teach this profound
doctrine
To worldly beings who were not receptacles,
The All-Knowing is therefore known
By the wise to be omniscient.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains that the verse is referring to the non-inherent existence of both samsara and nirvana. It reads¹:

When some non-Buddhist followers who combine sixty-two wrong views about the non-inherent existence of both samsara and nirvana into fourteen extremes, asked the Buddha if whether there is an end to the self and the world, the conqueror remained silent.

The same lines of this verse are quoted in Chapter 5 of Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses*, where the sixty-two wrong views that are combined into the fourteen extremes are also explained.² These extremes refer to fourteen questions that some non-Buddhists asked the Buddha about whether certain things existed or not. When the Buddha was asked these questions 'the Conqueror remained silent'.

As the commentary continues,

If asked why, then it is because without an excellent basis, it is inappropriate to teach the excellent doctrine.

This can be understood to mean that without a basis one could not possibly talk about the characteristics of the basis. In relation to the questions posed by the non-Buddhists, the bases are inherently established persons and inherently established phenomena. The characteristics are whether persons and phenomena have a beginning or not, and whether they are permanent or impermanent and so forth. Thus, as the very bases of an inherently established self of persons and phenomena do not exist, there was no point in talking about their attributes or characteristics.

The commentary further explains:

Thus by seeing that they were unsuitable vessels for receiving the teaching on selflessness, and that the

aggregates are empty of inherent establishment, the Buddha did not specify a response.

Because the question is whether there is a self of a person or not and whether there is a self of the aggregates or not, the perfect answer would imply teaching the selflessness of persons and phenomena. However, because those asking the questions were not receptive to the teaching on selflessness, the Buddha did not respond to their questions. The verse says, 'he did not teach this profound doctrine to worldly beings who were not receptacles', which means that because they were not ready to receive that teaching, the Buddha remained silent.

Thus, says the commentary:

It is precisely because the Buddha did not teach the profound Dharma to unsuitable vessels by directly and entirely knowing what was appropriate to teach and not to teach, that the intelligent scholars are able to know that the Able One is omniscient. It is not that he lacks the knowledge to teach.

As mentioned here in Gyaltsab Je's commentary, the non-Buddhists used the fact that the Buddha did not respond to these fourteen questions as a reason to claim that the Buddha was not omniscient and all-knowing. They reason that 'the Buddha did not respond to our fourteen questions, because he didn't know the answer and therefore he could not be omniscient'.

However Buddhist scholars use that very same reason to prove that the Buddha is omniscient. As mentioned here in the commentary, it is due to the Buddha's all-knowing omniscient mind, which directly knows the capacity of sentient beings, and thus knows when it is appropriate to teach and when not to teach, that the Buddha did not respond to those fourteen questions. That, in effect, is proof that the Buddha is all-knowing and omniscient. As Gyaltsab's commentary mentions, the wise use such reasoning to counter the claims of the non-Buddhist schools (i.e. that the Buddha lacks omniscience), as proof that the Buddha *is* indeed omniscient. Furthermore, as the commentary states:

On other occasions the Buddha taught extensively on the emptiness of things.

The point to be understood from these explanations is that the Buddha teaches only in accordance with the needs of the disciples, and that the Buddha will teach a point when it is appropriate to teach that particular point. For example, as other texts explain, for those who would gain greater benefit by receiving a teaching of the existence of a self, the Buddha would mention 'there is a self of person'. Knowing that for some the teachings on selflessness would cause great fear and might even cause them to completely reject the Buddha's doctrine, the Buddha taught that there is a self.

Having appeased the person's mind in that way the Buddha would gradually lead them towards gaining the understanding of selflessness. That is the skilful way in which the Buddha taught—by fully knowing the capacity of the recipient. What we can learn from this, as I regularly emphasise, is that when we share our knowledge of Buddhism with others, we must also be careful about how we present it. Even though we may not have the clairvoyance that knows the other's background, understanding and level of intelligence, we may have some idea about how much they can handle and grasp.

Therefore it is really important that we are wary and careful about how we present Buddhism to others, and not just

¹ These quotes from Gyaltsab Je's commentary are not excerpts from a published text.

² See teaching of 31 October 2006.

'blurt out' everything that we know. Just because we have the knowledge, it's not OK to assume that we can present it to others. That is where one must be careful. Even in worldly affairs, we all know there are many things that are kept secret for a purpose, thus it is also appropriate that we keep some things to ourselves.

It is in this light that we gain an understanding of why the Buddha's teachings are divided into the four main schools of tenets, which range from a grosser level of views up to a subtler level of views. We can understand the need for different schools of tenets when we can see how together they form a gradual process of leading disciples to the understanding of the Buddha's teachings. These schools form the basis for presenting the Dharma with skilful means.

In relation to this, the Mandala Offering and the *Ganden Lhayama* prayer that we regularly recite include these lines, 'Please release a rain of vast and profound Dharma teachings precisely in accordance with the needs of those to be trained' Just as we wish to receive the teachings in accordance with our capacity and needs, so too other beings need to receive them in that way.

Also, when we relate to the presentation of the Buddha's doctrine in this way, we can develop a deep appreciation for his kindness, realising how the Buddha taught very skilfully in accordance with the needs and the capacity of sentient beings. From this we can also understand that there is no need to force any of the doctrine onto students. It should only be presented in accordance with the capacity of the particular student. Then it will not be burdensome to them, but will be taken up as a joyful practice, because it is a manageable practice.

If only one doctrine is presented to everyone, then we would have to be indoctrinated: you must do this and must not do that lest you go against the rules. Then things could become very heavy. So the reason why we can adopt the Buddha's teachings and be comfortable with them is because of the skilful means with which they are presented.

These points are very significant for us to contemplate because, as mentioned previously, they deepen our appreciation of the Buddha's teaching and enable us to recall the kindness with which he presented his teachings to us. When we really think about it, we see how the Buddha guides individual sentient beings towards the understanding of the Dharma, from very basic, slowly progressing through deeper and deeper levels to gaining a more profound level of understanding.

Thus the profound teachings are not forced on those who initially do not have the capacity to understand them. Rather, the views that the individual is capable of handling are presented first, which then slowly lead on to the acquisition of more and more profound views of the Buddha's teachings. From our own experience we can see how the basic views of the teachings are what initially attracted us, and as we gain further understanding of the teachings, we gain deeper and deeper levels of understanding. Through our own experience of having understood the teachings, we can see the great skill in the presentation of the teachings, and the great kindness in the way they are presented to us.

This is also how we can understand that ultimately the Buddha's teachings are based on love and compassion. In the very way they are presented, we can see the quality of his love and compassion and his great concern for others. Thus, the way in which the Buddha's teachings are

presented is very meaningful, and suitable for those who are following the teachings.

As the very essence of the Buddha's teachings is that they are based on love and compassion and non-violence, we can see that no one could deny that they are very appropriate teachings. Whether they are religious or not, there is no one who would disagree with the value of love and compassion, or the value of non-violence. That is something which everyone can accept and agree upon. So when we see that the Buddha's teachings are based on love and compassion and non-violence, then that too helps to deepen our appreciation.

As I regularly emphasise, we can see the value of love and compassion even when it is extended to animals. Dogs and cats may not intellectually understand what love and compassion are, but they definitely respond to it. There is no doubt about that. You can see that when the owner shows genuine love and care for their pet, the pet naturally and immediately responds to that, and that they enjoy and appreciate that love and compassion expressed in the form of genuine care. So they respond to that. They may not have an intellectual understanding, but they can feel it. Thus there is no question about the value of love and compassion for everyone, regardless of their understanding of it.

In the past have shared this story about the need to be skilful in presenting the teachings, and the need to be mindful of how much each person can accept, and how much they can grasp. Many years ago I was giving a teaching which included the disadvantages and faults of attachment. In those days I used to have a cup of tea with the students in the dining room after the teaching. One young lady, who would have been in her twenties came up to me and asked 'Is attachment really bad? Do I have to completely give up all attachments?'

I knew where she was coming from and what was bothering her. I felt that if I were to emphasise the need to abandon all attachment, she might have been put in a position where she would feel that she couldn't practise Buddhism, because she couldn't cope with trying to overcome all attachment. So my response to her was, 'Some small attachments should be fine to keep' [*Geshe-la laughs*] She was happy about what I had said at that time and thanked me. Of course a few years later, as she continued to come to the teachings and gained more understanding, she completely understood what my intent was at the time.

2.1.3 Summation

This is sub-divided into three categories:

2.1.3.1 Conquerors' descriptions of the profound

2.1.3.2 Faults of fearing the profound

2.1.3.3 Exhorting the king to realise the profound

2.1.3.1 CONQUERORS' DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PROFOUND

75. *Thus the doctrine of definite goodness
Was taught by the perfect Buddhas,
The seers of reality, as profound,
Unapprehensible, and baseless.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the meaning of this verse in this way:

Thus the doctrine of definite goodness is profound because it is difficult to fathom, unapprehensible because no extremes can be apprehended [i.e. the extremes of inherent existence] and baseless because it does not provide any basis for inherent establishment.

When realised and meditated upon, this doctrine brings to fruition the goals of all three vehicles. This was taught by the perfect Buddha, seer of all, in the *King of Concentration sutra* and so forth.

As explained here, the doctrine of definite goodness is, as mentioned previously, the teaching on emptiness. Therefore, as explained here, it is profound, unapprehensible and baseless. Therefore, when 'realised and meditated upon', this profound view of emptiness, brings about 'the goals of all three vehicles', which are the hearer, solitary realiser and the bodhisattva vehicles. So what needs to be understood is that all ultimate goals on the Buddhist path are obtained only through gaining the realisation of emptiness.

This is re-emphasising the earlier point that without gaining the realisation of emptiness, one cannot possibly obtain the goal of liberation. Thus in order to achieve even self-liberation, which is the goal of the hearers and solitary realisers, one needs to gain the realisation of emptiness. As mentioned in the commentary, these are explained extensively by the Buddha in the *King of Concentration sutra*.

2.1.3.2. FAULTS OF FEARING THE PROFOUND

76. *Frightened by the baseless doctrine,
Delighting in a base, not passing
Beyond existence and non-existence,
Unintelligent beings ruin themselves.*

77ab. *Afraid of the fearless abode,
Ruined, they ruin others.*

As Gyaltsab's commentary explains:

There are beings who are frightened by this doctrine that does not provide a base for the conception that grasps at inherent existence. [Trans: The literal word used here is 'grasping onto sign', but I have used the words 'inherent existence'.]

When the doctrine about the emptiness of inherent existence is presented to those who grasp at inherent existence, it makes them frightened. Because the doctrine on emptiness presents no base for the conception that grasps at inherent existence, it becomes a baseless doctrine which causes fear in the minds of those who grasp at inherent existence; the fear is of losing what they strongly hold on to.

As the commentary further reads:

There are those who, due to their strong grasping at the self from beginningless time, take delight in an inherently established base and thus assert inherent existence. Or there are those who find no choice but to assert the non-existence of a previously inherently established base.

Because of the familiarity over many lifetimes with adhering to the base that is established on inherent existence, the first type of being takes delight in grasping at an inherently existing base, and they therefore assert inherent existence. Then there are those who, when confronted with the lack of inherent existence, misunderstand that presentation. They feel that if things were not to exist inherently, then they have no choice but to assert that non-inherent existence must mean the cessation of a previously inherently established base. So for these people, something that was previously inherently established would cease to exist.

The commentary continues:

Such unintelligent beings ruin themselves due to their corrupt views. So when the emptiness of inherent existence is presented as the ultimate mode of existence, those who are afraid of the fearless abode

will not accept it and will abandon it. Having abandoned it, they will fall into lower rebirths.

This refers to the first type of being who grasps at inherent existence. When the lack of inherent existence or the emptiness of inherent existence is presented, they completely reject it, thinking 'this is not acceptable', and by condemning emptiness, they create the negative karma to be reborn into the lower realms. Thus through their misapprehension, the first type of being condemns emptiness itself and thus creates the cause to be re-born in lower rebirths.

The second type of being condemns the law of karma and effect, and thus also creates the cause to be re-born in lower rebirths. With respect to this second type of being, the commentary reads:

Some favour this view but misunderstand the meaning to conclude that all functional things must cease to be. [They misunderstand the lack of inherent existence as referring to functional things ceasing to exist]. Thus they condemn the law of karma and its effects, and claim that all phenomena are neither existent nor non-existent.

The views of the second type of being also arise from quite a subtle misconception. Other teachings explain that when the lack of inherent existence is presented, some mistakenly conclude that in meditation one must negate all coarse form, and that the negation of coarse form is emptiness itself. This is a danger. On a more profound level, if one is not careful to understand what the lack of inherent existence actually is, it is very easy for one to also reach this conclusion and fall into this type of wrong view. This is something that we need to be really mindful about, and to be careful about falling into adhering to that wrong view.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary concludes:

Thus they are ruined themselves and ruin others.

The commentary continues with a quote from another commentary

In his commentary on the *Ornament of Middle Way*, Shantirakshita says, 'The actual killing of animals such as birds and cattle and the like is merely a negative act of destroying a few beings with limited capacity for benefitting oneself and others...'

Here Shantirakshita is explaining how there can be some minor benefits from the act of killing for example birds or cattle, such as relieving the immediate suffering of hunger by consuming the meat and sharing it with others. Nevertheless, it is a negative act or deed.

'...However those who abandon the view of emptiness are harming the ultimate cause of Dharmakaya [the Buddha's truth body], which is like a lamp that illuminates the darkness of ignorance within all sentient beings. Thus those of you who wish for the ultimate goodness for yourselves must be careful of this point.'

The quote shows that although the act of killing animals such as birds or cattle is a negative one, there can be some minor benefit from that act. In contrast, however, abandoning the view of emptiness is a much heavier and more severe negative karma than killing animals and so forth. That is because abandoning the view of emptiness hinders the ultimate cause of Dharmakaya, that which serves as the ultimate means to benefit all living beings.

The quote from Shantirakshita says that realisation of emptiness serves as the 'lamp to illuminate the darkness of

ignorance of all sentient beings'. Here we need to incorporate our understanding of earlier explanations, which is that the wisdom realising emptiness is the only antidote to overcome ignorance. The only antidote to self-grasping is the wisdom realising selflessness or emptiness; and so without gaining the realisation of emptiness, one cannot possibly apply the antidote for overcoming the deep-rooted ignorance of grasping at the self. Without the realisation of emptiness there is no possibility of gaining liberation or enlightenment.

Therefore, compared with the negative karma of killing animals for example, abandoning the view of emptiness is a much more severe negative karma. That is because killing animals involve harming a limited number of sentient beings, whereas, if one were to abandon or condemn the view of emptiness, it is equivalent to preventing all sentient beings from gaining the means to remove the darkness of ignorance. So, condemning emptiness is indirectly equivalent to harming limitless numbers of sentient beings. That is the severity of the negativity of that act.

2.1.3.3 EXHORTING THE KING TO REALISE THE PROFOUND

*77cd. O King, act in such a way
That the ruined do not ruin you.*

In explaining the meaning of the verse Gyaltsab Je says:

Addressing the King, the author advises him to protect himself and others from ruin by developing the full understanding of emptiness in relation to the meaning of interdependent origination. If one were to deny interdependent origination, one will fall into the lower rebirths. The very reason for accepting interdependent origination in our system is a reason to accept the emptiness of inherent existence. It is in gaining the full understanding that cause and effect could not be established in the slightest way if things were inherently established, that one is led to the understanding of the two truths as being merely nominated and imputed phenomena.

We have touched on this point many times in the past, such as when we studied *Four Hundred Verses*. The main point here is that in our system, the understanding of emptiness should enhance the understanding of interdependent origination, and the understanding of interdependent origination should enhance the understanding of emptiness.

One of the main points about this relationship between interdependent origination and emptiness is that because there is a cause, there is an effect. When the cause is explained, it is presented as lacking inherent and independent existence, which indicates the possibility of the production of an effect. When an effect is presented as lacking interdependent and inherent existence, then that also presents the possibility of it being produced from a cause. In other words cause and effect and interdependent origination can be understood when the lack of inherent and independent existence is presented. That is how, on one level, the very presentation of emptiness enhances the understanding of cause and effect. Also, because of the fact that there is a cause and that there is an effect, things could not be independently or inherently existent.

I have taught on the relationship between emptiness and interdependent origination many times before, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama emphasises it again and again in his teachings. Thus it is good to refer back to the earlier

teachings and re-familiarise oneself with these points and try to gain a good understanding of them.³

2.2 Exhorting the king to train in the profound

We can leave the explanation of the sub-headings listed under this heading for our next session.

As some of you may be aware, I will be doing the annual White Tara retreat, so would you mind holding the next session as a discussion session? In addition to the retreat, the Tara puja that I have to do regularly falls on next Tuesday. So the retreat commitment as well as the Tara puja as well as the teaching might be a little bit too taxing for someone of my age [*Geshe-la laughs*]. Just as you experience anxiety and stress from your job or whatever so will I if I do too much! However stress when doing Dharma activities is much more worthwhile than stress from worldly activities.

When I have had an opportunity to do all of my commitments, then I naturally feel very calm and relaxed for the rest of the day. Whereas if I have not had time to do my commitments, then I feel a little bit apprehensive and unsettled during that day. Some years ago when I went to the teachings for the Kalachakra initiation in Canada, I had to make sure that I woke up at about 3.00 am in order to fulfil my commitments before going to the teaching session. By the time I had breakfast, lunch and dinner at the teachings it was around about 6.00 pm.

In the morning His Holiness would be doing the preparations for the initiations, which meant that we would be just sitting in the hall recited prayer mantras ourselves. Quite early one morning, I was sitting there quietly in the corner doing some mantras, when I suddenly felt something. When I opened my eyes, the attendant was trying to gain my attention as His Holiness was actually right there. His Holiness commented, 'Oh Gen-la, you seem to be here early today'. His Holiness was right there in front of me and I hadn't noticed!

So, would you like to have a regular discussion or do something different? If you want something different then my suggestion is to first do all the regular prayers, and the recitation of the verse for the Tonglen Practice. Then to do the *Tonglen* meditation for about 15 minutes, followed by a group discussion on that practice.

It would be good to discuss what love and compassion really means and try to get a really good understanding of the love and compassion that is to be cultivated in our daily lives. It is very important that one gets a good understanding of love and compassion. Some people say, 'I don't think I will ever be loved', which just goes to show that their understanding of love is mixed with attachment. If you're expecting some sort of love from someone, then you are expecting attachment rather than love. So consider presenting and receiving love. What is the love we are referring to? What kind of love is it? Discuss it to really define it well.

Maybe you could go into a bit more detail of what it is that you are taking in the practice, and when you are giving, and what you are giving. There is the taking and giving in the first round, and then the taking and giving of second and the third rounds as well. So what is the difference between each one? What is the difference in what you take? What is the

³ See 8 April 2008; also the Mahamudra teachings from 13 October 2009 to 24 November 2009.

difference in what you give? As mentioned previously, by gaining a good understanding of the practice, one can gain a good overview of the whole path itself. In other words, the entire structure of the path can be combined into the practice itself. Thus it is really worthwhile that we gain a good understanding of the Tonglen practice.

You would be aware that one of the study group commitments is to recite Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*, or *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, which can be the last Sunday in October, Sunday 31 October.

It is important to make it accessible to others. The recitation of the *Bodhicharyavatara* should be presented in the newsletter or posters as a joyous day of contemplation, recitation and meditation on the *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, so that it can appeal to others who otherwise may not understand what it is about. That's the point of coming.

Someone new may be attracted to that presentation of how and what we are going to do, or to the title of the meditation. What incredible merit they would gain if they come and actually do the recitation, or just sit here and listen to the recitation of the entire *Bodhicharyavatara*. What an incredible imprint it would be for that person! So we need to present it in an inclusive manner, and conduct it in a way that is accessible to others, so that they can benefit from it.

There is also the question of what to call the next study group event. Calling it a 'Study Group Seminar' implies something very grand and exclusive, or that it is just for study group people. Just reading that, people could think, 'I wouldn't be welcome because I am not part of the study group'. Whereas if it is presented in a way which is inclusive, others will feel that they are welcome to come, and that it is joyous event that they could learn from. That will then open the doors for others. The point that I am trying to make here is to present the event in a way that is inclusive of others, and not exclusive to the study group.

The directors and managers and everyone who works so hard in the centre do so with intention to be of benefit to others. 'Others' means whoever we can reach out to. Therefore if the events we hold here are a means of benefitting others, then the hard work we do for the events serves its purpose.

Announcing that the next session is the discussion is not of course an announcement that you are exempted from attending. Everyone should be coming regularly. In the past we had an attendance roll for the study group and we used to mark those who didn't come as being absent. Wah, a very joyful and very nice person who has now passed away, used to tick the attendance sheet very diligently and very well.

Sometimes Wah seemed to be a bit deprived of proper shoes and clothes, so I bought him some shoes once, and some other clothes. Even though I didn't have much money, I gave him \$100 and \$50 a few times. When we were living in St Kilda, I made an exception and allowed him to come and make his tea in my kitchen and he would also come once in a while to warm up his food. But then there would be times when I was quite busy in the kitchen, and he would come in and hang around a bit. He was sometimes a bit of a nuisance. *[laughter]*.

When he made his coffee, he seemed to be shaking. He would offer to massage my back because I suffer from back pain. He would say 'it would be good to just put some oil on it', but I didn't want any oil *[laughter]*. He would warm his hands first and then try to massage me, but of course without oil there was a lot of friction. *[laughter]*

He was a very nice person. One of his commitments was that he would go to church every Sunday! Even though he considered himself Buddhist, he still wanted to go to church, and I thought it was good that he kept that up. Then he would go to the city, perhaps twice a day, to the library to read books. Later on he couldn't travel about too much, so he had to stay in a nursing home. Some of the older students such as Allys, Vanessa, Carol and Adele went to visit him a few times and helped him out a bit, which was very good. If he had an appointment, Vanessa would take him in her own car.

Adele said that later on she had to tell him 'we have stop the kissing on the cheek', because she felt that he was starting to get too close! He must have been 93 when he passed away. He didn't suffer too much but as his health deteriorated, he started having a bit of difficulty with his eyesight. His son had passed away, and there was a daughter who I never saw. So when he passed away, George Farley helped by paying \$800 for the funeral. So all in all, Tara Institute, together with the students, took quite good care of him. It was one of Tara Institute's good deeds.

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