
Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷན་པའི་བུ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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Based on the motivation that we generated earlier when we recited the refuge prayer, we engage in meditation. *[pause for meditation]*

You can make a roster of those who wish to lead the meditation prayer. Then you will know who is leading each week, and those who are leading later can practise before they come, so that they are properly prepared.

My style is that I like to see that everyone shares responsibility, and that everyone does something. Some time ago I also started a tradition where everyone greets each other and asks, 'how are you', and exchanges names if they haven't met before. That was my way of trying to get everyone to know each other and become good friends. We haven't done that for a long time.

There are occasions where, although we have been together for some time we don't really know each others' names. When I ask someone for the name of another person, they can't recall it, and of course if I haven't been told the names of others then I can't be expected to know them. There are definite benefits if one greets others personally.

When we exhibit a sense of companionship then we set a good example for new people who come to the centre. The harmonious atmosphere will naturally attract others and just through observing that we are friendly towards each other, they may then develop an interest in the Dharma.

With new people we always need to be mindful about not giving too many instructions, such as indicating that they need to follow the prayers. That won't help those who come with a lot of doubts and questions in their mind. Just leave them to sit comfortably, and when they feel ready they may wish to do the prayers and so forth.

Some years ago I went to the hot springs and at the sauna I happened to be sitting next to a mother and daughter. I'm not sure about the age of the mother but the daughter said she was about 20 years old. For some reason both of them seemed to be happy about my presence, and it was very easy to have a conversation with them.

In our conversation naturally it came about that I told them that I lived at Tara Institute, so they heard about Tara Institute in that way. They told me that they lived in Mt. Martha, and while they would definitely like to visit the Institute they confessed that they had some difficulty in going to a centre because of past experiences. They said that they had experienced a very strict centre, which had asked them to make a promise not to go to any other centre. *[Geshe-la laughs]*

I reassured them that there are no such obligations or rules whatsoever at Tara Institute, and that it is a centre

where you are free to come or go, with no restrictions or obligations. I suggested that they come to Monday evenings. I am not sure if they did, and by now I probably wouldn't even recognise them. The main point is that we need to consider these issues.

2.1.3.3. EXHORTING THE KING TO REALISE THE PROFOUND (CONT.)

It is good to use the outline itself to get some understanding of what will follow. 'Exhorting the king to realise the profound' may sound quite grand, but in ordinary language it means that Nagarjuna is indicating to the king that even though he may be the ruler of many subjects, he should not take pride in his status and feel that he is exempt from working to gain the realisations of the profound teachings. Even the king needs to work on realising emptiness if he wishes to obtain liberation!

With respect to this the two last lines of verse 77 read:

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

I think we covered these lines last time, but I will go over it again.

Gyaltsab's commentary states:

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.

As the commentary specifically mentions, the essential point to understand is that in our system the acceptance of interdependent origination serves as the reason to accept emptiness. The commentary explains that if one were to accept the possibility that inherent existence can be established, then there is no way that cause and effect could also be established. Thus one must realise that both truths are merely nominated and imputed phenomena. That is what is being presented to the king.

As explained many times previously, one of the main points to be understood is that the very lack of inherently existent phenomena, establishes the interdependent origination (or the cause and effect) of phenomena, while the understanding of cause and effect (or the interdependent origination of phenomena) establishes the lack of an inherent, intrinsic nature of phenomena. It is really essential to understand how establishing the lack of inherent existence of phenomena in itself establishes the interdependent origination of phenomena. Likewise when phenomena are established as interdependent originations then that in itself establishes the lack of inherent or independent existence of phenomena. This is the main point.

As explained many times, this understanding is the crux of our Prasangika-Madhyamika system. When the *Heart*

Sutra says, 'Form in empty and emptiness is form', it is emphasising the point that while form is empty of inherent existence, that very fact of being empty of inherent existence establishes form to be nominally or conventionally existent. The *Heart Sutra* is stating that establishing the emptiness of inherent existence enhances the understanding of how it is also interdependently existent, whereas when things are established as being of interdependent origination, one gains the understanding that it therefore lacks inherent existence.

How does one gain the understanding of the implication of the *Heart Sutra*, which is that because form is empty of inherent existence form is therefore an interdependent origination? These are points that might not be immediately obvious, but if one thinks about it again and again, the inter-relationship between emptiness and interdependent origination will begin to dawn upon oneself.

This essential point was confirmed during my recent retreat, when I had very vivid dream that some of us were together and His Holiness was amongst us. In the dream Samdup Tsering¹ was present and he was trying to explain something about the study program in relation to having difficulty in printing the material, and I was thinking, 'What is he trying to relay to His Holiness?'

At that point His Holiness asked me, 'Do you teach the Lam Rim?' and when I responded that I was teaching it regularly, he said, 'That is very good; it would also be good to give the students advice based on the Lam Rim'.

Then His Holiness asked some of the students: What is the meaning of 'through interdependent origination one should gain an enhanced understanding of the meaning of emptiness'? It wasn't clear in my dream whether the students were able to reply [*laughter*]. I could see Clare at the back, and I was hoping she would give an answer, but in my dream there seemed to be no answer coming forth. [*laughter*]

Regardless of the meaning of the dream, I felt that my retreat went very well. I had quite a number of other vivid and significant dreams as well.

2.2. Exhorting the king to train in the profound

This has two major subdivisions:

2.2.1. Setting the scene

2.2.2. Two selflessnesses

It is good to get some idea of what will be presented just from the outline itself. So 'Exhorting the king to train in the profound' implies exhorting the king to gain the profound understanding of emptiness. The two subdivisions include 'setting the scene', followed by an explanation of the 'two types of selflessness', which is the two types of emptiness. It is good to get that understanding.

2.2.1. Setting the scene

78. *O King, lest you be ruined
I will explain through the scriptures
The mode of the supramundane, just as it is
The reality not partaking of dualism.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Addressing the king, Nagarjuna states that through logic and citation in accordance to the definitive scriptures, he will present the mode of supermundane reality just as it is—that which does not rely on the two extremes.

The meaning of the mode of supermundane reality, or profundity is explained here as that which is free from the two extremes, which indicates emptiness. This profundity which does not rely on the two extremes is presented through logic and citations, in accordance to the definitive scriptures. What is being implied here is that the ultimate intention of the Buddha's definitive teachings is the presentation of that which is free from the two extremes, i.e. emptiness.

The commentary continues:

If asked what is the purpose for doing so, it is explained in the line from the verse, 'O, King lest you be ruined'.

Nagarjuna explains the ultimate intention of the Buddha through the use of logic. He does so by relying on the Buddha's teachings, scriptures and citations through his own intelligence and wisdom, without relying on any other humans. Therefore Nagarjuna's presentation of logic is unequalled. Besides relying on enlightened beings such as Manjushri, there is no evidence that his works rely on any other ordinary human being. This confirms that Nagarjuna's profound understanding and wisdom has been gained from authentic sources. Thus, lest the king be ruined by being misled with false or corrupt views, Nagarjuna presents the profound Middle Way view that is free from both extremes directly to the king.

79. *This profundity endowed with meanings
drawn (from scriptures)
And beyond ill-deeds and meritorious deeds
Has not been tasted by those who fear the
baseless—
The others—the Forders—and even by our own.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of verse 79:

This profundity which is endowed with great meaning, is drawn from the scriptures and surpasses all negative as well as meritorious deeds that are the causes of samsara.

This is explaining that the profundity, i.e. the profundity of emptiness which is endowed with great meaning, is drawn from the scriptures and surpasses all the negative and meritorious deeds that are the causes of samsara. This indicates that both meritorious as well as negative deeds are causes of samsara. The result of negative deeds would be, for example, an unfortunate rebirth in the animal realms. Rebirth in the animal realm is caused by negativity, whereas the causes for our own existence as humans are meritorious deeds.

Even though they differ in status, however both realms are equally in samsara. Because of the causes, one is considered unfortunate because it is characterised with more unpleasant experiences, while the human realm is a fortunate realm because of less severe suffering.

¹ Samdup Tsering was Geshe-la's translator from 1985 to 2001.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

Because of fear of the baseless, this has not been tasted by non-Buddhist such as the Tirthikas² and even some proponents of the Buddhist system.

Gyaltsab Je indicates that the profound meaning of emptiness is drawn from the scriptures, and completely surpasses all negative as well as meritorious deeds, which are cause of samsara. This indicates that when one gains the wisdom realising emptiness directly, one will not create further causes to be reborn in samsara.

There can only be two causes of samsara—meritorious karma and negative karma. When one gains the direct realisation of emptiness, one goes beyond creating the projecting karma to be reborn in samsara. 'This great profundity...has not been tasted', indicates that this understanding has not been gained by non-Buddhists such as the Tirthikas, and even some proponents of our own Buddhist system. That is because of fear of the baseless. As mentioned previously, lacking the base of inherent establishment causes such fear that they are unable to gain the understanding of emptiness. So, says Nagarjuna to the King, I am presenting to you the meaning of this great profundity that is the Middle Way.

This also shows that the king, who is receiving the teaching from Nagarjuna, is clearly a receptive vessel for receiving the profound teachings on emptiness.

2.2.2. Two selflessnesses

This is presented under two sub-headings:

2.2.2.1. Selflessness of persons

2.2.2.2. Selflessness of other phenomena

At this point I would particularly like to ask older students what is the difference between the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena? I have presented this many times, so I would like to resort to your wisdom.

Student: The basis is different but the quality of emptiness is the same. In one the basis is the person, and in the other the basis is phenomena.

Why is there no difference between the emptiness of each?

Student: Because the quality is the same while the base of each is different.

It should be explained in terms of what is being refuted. That's maybe what you are attempting to explain but you haven't quite come to the point yet.

Student: Refuting that they exist independently from their own side, without relying on being designated.

In the Prasangika system there is no difference in subtlety between the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena. If one were to present the differences in terms of coarseness and subtlety, where would the difference arise from? How would a difference of coarseness and subtlety be established?

The way in which other Buddhist systems establish the difference between the coarseness and subtlety of the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena

has been explained many times. For example, the Svatantrika Madhyamika school assert that the selflessness of person and selflessness of the phenomena differ in terms of their coarseness and subtlety.

The Consequentialist or Prasangika-Madhyamika school posits that there is no difference in coarseness and subtlety, however there is difference in the ease with which each is realised. One is easier and the other is little bit more difficult to realise. Do you recall that difference?

Student: For the Svatantrika-Madhyamika coarse selflessness is emptiness by way of being empty of being substantially existent and self-sufficient.

I have explained this in detail previously³, but I will go over the main points again. According to the Svatantrika system there is a difference between coarseness and subtlety of selflessness of person and selflessness of phenomena. As we have indicated, for the Svatantrika the selflessness of a person is coarser and the selflessness of phenomena is more subtle. They posit that *selflessness of person is that which lacks a self-sufficient and substantially existent person*, whereas *the selflessness of other phenomena is the negation of that which exists from its own side, without being dependent on a conception labelling it*. When the existence of phenomena that are labelled from their own side is negated, then that is the selflessness of phenomena. Therefore in the Svatantrika system not only is one easier to recognise than the other, but there is also this difference coarseness and subtlety.

In the Prasangika system there is no difference in the coarseness and subtlety of the selflessness of person and selflessness of phenomena, but the selflessness of person is said to be relatively easier to realise than the selflessness of phenomena. The reason why there is no difference in subtlety and coarseness is because the object of negation is the same for both selflessnesses, i.e. what is being negated is inherent existence of person and inherent existence of phenomena. Thus the lack of inherent existence of person is the selflessness of person, while the lack of inherent existence of other phenomena is the emptiness of phenomena. It is said that gaining the understanding of selflessness of person is easier than gaining the understanding of the selflessness of other phenomena. If you refer back to earlier teachings, of course, it will become clear for you.

Thus the way to present the lack of coarseness and subtlety of the selflessness of person and other phenomena lies essentially in there being no difference in the object of negation. While the base is different, what is being refuted is exactly the same. When inherent existence based on a person is refuted, then one establishes the selflessness of person. When inherent existence of the aggregates of the person is refuted then the selflessness of other phenomena or the aggregates is established. Thus there is no difference in the object of negation, as what is being negated in both cases is inherent existence.

Our Prasangika system posits the selflessness of person as the lack of inherent existence within the person, or the

² The Sanskrit term for Forders

³ Specifically in the teachings on Tenets, 2 October 2001, 23 October 2001, and the Madhyamaka teachings from 11 March to 25 March 2003.

lack of a person existing from its own side, or the lack of the characteristics of a person or a truly existent person. These are synonyms, and one needs to understand that they all mean the same thing. It is the same with all phenomena other than the person.

To begin with, it is good to gain a sound understanding of the difference between a self of person and the selflessness of a person. Grasping at the self of a person is apprehending a person as being inherently or independently existent or, as mentioned previously, truly existent. That apprehension of a person existing inherently or truly or self-sufficiently is called grasping at the self of person. So when one gains the understanding of the lack of inherent existence of a person, then one has gained the realisation of the selflessness of person.

The selflessness of person is the lack of inherent existence, or the lack of true existence, or the lack of a self-sufficiently substantially existent person. So first we need to be able to clearly distinguish between the self of person and the selflessness of person.

It is good to meticulously investigate so as to gain a good understanding of the selflessness of a person, and how a person would have to exist if there were to be a self of a person. How would the person exist? One thing we need to be clear about from the very beginning is that the term 'selflessness of person' doesn't suggest that a person has no self. That is not what is being indicated. One must not misinterpret the selflessness of person as meaning the lack of a self of a person.

The term 'selflessness of person' indicates that there is no inherently existent self of a person, and thus there is no independently existent person. Therefore when one gains an understanding of how a person lacks inherent or independent existence, that understanding should naturally imply that if a person could not exist independently or inherently, then the only way for a person to exist would have to be by depending on causes and conditions. Thus the understanding of the interdependent origination of a person arises.

When a person is understood as existing in dependence on causes and conditions then that understanding should induce the understanding of how a person lacks intrinsic or independent existence. So, that is how the two understandings of the selflessness or emptiness of a person, and the interdependent origination of a person, mutually support each other.

This discussion has been in relation to the headings 'selflessness of person' and 'selflessness of other phenomena'. The very presentation of the headings indicates that one first needs to gain a good understanding of what 'selflessness of person' actually means.

In gaining an understanding of what selflessness of person means, one also needs to get an understanding of what a self of person means. In fact without clearly understanding that how a person would exist if it did have an inherently existent self, then the lack of inherently existence, which is the selflessness of a person, cannot be understood. Therefore one needs to understand that as well.

To gain the wisdom realising selflessness one needs to be able to negate the self as apprehended by the erroneous view. Thus one needs to have an understanding of what the grasping to the self of person means, and how the person would have to exist if there were a self of a person. Therefore in order to gain the realisation of selflessness one needs to have an understanding of the misapprehension of grasping at the self. Only by negating that misapprehension can one gain the actual realisation of selflessness.

Therefore, as indicated in the teachings, the object of both the grasping at a self and the wisdom realising the selflessness of person is the same, i.e. a person. So therefore there is no difference with respect to the object on which both are focusing. However, the two apprehensions directly oppose each other.

The view that grasps at a self of person, based on the object which is a person, views the person as being inherently or independently existent and existing without depending on any other causes and conditions. Therefore, that is the wrong view or misapprehension that grasps at a self of person.

The wisdom realising selflessness is based on the same object, which is the person, but views the self as lacking any inherent existence or independent existence. Therefore the object of focus is exactly the same, but the apprehension of the object is completely different.

On this note we will leave the actual explanation of the headings for our next session. You should prepare by reading the relevant material, as means to gain some understanding prior to the teaching.

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