
Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇིགས་ཆེན་ཕྱིར་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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With a motivation in accordance with the refuge and bodhichitta prayer that we have just recited, we can engage in meditation practice. (*Meditation*)

As usual we generate a positive motivation for receiving the teachings.

2.2.2. The two selflessnesses

This heading has two subdivisions:

2.2.2.1. Selflessness of person

2.2.2.2. Selflessness of phenomena

2.2.2.1. SELFLESSNESS OF PERSON

Again there are two subdivisions:

2.2.2.1.1. Presenting a summary

2.2.2.1.2. Presenting the individual meaning of the terms.

2.2.2.1.1. Presenting a summary

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains that a person does not exist from its own side at all and is thus mainly imputed by conception. This is in accordance with the earlier explanation that a person is merely nominated and imputed by conception, and that other than that a person cannot exist inherently from its own side.

At this point the commentary introduces the notion that a person is a mere label or a name designated upon one or more of the five aggregates. Older students will already be familiar with this terminology, but for the benefit of new students and also older students who might like to refresh their understanding, the term 'selflessness of person' does not imply that there is no self of a person. That has to be understood. What selflessness does refer to is the lack of an inherently existent self of a person.

When the selflessness of person is presented, the implication is that the person lacks a particular type of self, i.e. a self that exists independently or inherently without depending on other causes and conditions. Such a self of a person does not exist. Being clear about that at the outset will make it easier to understand the following presentation.

When selflessness is mentioned in the teaching one needs to immediately understand that it does not mean that a person lacks a self. That is not what is implied; a person does have a self, i.e. there is a self of a person. One needs to understand that the term selflessness refers to the lack of an independently existent self; a self that does not depend on anything else and which exists intrinsically from its own side. Such a self of person does not exist, and that is what selflessness means.

Thus, as Gyaltsab Je's commentary indicates, a person does not exist from its own side in the slightest way. One also needs to understand that this is synonymous with a person lacking inherent existence, or a person not existing by its own characteristics. In other words, a person that is established inherently, from its own side, or by its own characteristics, does not exist in the slightest way.

In presenting selflessness Gyaltsab Je first quotes this verse from Nagarjuna's *Sixty Verses of Reasoning*.

Since the Buddha has stated
That the world is conditioned by ignorance,
Does it not stand to reason
That the world is [the result of] conceptuality?

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

This verse explains that the five compulsory aggregates of the world are conditioned by deluded ignorance. This in turn influences the mind to apprehend things as existing from their own side. This is how one creates karma that produces suffering.

The commentary explains that in the line *the world is conditioned by ignorance*, the term 'world' actually refers to the five compulsory aggregates, which are the contaminated aggregates. The contaminated aggregates are said to be created by deluded ignorance. As specified here, the deluded ignorance then influences the mind to apprehend things as existing from their own side. In other words deluded ignorance taints the mind so that it perceives things as existing from their own side. Even though things lack inherent existence, the deluded ignorance influences the mind to apprehend things as existing from their own side or inherently, and through that one creates the karma which then serves as the cause for all the sufferings we experience.

As I have explained many times previously, grasping at the self, or more specifically grasping at an inherently existent self, is the cause of samsara. That is the key point that Gyaltsab Je is making. So it is good to really understand the implications of what 'grasping at the self being the cause of samsara' really means. What does it actually mean?

First of all, in relation to oneself, samsara is none other than the condition of being within the domain of, or under the control of our own contaminated aggregates. It is because we have the contaminated aggregates that we experience various types of sufferings. All the unpleasant and unwanted experiences that we experience are the natural consequence of possessing the five contaminated aggregates. So, being in samsara means possessing and being under the control of the five contaminated aggregates.

Having understood this, we then need to understand what the causes of the five contaminated aggregates are. As presented in the scriptures, grasping at an inherently existent self is explained as the cause of our contaminated aggregates. So, we further investigate what grasping at a self means. What does grasping at a self imply? As explained in the teachings, grasping at a self has two aspects: first there is an appearance of an inherently existent self, and secondly we have the apprehension of an inherently existent self. So, grasping at the self arises through the combination of appearance and apprehension i.e. the appearance of inherent existence and the total belief in that appearance.

If we relate this on a personal level, how do we appear to ourselves? If we actually think about it, it becomes clear that we have an instinctive natural apprehension of our self as being a somewhat solid entity that exists in its own right. It is a self that is not dependent on the aggregates but a very concrete 'I' or 'me'. When we think about ourselves in relation to any activity such as what we are going to do, what we are going to eat, who we will interact with and so forth, it is always in relation to our apprehension of our self as being a very solid entity that exists from its own side. Because we apprehend the appearance of our self in that way, we believe that is how we actually exist. That grasping

at the concrete appearance of ourselves is called grasping at an inherently existent self.

It is the same with the way others appear to us—they appear to us as being an entity that exists in and of itself, in a very solid and independent manner. When we bring someone else to mind, we really believe in that solid independent appearance. Thus grasping at a self of person can refer to grasping at one's own self or grasping at the self of others. There is the specific wrong view called 'the view of the transitory collections', which refers to viewing oneself as being inherently existent, but in general apprehending oneself and others as being inherently existent is grasping at the self of a person.

With respect to grasping at phenomena, if someone says, for example, 'bring the vase from my room' we immediately have an image of a vase that exists in and of itself, very solidly and very concretely. From the very first moment of recalling the image of the vase, up to the point of fetching the vase and bringing it here, we have no doubt that is a vase that exists inherently and independently from its own side. So, that very concrete apprehension of the inherently existent vase that we ordinary beings have is the object of negation.

Due to that misapprehension of the appearance of a self of person and phenomena as existing inherently and the grasping at that misapprehended appearance, we create karma. We engage in actions under that misapprehension of inherent existence and thus we create the karma to obtain the contaminated aggregates, which then serve as a basis for us to experience the various types of sufferings in samsara. That is how we need to understand grasping at the self as being the root cause of samsara.

It therefore follows that when we understand how the cause of samsara is created, we also get an inkling of how that process can be circumvented. By ceasing to grasp at an inherently existent self, one will naturally stop creating karma, and in particular the propelling or projecting karma that is the cause for being involuntarily reborn in samsara. This is how, as the teaching explains, when you realise selflessness or emptiness directly, you will not create any new projecting karma to be reborn in samsara involuntarily.

It is worthwhile to become very familiar with this explanation and to relate it to one's own experience. Try to see how this wrong view of grasping at the self influences whatever we do. When we investigate and analyse our perception in relation to whatever we do, we will find that it is always based on perceiving the object as being inherently existent. And because it seems that things automatically appear as being inherently existent, it may seem as though we have no control over our perceptions.

However even though things may appear to be inherently existent, they are in fact dependent on many causes and conditions. When something appears to be beautiful, for example, we cannot deny the attribute of beauty. The object is definitely beautiful, but there is an initial misconception of that beauty as being independently and inherently existent—it appears as beautiful from its own side. The attribute of beauty doesn't appear as being the result of many causes and conditions. So, along with the misconception of perceiving beauty as inherently existent, another deluded mental state called 'inappropriate attention' further exaggerates the quality of beauty upon the object. It is the perception of that exaggerated attribute or quality that causes strong attachment for the object to arise. And that attachment to the object then leads us to engage in non-

virtuous actions. We need to understand how it all boils down to that misapprehension of beauty as existing from its own side independently and inherently. Then we can apply that understanding to everything that we perceive.

Coming back to the self, it appears as if our existence is independent and inherent. Of course we do have a self of a person, but because of our misapprehension that the self is independently and inherently existent, we have a very strong sense of identity and we grasp at that. This leads to strong opinions about ourselves, as in 'I like this', 'I don't like that', 'I want this', and 'I don't want that', which all arise from that initial misconception of the self.

Of course it is not wrong to want or need something. In general we can say that we need things and we have to do things, but the fault lies in perceiving the 'me' that wants something or doesn't want something as a self that is independently existent, and which exists from its own side. Due to that misapprehension of the self, strong grasping and thus strong opinions arise. As a result of our very strong grasping and opinions negative states of mind arise—attachment to things that we like and want, and aversion or anger towards those things we don't like or don't want. Then, due to the influence of attachment and aversion we engage in actions and thus create karma. The imprints of that karma then become the causes for our future existence in samsara. It is really important to relate this to our own perceptions. To personalise our understanding in this way is a really effective practice.

One of the points I am emphasising here is how, by grasping at the self, we create karma, which then becomes the cause for samsara, and that the converse is that the realisation of selflessness or emptiness is the main cause that destroys the causes of samsara within oneself. Using the same logic, one can understand that just as grasping at the self is the cause of all delusions, the reverse of that is that the wisdom realising selflessness or emptiness is an antidote to delusions, which serves to destroy them. This is how one understands that emptiness or selflessness is the antidote for overcoming all delusions.

With this understanding we can get an inkling of how, as explained in the teachings, when a bodhisattva gains the direct realisation of emptiness they don't create any further causes of samsara, and in particular how the direct realisation of emptiness serves as an antidote for overcoming the delusions in the mind. As explained in the teachings, while the attribute of beauty will appear to a bodhisattva, they will not develop even a fraction of attachment towards that being. As explained in the teachings, the reason attachment does not arise is because of the bodhisattva's wisdom.

We need to understand that while the attribute of beauty does appear to a bodhisattva, it does not cause attachment to arise in them. Why? It is because of the bodhisattva's wisdom, in particular the wisdom realising emptiness. While that may be bit beyond our capacity to fully comprehend right now, we may still be able to see some degree of truth in these statements. When we understand from the teachings that the beauty that appears to us is mostly an exaggerated form of beauty, which does not really exist at all from its own side, because it is dependent on causes and conditions, then even at our level that can help to prevent a 100% strong belief in that object of beauty. It can actually help to reduce the strong attachment one feels towards the object.

It is the same with anger; if at a moment of intense anger, when an object appears to be unappealing and completely at

fault, if we actually apply the understanding that the faults do not actually exist from its own side, then that very understanding will help to reduce anger towards the object. When we understand that things do not exist as they appear, then that reduces both anger and attachment. It is when we begin to see the relevance of this view even on this level, that we see the need to gain the actual realisation of emptiness.

We can also get an understanding of the following statement in the teachings about the benefits of realising emptiness: 'Individuals with lesser merit will not even have a doubt about emptiness, but for individuals who generate even a doubt about emptiness, it will serve as a basis to shatter the very foundations of samsara'. So when we get an inkling of a doubt about emptiness, and the possibility of gaining the wisdom realising emptiness, we will be able to see how that actually shatters the very foundation of samsara, because it serves as antidote to slowly overcome the ignorance within oneself.

Gyalsab Je's commentary further states:

In realising that things do not exist in the way that they are conceptualised, one must however not deny the [actual existence of] person and aggregates. When the mode of apprehension of ignorance is refuted one realises that things are merely nominated and imputed by conceptuality.

As explained in the commentary, when one realises that grasping at inherent existence is the cause of samsara and so therefore things do not exist in that way, one must however not deny the actual existence of things; specifically persons and aggregates. One needs come to the understanding that although the mode of apprehension influenced by ignorance is refuted or negated, things do in fact exist as merely nominated and imputed phenomena. Although persons, aggregates and all other phenomena exist as merely labelled and imputed by conceptuality, they do however exist. If one comes to that realisation then one has not missed the point. This is further emphasised by Gyalsab Je with a quote from *Four Hundred Verses*:

Apart from conceptuality
Desire and so forth have no existence.
Who with intelligence would hold [that there are]
Real things [imputed by] conceptuality?

I will not go through the explanation of the verse now, but will leave it to you to investigate the meaning for yourselves.¹

As explained previously, when the mode of apprehension through ignorance is refuted one realises that things are merely nominated and imputed by conceptuality. One needs a thorough understanding of this point.

I have mentioned previously that statement 'Form is empty, emptiness is form' in the *Heart Sutra* really encapsulates the main point that is being emphasised here. 'Form is empty' means that form is empty of inherent existence, while 'emptiness is form' implies that that very nature of form being empty of inherent existence implies that form does exist nominally. That presentation in the *Heart Sutra* very skilfully leads beings to understand that while form is empty, implying form is empty of inherent existence, they do not get the false understanding that form does not exist all. This is achieved with the words 'emptiness form'. That is a skilful way of guiding sentient beings to the

understanding that while form lacks inherent existence, it does exist nominally or conventionally.

2.2.2.1.2. Presenting the individual meaning of the term

This has two subdivisions:

- 2.2.2.1.2.1. Unsuitability of the six constituents as the person
- 2.2.2.1.2.2. Refuting an inherently existent person through a fivefold analysis

2.2.2.1.2.1. Unsuitability of the six constituents as the person

We covered the meaning of the next two verses when we studied the Mahamudra, which used the following verse extensively.²

80. *A person is not earth, not water,
Not fire, not wind, not space,
Not consciousness, and not all of them.
What person is there other than these?*

The verse begins with a list of the six elements—earth, water, fire, wind, space and consciousness. In this verse Nagarjuna explains that while a person is not any one of the six elements, it is also not the collection of the six elements. Rather, a person is defined as a mere label designated upon the collection of the six elements. So here 'person' does not refer to just any person, but specifically to a person who possesses the form aggregate.

As Gyalsab Je explains in his commentary,

A person is merely imputed upon the collections of six elements, apart from that a person is not any of the six elements, not the collection nor completely separate from them.

A person is merely imputed upon the collection of the six elements indicates that we are dependent on the six elements for our existence. That is very clear. For example, without water there is no possible way for us to exist. We need to drink to maintain the fluids in our body. The fire element is symbolised in the warmth of our body, and if we aren't warm enough we can die, and without a consciousness we will not even be a person. The last element is space, which refers to the spaces within our body. So, for example, if we eat too much and don't leave some space in our stomachs then we find that it is hard to breathe and move about. In fact it is actually due to space that we are able to drink and eat. If there was no space we would not be able to consume anything, so we can understand how the space element is essential in that practical sense. Even our hair wouldn't grow if we didn't have space

Just as it is clear that we definitely rely upon on all six elements for our continuing existence, it is also quite clear that a person is not just water or fire or earth and so forth. As the commentary reads:

A person is not earth, not water, not fire, not wind, not space, not consciousness, indicates that the person is not any of the six elements. *And not all of them* indicates that a person is not the collection of the six elements. *What person is there other than these* indicates that it is just not possible for a person to be a separate entity from these six elements.

Thus, in summary, a person is labelled or imputed upon the collection of the six elements. But that doesn't mean that the person exists within the six elements. This will be explained

¹ Covered in the teaching of 22 May 2010.

² Specifically 6 October and 13 October 2009, and more generally 1 September 2009 to 13 October 2009.

in the next verse. So is it clear how, as the teachings present, a person is imputed or designated on the six elements?

81. *Just as a person is not real
Due to being a composite of six constituents,
So each of the constituents also
Is not real due to being a composite.*

In his commentary Gyaltshab Je explains the meaning of this verse with this syllogism:

The subject 'a person'—is not established ultimately—because it is imputed upon the collection of the six elements.

So here he is reiterating that while the person is merely imputed or designated upon the six constituents, the person does not actually exist inherently from its own side. To further explain this, the commentary presents a second syllogism:

Just like the person, the subject—each of the six elements is not established ultimately—because the person is imputed upon the collection of many parts.

This syllogism indicates that the subject, which is the person, is not established ultimately, which implies that the person does not exist from its own side, or inherently. That is because the person is imputed or designated on the collection of the six elements. Therefore the reason is that if a person were to be imputed or designated on the collection of the six elements, then because there are six elements, there would have to be six different parts to a person. Therefore a person could not exist ultimately, meaning a person could not exist from its own side. The reason presented here that being dependent on many parts in itself is proof that a person could not exist independently from its own side.

If we can gain some understanding of what is being presented here, then the following verses, which are an elaboration of this will be much easier to grasp. So it is good to review the basic presentation to get a sound understanding of it.

As usual next week will be the discussion session. It will be good for you to conduct the discussion in a meaningful manner. This means that you clearly explain to each other the topics under discussion. So try to develop good explanations. Having a good discussion implies that those with more knowledge will share their understanding with those who have lesser understanding, or who are still learning, with an intention of wishing to benefit them so that they gain a better understanding of these points.

That also implies sharing with kindness, and in a compassionate way, which means explaining with patience and not putting others down, so that they feel inadequate or inferior. That would be unfortunate as it would cause people to withdraw. In the past I have heard of people coming to discussion and feeling left out thinking, 'Oh, those who know it explain too quickly, but I still haven't got the point'. We need to be careful to ensure that does not happen. It takes time for newer students to understand the material, and it is difficult for them to comprehend everything at once.

When I was studying in Varanasi in my younger days I met a very great scholar called Khensur Nyima, who was former abbot of Drepung Monastery. He had come to Sarnath, the university where I was studying, for a holiday. It happened that the place where I was residing had a very good water pump so Gen Nyima-la came over to take a shower at my place. Before taking his shower he came into my room and commented that he had heard that I was zealous student. Later we went outside and sat in the sun for a while. One

thing that I regret now is that although I had some not-so-good tea in my room I felt that it would not really appropriate to offer that to him. Later I was told, 'Oh, that was a mistake, you should have offered the tea because it is known that Khensur Rinpoche accepts any food or drink'.

In our conversation Khensur Rinpoche asked me about the well-being of an ex-abbot of Sera Je Monastery, Khensur Lobsang Wangchuk, who was also a prominent scholar. So I explained that Khensur Lobsang Wangchuk was busy teaching the younger students, and spending a lot of time teaching the new students. Khensur Nyima immediately put his palms together and said, 'Oh that is really great. That is a mark of a good teacher and a great deed. I find it is very difficult to teach new students because you have to teach the basics over and over again'. In debates there are particular terms such as, 'it pervades', 'there is no pervasion', 'I accept' and 'I don't accept' and so forth. The meaning of these terms, what they imply and how to use them has to be taught from the very beginning, which is considered quite tedious. So Khensur Nyima's comment about what a great deed that was shows that spending time with new students is indeed a very good deed, as the deed of teaching takes time and a lot of energy and so forth.

After our regular recitation of the *Heart Sutra*, we can recite the *Eight Verses of Mind Training*. We just got news of one of our members; Jack Haynes has passed away, so we can pray for him.

I have a feeling that he passed away in a good state of mind, because a few days ago after Ven. Michael went to visit him, he sent a message back acknowledging the prayers and all the advice. He said that he would keep that advice in his heart and that he constantly remembered me praying for him. That acknowledgement shows that his mind was in a good place. He also personally thanked me for keeping him in my prayers, and emphasised that he had kept my advice in mind, and believed in it 100%. That is good sign. The fact that he said that just three days ago, and then passed away so soon after, shows that he had a good state of mind.

Actually just a month ago, soon after he was diagnosed with the disease he came to see me and we had a long meeting. At that time he said, 'Even though I have been diagnosed with this illness, I really don't have any worries'. He commented, 'Getting this news of my illness has confirmed that love and compassion is really the essence. That is something that very clear—really it all comes down to just love and compassion. That is the basis and the very essence of everything, and it has dawned upon me very clearly now'.

It might be considered unfortunate that he passed away so soon, because when he came to teachings I noticed that he was really quite zealous, and on the verge of really gaining some understanding about the way to go forward.

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