
Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷན་པའི་བུ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

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With a good motivation we will engage in the practice of meditation. [Meditation].

We can set the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines: For the sake of all mother sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will listen to the teaching as a means to overcome and destroy the unruly mind and self-centredness within myself, and replace it with a mind wishing to benefit all sentient beings. Thereby I will put it into practice well.

1.2. Actual refutation of extreme views

1.2.3. Dispelling an objection that not teaching an end to cyclic existence is wrong

1.2.3.2. ANSWER

1.2.3.2.2. Example for the absence of inherent existence of going and coming

This follows from the earlier explanation which refuted the going and coming of inherent existence with logical reasons. Now the text gives an example to illustrate the absence of inherent existence of going and coming. It is good to note the systematic sequence of how the teachings are presented; sound and logical reasons are presented first, which are then clarified with examples. The verses that corresponds to this outline reads:

112 *Just as an illusory elephant,
Being only a bewildering of consciousness,
Does not come from anywhere,
Nor go anywhere, nor really stay,*

113 *So the illusion-like world,
Being only a bewildering of consciousness,
Does not come from anywhere,
Nor go anywhere, nor really stay.*

Verse 113 is a supplementary verse which is not actually part of the root text, thus there is no specific explanation on it in the commentary.

The example presented here is the one which is used in the following syllogism: The subject 'coming and going'-are not inherently established,-because they are interdependent originations, take for example an 'illusory elephant'. In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains:

Just as an illusory elephant, doesn't come from anywhere nor go anywhere, the appearance of an actual elephant coming and going is present due to the bewildering of consciousness because of the magic spell. One must fully comprehend that there is no real or true staying [of an actual elephant] in the slightest.

As was explained earlier, when a magician conjures the appearance of horses and elephants, only the spectators under his spell will see the horses and elephants. Even

though the actual horses and elephants don't exist in reality, the spectators perceive them because of the spell.

It is good to understand the full implication of this analogy, which indicates that there are no real or true horses or elephants from the side of the object. This corresponds to ordinary beings perceiving true or inherent existence of phenomena, when in fact there is no true existence or inherent existence of phenomena in the slightest.

Ordinary beings perceive inherent existence because their consciousness is affected by the negative imprints of grasping to inherent existence. Therefore one must understand that even though from the side of the object there is no inherent existence, in the slightest, ordinary beings perceive it as such. Rather than being any fault in the object, it is due to the ignorance of the perceiving mind. That is how one needs to understand this illustration.

As explained in our last session, the analogy presents three types of beings: those who are under the influence of the magic spell where both the appearance and belief in the illusion are apparent; the magician himself who has the appearance but not the belief; the late-arriving spectators who are unaffected by the spell and therefore do not see the illusion and thus neither has the appearance nor the belief.

As explained previously, spectators under the influence of the spell who perceive and believe in the illusion are analogous to **ordinary beings** who perceive and believe in inherent existence. One needs to understand that it is the ignorance that grasps at inherent existence that causes ordinary beings to perceive inherent existence. In addition to the appearance of inherent existence, there is also the belief in that appearance of inherent existence.

But even though there is both appearance and belief in inherent existence, in reality it is false just like the magician's illusion, where there is not even the slightest truth of it actually existing in that way. What really needs to be understood here the cause for the appearance of inherent existence to sentient beings. Until and unless the very imprints of grasping at inherent existence are overcome, one will not be able to eradicate the mistaken conception of perceiving inherent existence.

Even though **an arhat** has abandoned the delusion of grasping at inherently existent self, they still have the appearance of true or inherent existence, and that is because they have not abandoned the imprints of grasping at inherently existent self. Thus, they still have that imprint in their mental continuum.

Therefore the only one who is completely beyond the misconception of adhering to the appearance of true existence is a **buddha**.

It is necessary to understand that the cause for perceiving and apprehending true existence is either the actual delusion of grasping at true existence itself (which is the case for ordinary beings), or due to the imprint of grasping at true existence which is within the continuum of arhats and bodhisattvas who are not in meditative equipoise focussing on emptiness directly.

1.2.3.2.3. THINGS ARE ONLY NOMINALLY IMPUTED

The verse that corresponds to this outline is:

114 *Thus it has a nature beyond the three times.
Other than as the imputation of a convention
What world is there in fact
Which would exist or not?*

The meaning of this verse is that while the going and coming of phenomena do not exist inherently, they do exist nominally, by mere label and imputation. As Gyalsab Je explains in his commentary:

What world or phenomena is there in fact, which would exist or not in accordance to the perception of worldly beings or inherently? There is not, because as with all the previous reasoning, other than as the imputation of a convention, it is beyond the inherent production and cessation in any of the three times.

This was elaborately explained in previous verses. At that time I reminded you how it is crucial to be able to understand the implication that although things are merely nominated and imputed, they do not exist from their own side. If one paid attention then, one will immediately understand the meaning of this verse, which is that the reason that things do not exist inherently is because they are merely imputed by conception.

1.3. Therefore the four extremes were not taught

The corresponding verse is:

115 *For this reason the Buddha,
Except for keeping silent, said nothing
About the fourfold format: having or
Not having a limit, both, or neither.*

As the commentary explains:

The Buddha *kept silent* and didn't teach anything in relation to *the four extremes* because things are beyond the four extremes. Thus, *for this reason the Buddha* did not teach the world *as having an end, no end, both or neither*.

Then the commentary presents the four extremes and those who actually abide with each.

The **first** extreme is:

The extreme of there being an end is asserted by the Nihilists who adhere to the belief that when the self of this life ends it does not go on to a future life.

The **second** extreme is:

The extreme of having no end is asserted by the Samkhyas, who adhere to the belief that the self of this life continues to future lives.

The self that the Samkhyas (one of the non-Buddhist schools) assert is an independent and permanent self. By asserting that a self is a unitary and permanent entity, the implication is that such a self continues on to the next life, and to future lives. So based on that assertion of a self there is no end.

The **third** extreme is:

The extreme of there being both an end and no end is asserted by some Jainas who adhere to the belief that the states of the self have an end but the nature of the self has no end.

Some, but not all, of the Jainas adhere to a belief that there are two aspects to the self: a self that has an end and a self that does not have an end.

The **fourth** extreme is:

The extreme of there being neither end nor no end, is asserted by the Buddhist proponents of a self, who say that there is a self that is utterly unpredictable as being either permanent or impermanent.

This is all in accordance with what we have studied previously.

We can go through these next stages quite quickly, because they have already been covered. Then we can spend more time on other points later on.

2. DIFFICULTY OF REALISING THE PROFOUND

This has three sub-divisions:

- 2.1. Reason for the difficulty of realising the profound
- 2.2. Reason why Buddha did not explain the profound to non-receptacles
- 2.3. Explaining the reason

2.1. Reason for the difficulty of realising the profound

This heading corresponds to the next two verses, which read:

116 *When the body, which is unclean,
Coarse, and an object of the senses,
Does not stay in the mind [as having a
nature of uncleanness and pain]
Although it is continually in view,*

117 *Then how could this doctrine
Which is most subtle, profound,
Baseless, and not manifest,
Easily appear to the mind?*

In his commentary Gyalsab Je explains the meaning of these two verses, beginning with verse 117:

This doctrine which is difficult to realise by unsuitable vessels and which is the essential supreme dharma of definite goodness, is *baseless* - to the perception of those who grasp onto signs...

When the verse says 'baseless' it is referring to the perception of those who grasp onto inherent existence; it is baseless 'to the perception of those who grasp onto signs' means that they grasp at inherent existence.

Gyalsab Je continues:

[It is] *subtle* and *profound* - because of its difficulty to realise...

The reason why it is subtle and profound is because it is difficult to realise.

[And it does] *not manifest*, because ordinary beings can not perceive it directly with their senses but need to rely on reasons...

One needs to understand that the reason why the doctrine does not manifest is because it has to rely on reasoning to be understood.

As Gyalsab Je concludes:

... thus how can this profound doctrine swiftly and *easily appear to the mind*.

Because of the profundity and subtlety of the doctrine, it cannot be easily apprehended by ordinary beings, as it requires reasons in order to be realised. One needs to understand here that emptiness is a phenomenon that needs to be realised through reasoning supported by valid quotations from the Buddha's teachings. We need to understand that emptiness is profound and subtle because we cannot directly perceive it with our senses.

Even so, if we apply the sound reasonings presented in the teachings supported by the valid quotations, it is possible for the subtle and profound to be realised. Thus it is worthwhile for us to spend time studying and understanding the reasons, as well as citations from the Buddha's teachings, that establish emptiness, and then to apply the reasons, and contemplate them again and again. That is the way to understand the profound doctrine.

Thus far the explanation in Gyaltsab Je's commentary has referred to verse 117, and now an explanation for the earlier verse is presented:

Why, even when the body, which is unclean because of constantly dripping with unclean substances; which is coarse because of being form; and easy to realise because of being a direct object of the senses...

The difficulty of realising the profundity of emptiness is illustrated with the example of the coarse body that is, in nature, obviously unclean. This unclean body can be directly perceived by ordinary beings.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

... although it is continually in view as being unclean however it does not stay in the mind as having the nature of uncleanliness. Thus, if it is not possible [for ordinary beings] to even realise coarse matter then it goes without saying that it would be impossible for them to realise the subtle.

When we investigate the substances within our bodies, whether it is our own body or that of others, it is very clear that it is of an unclean nature. There is nothing really attractive or clean about the substances that make up our body. Yet although that is obvious we still seem to hold on to a perception of the body as being clean and pure, and we develop attachment to either our own body or the bodies of others. The mind is almost denying the obvious. Although it is obvious on one level that the body is unclean, part of our mind seems to make us believe that the body is of a clean and pure nature, which is the source of many delusions.

The implication is that if it is so hard for ordinary beings to be aware and mindful of such an obvious thing as the unclean nature of the body, then what need is there to mention the difficulty of being aware of the subtlety of emptiness, which is not obvious at all! As explained earlier, even though emptiness can be realised through reasoning and valid citations, it is difficult for ordinary beings to realise is because even the obvious is difficult to comprehend and understand!

The meaning of the analogy is that while it is obvious on one level that the body is unclean and produces unclean substances that constantly drip from its orifices, we cannot overcome our attachment to bodies. Why? It is

because we perceive it as being attractive and appealing. There is a faulty part of our mind that perceives the body as being appealing and attractive, and thus it is difficult to overcome attachment. So it is not surprising that ordinary beings cannot realise emptiness.

There is more in the commentary on this but I will move on.

2.2. Reason why Buddha did not explain the profound to non-receptacles

*118 Realising that because of its profundity
This doctrine is difficult for beings to
understand,
The Subduer, having become enlightened
[At first] turned away from teaching doctrine*

In explaining the meaning of this verse, Gyaltsab Je cites a quote from a sutra:

I have found this nectar-like-dharma;
That is profound, peaceful, free of elaborations,
luminous, and uncompounded.
Since no matter whom I explain it to, will not
understand it;
For the time being I will remain silent, and abide in
the forest.

This is what the Buddha proclaimed soon after he reached enlightenment. In the past I have explained that when the Buddha obtained enlightenment, he remained silent for forty-nine days due to the lack of receptive beings. As the historical account of the Buddha's life explains, it is only when the god Brahma requested the Buddha to turn the wheel of the Dharma that the Buddha began to teach. At that time most beings were very strongly influenced by Brahma, and so when Brahma himself made a request for the Buddha to teach, then a lot of people naturally followed suit and received teachings from the Buddha. So his initial reluctance to teach could have also been so that more beings would be benefited when Brahma makes the request for him to teach.

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

For certain beings the Buddha turned away from teaching the doctrine for forty-nine days after he obtained enlightenment.

Here 'certain beings' implies that the Buddha would have taught at another level to beings of higher intelligence. Although the Buddha did not appear to teach ordinary beings, whose karma was not fully ripened at that point, he is however constantly teaching at all times. For example, at this time in our history we don't have the Buddha teaching in the *nirmanakaya* form (supreme emanation body), but of course in the aspect of the *dharmakaya* (wisdom body), the Buddha is constantly teaching to various beings who are appropriate receptacles. Therefore we need to understand how the Buddha is constantly guiding and teaching beings. But for ordinary beings with limited karma, the appearance of the Buddha teaching doesn't occur.

Gyaltsab Je continues:

The reason for doing so is because the Buddha realised that the profundity of this doctrine which is free from all extreme fabrications is difficult for certain beings to understand.

As also mentioned previously, the fact that the Buddha did not teach in itself is a reason that validates the omniscience of the Buddha. It wasn't because of a lack of knowledge or ability that the Buddha did not teach, but because he knew that it was not appropriate. We need to understand that. Taking this advice on a personal level, we need to understand that just because we have the knowledge is not a sufficient reason to blurt it out to others who may not be ready to hear it. If others are not ready to understand the meaning then it will be of no benefit to them, regardless of one's understanding and knowledge of certain subjects. You may remember the story about a king in ancient India who, when he received teachings on emptiness, immediately misinterpreted the teacher as being nihilistic. He thought 'this teacher is nihilistic; he is denying everything and proclaiming that nothing exists', and ordered the teacher to be killed for fear of him spreading nihilistic views. Thus, such misunderstanding or misinterpretation can lead to grave faults.

2.3. Explaining the reason

Once again I draw your attention to how we can derive a lot of understanding from the sequence itself, as it is a very systematic way of leading and guiding the disciples. First the profound doctrine is introduced, and then it mentions that the Buddha initially didn't teach it, and now the reason as to why the Buddha didn't teach are being presented.

The three sub-divisions are:

2.3.1. Faults of misconceiving the profound

2.3.2. Example for the defects of misconception and the good qualities of correct conception

2.3.3. Advice to be conscientious about realising the profound

2.3.1. Faults of misconceiving the profound

One may wonder whether there would be a fault in misconceiving or misunderstanding the profound. The next two verses show how misconceiving or misunderstanding the profound emptiness could give rise to a grave fault.

The next two verses are:

119 *This doctrine wrongly understood
Causes the unwise to be ruined
Because they sink into the uncleanness
Of nihilistic views.*

120 *Further, the stupid who fancy
Themselves wise, having a nature
Ruined by rejecting [emptiness], go headfirst
To a terrible hell due to their wrong
understanding.*

In explaining the meaning of these verses, Gyaltsab Je's commentary first presents this objection:

Objection: If the profound were easy to realise then there would be no need to teach it, thus the very reason that it is difficult to realise is why it would be suitable to teach this doctrine again and again.

This objection arises from the earlier explanation that the Buddha did not teach the doctrine on emptiness because of its profundity. The objection is saying that if the profound were easy to realise then there would be no

need to teach it, but if it is profound and difficult to realise, then that in itself is the reason why it is suitable to teach it again and again.

The answer presented by Gyaltsab Je is:

Answer: It is not suitable to teach this doctrine to those who don't have the lineage or capacity to comprehend emptiness. Because they lack the lineage or capacity they are *unwise* and thus there would be the fault of *becoming ruined* and there is also the fault of being ruined from the pretence of being wise.

As explained previously, if emptiness was presented to unreceptive beings who are unintelligent and unwise then the misinterpretation that nothing exists would occur, and such a nihilistic and wrong view would lead to a great fault. The commentary is explaining the faults that arise in two types of beings. There are those who are **unwise and unintelligent** and those who have the **pretence of being wise**. The commentary explains how the first type are ruined:

The manner of becoming ruined as result of being unwise is that when emptiness is taught to them they would be wrongly understood that nothing exists. When such misinterpretation and misconception occur, the unwise will degenerate from the precious human rebirth as well as from liberation. Because of these *nihilistic views*, they will *sink into the uncleanness* of the lower realms, thus you must be extremely cautious about this point.

The second types are those who are actually unwise but have a false notion that they are wise and intelligent; this may apply to us! In this context it applies to those who have some vague understanding of emptiness, yet assume that their understanding is a profound one. Great faults will arise from such an assumption.

The commentary further explains this point:

The manner of becoming ruined from the pretence of being wise is that *further*, either by holding on to the misconception of nothingness or when things are presented as being empty of inherent existence, to claim that it is not genuine emptiness, but rather a deprecation of karma and its effect.

Thus those who have the pretence of being wise either misinterpret emptiness as to mean nothingness, or they claim that what is being presented 'is not genuine emptiness but rather a deprecation of karma and its effect'.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

Thus, grasping onto the literal meaning of the Buddha's doctrine to understand it as the final meaning, *the stupid who fancy themselves wise, reject emptiness. Due to their wrong understanding, whoever has this destructive mind will go headfirst to the terrible hells*. Thus, although it is difficult for one to [swiftly & easily] gain belief in emptiness, it is best to maintain impartiality and refrain from deprecating the view of emptiness.

This last point is really a point for us to carefully consider. If we fail to fully understand or comprehend emptiness because of its profundity, then the next best

thing is to protect ourselves from deprecating or criticising the view of emptiness.

2.3.2. Example for the defects of misconception and the good qualities of correct conception

The next two verses, which correspond to this heading, read:

- 121 *Just as one comes to ruin
Through wrong eating but obtains
Long life, freedom from disease,
Strength, and pleasures through right eating,*
- 122 *So one comes to ruin
Through wrong understanding
But obtains bliss and highest enlightenment
Through right understanding.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

Just as one comes to ruin even up to facing death, through the wrong eating such as overeating and consuming disagreeable foods...

This is of course very true. When people overeat, they may become really sick. They might get very severe diarrhoea for example, and lose a lot of fluids, maybe reaching a point of looking as though they were going to die. We have all encountered illness occurring as a result of to the wrong consumption of food; it can affect our health, even to a point of nearly facing death. The alternative, as explained in the commentary is:

... but obtains long life, freedom from disease, strength, and physical and mental pleasures through right eating.

So if one applies the correct method of eating, it will nourish one's body such as to obtain a long life free of disease, together with sound physical and mental health.

The commentary then relates this to the previous explanation about gaining the wrong understanding or misconception of emptiness:

Likewise, so one comes to ruin through the wrong understanding of emptiness.

Gyaltsab Je further explains:

Through the right understanding of emptiness when it serves as a means to enhance the understanding of interdependent origination, and thus because of the very reason of emptiness one gains a profound understanding and respect for the law of karma and its effects, one will then obtain the bliss of high status and the highest enlightenment.

As explained here, having the right understanding of emptiness will definitely serve as a means to obtain all of one's temporary goals and the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

As explained earlier, having a wrong understanding of emptiness would definitely relate to deprecating the law of cause and effect and thereby ruining one's own precious human rebirth, as well as the ultimate goals of liberation or enlightenment. So that point can be applied here as well.

2.3.3. Advice to be conscientious about realising the profound

The corresponding verse is:

- 123 *Therefore having forsaken with respect to
this [doctrine of emptiness]
Nihilistic views and rejection,
Be supremely intent on correct understanding
For the sake of achieving all aims.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Because of the ramifications of the great faults of grasping onto a wrong understanding and the great benefits of gaining a correct understanding, *therefore having forsaken nihilistic views and rejection with respect to this [doctrine of emptiness], be supremely intent and strive on gaining the correct understanding.* The purpose is *for the sake of achieving all aims* of living beings.

As explained here, having understood the disadvantages and the faults of grasping at a wrong understanding, as well as the great benefits of the correct understanding of emptiness, one must forsake nihilistic views and the rejection of emptiness, and develop the supreme intent to strive to gain the correct understanding of emptiness. One needs to do that for the sake of all sentient beings. That is the whole purpose.

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