
Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇམ་དཔལ་གྱི་ལྷན་པོའི་སྐུ་ལྷན་པོ།།

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9 November 2010

As usual we will practice some meditation. [*Meditation*]

It is good to set the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines: 'In order to benefit all sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment myself, and so for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well'.

B. CAUSE AND EFFECT OF HIGH STATUS

This has two sub-divisions:

1. Setting the scene
2. Actual explanation of the cause and effect of high status

1. SETTING THE SCENE

In the first chapter we covered the meaning of 'high status'. Aspiring for high status relates to striving to achieve happiness in the human and god realms.

It would be good to relate to the entire layout of the text and use it in one's meditation practice. As explained in the teachings, one needs to be inspired to develop the impetus to strive for a good rebirth within the human and god realms. Also, one needs to understand (as explained in the teachings) that high status is the basis of developing the causes for definite goodness. It is good to really understand how the text is laid out in a very systematic way, as means to remind us of the essential points and to rekindle our aspirations.

Having explained the causes for the high status in the first chapter, Nagarjuna very kindly recapitulates those causes in slightly different wording. Basically he is reminding us about the importance of developing the causes for high status, which we need to take as personal advice. It is important that we recognise our own capacity to engage in virtue, which is the cause for a good rebirth. Even people who are quite new to Buddhism seem to develop a unique state of mind, particularly at the time of death. As we have noticed, some have exhibited a real sense of ease and preparedness in facing death.

The actual benefits of engaging in the causes for high status will be explained in more detail later in the chapter, however it is good to relate to whatever we have already learnt and may have experienced.

As far as the conditions are concerned, we can safely assume that we already have all the necessary good conditions. We are not physically or materialistically impoverished in any way, and we enjoy the perfect conditions under which to study and practise the Dharma. So it is really in our own interest to utilise that and try not to waste the opportunities that we have now. A genuine awareness of death and impermanence is an impetus for our practice, and this will be explained later in the chapter.

The section is further divided into two:

1.1. Travelling in cyclic existence due to not realising emptiness

1.2. Advice to strive for high status as long as emptiness is not realised

1.1. Travelling in cyclic existence due to not realising emptiness

Do you now get an inkling of what this heading refers to from its words alone? Can you see the connection between circling in cyclic existence and not realising emptiness?

The main point is that until one gains the realisation of emptiness, one is bound to cyclic existence. Circling in cyclic existence refers to being reborn again and again in either a fortunate or unfortunate rebirth. There is no other choice in samsara, it is either a relatively more fortunate rebirth or an unfortunate rebirth in the lower realms. So until and unless one develops the realisation of emptiness, one is bound and conditioned to that cyclic existence. We can see here how Nagarjuna has very skilfully and with great kindness shown us this reality in a very matter-of-fact way, without having to use measures of frightening us. He does not go into detail about the unfortunate realms but just presents the reality of the situation.

Although the direct recipient at the time of Nagarjuna's presentation was the king, his advice is really directed to all of us. Thus, we can see how skilfully he had presented the teachings as a means to guide us. Nagarjuna was definitely an unequalled being, renowned for having obtained enlightenment in his very lifetime. To that extent all scholars have great reverence for him. We can definitely relate to his uniqueness from the skilful manner of how he presented the Buddha's teachings and the composition of his work.

The relevant verse for this section reads:

124 *If this doctrine is not understood thoroughly,
The conception of an I prevails,
Hence come virtuous and non-virtuous actions
Which give rise to good and bad rebirths.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je presents this explanation:

So long as *this doctrine* on emptiness is not understood thoroughly, for that individual the conception of an inherently existent I prevails. Hence, virtuous and non-virtuous actions are created, which give rise to good and bad rebirths.

From this we can basically see how Nagarjuna is presenting very profound advice that can be subsumed into two main points:

1. Have good attitudes in one's mind and develop genuine kindness and concern.
2. Refrain from a negative state of mind.

This is what the advice basically comes down to. If we don't pay attention and merely skim over the words, then it may not dawn upon us as being a personal instruction. But if we take the time to really reflect upon the meaning of what is presented here, it will then dawn upon us as being very profound and personal advice. We can thus appreciate Nagarjuna's great kindness in presenting the teachings in this way.

This verse relates back to an earlier verse in the text which says that for as long as there is a conception of 'I', there will be grasping at 'I' and 'mine'; and as long as there is grasping at the aggregates there is grasping at the self. It follows then that for as long as one does not have an understanding of emptiness or has not understood it thoroughly, an inherently existent 'I' will prevail. All our non-virtuous actions, thoughts and otherwise are related to the conception

of 'I' and our grasping at it. So it actually comes down to that.

For as long as there is a grasping at the 'I', one will create both virtuous actions as well as non-virtuous actions. That is how karma is created. It is due to grasping at the 'I' that one creates both virtuous and non-virtuous karmas. What is virtuous and what is non-virtuous? It all depends on the state of mind. With good thoughts and a good attitude in the mind (i.e. genuine kindness and concern) one creates virtuous karmas and has good rebirths. Having a negative state of mind motivated by strong delusions, results in the creation of negative karmas, which are causes for bad rebirths. Thus good and bad actions create the causes for good or bad rebirths.

When we pay attention to what is being explained here, it will become apparent that it actually relates to how we function in our daily lives, and how all our activities and actions are based on the misconception of grasping at the inherently existing 'I', which is basically known as 'grasping at the 'I'. If we scrutinise and check the motivation in whatever activity we engage, it will be very apparent to us that it is fundamentally our grasping at the 'I'. The stronger the grasping at the 'I' the more one will create negative karmas.

In his commentary Gyalsab Je explains that until one gains the realisation or understanding of emptiness, one will continue to have a strong grasping at the 'I'. That is how we create the karmas to be re-born in unfortunate rebirths, and how all our activities become the cause of our suffering. Thus when one gains a profound understanding and direct realisation of emptiness, the grasping at the self or the grasping at the 'I', will naturally be reduced. With the realisation of emptiness comes the permanent cessation of the creation of intensely negative karmas. That is how we need to understand it.

Our actions are motivated by grasping at the 'I'. With opinions like 'this agrees with *me*' or 'this doesn't agree with *me*', there is a sense of the importance of the 'me'. One will try to avoid anything that opposes what is not in one's own interests. There will be no hesitation in doing whatever it takes to try and prevent it. That is how we create a negative mind. With an attitude of 'because it is not favourable to *me* or *my* interests, / will not accept it', we create an aversion to whatever opposes our opinions or interests. Thinking 'this is what / am interested in, this is in accordance with / like, this is *my* opinion' indicates attachment to one's own interests and opinions, resulting in the creation of certain kinds of negative karmas. In both instances it is the strong grasping at the 'I' which is the motivator, and that is how we need to relate this to ourselves.

What is the nature of the 'I' that says, '/ am interested in this, so therefore it is favourable for *me*' or 'this is not in accordance with *my* interests'? How does this 'I' appear to oneself? This is the main point to analyse. So when one scrutinises and analyses carefully, it will become apparent that the 'I' to which one relates (the referent 'I'), is an 'I' that appears to exist independently and self-sufficiently, which does not depend on or relate to anything else; an 'I' which really seems solid and independent. When relating to our interests and so forth, it is that kind of 'I' to what we refer.

1.2. Advice to strive for high status as long as emptiness is not realised

It is important to pay attention here to the sequence of the text. Having earlier mentioned that without realising

emptiness one will have to endlessly circle in cyclic existence, one may wonder, 'If I have not gained the realisation of emptiness yet, then what practices can I do?'. So this is a practical section that explains the necessary practices in which to engage, for those who have not yet gained the realisation of emptiness. Thus we can engage in the practices that will become the causes for obtaining high status.

The relevant verse reads:

*125 Therefore, as long as the doctrine removing
The conception of I is not known,
Take heed of the practices
Of giving, ethics, and patience.*

Gyalsab Je explains the meaning of the verse in this way:

As you will circle in samsara due to the grasping to the self; *therefore, as long as the doctrine removing the conception of I is not known*; [Nagarjuna advises] *take heed* and pay respect to the sixteen practices of high status which include *practices* such as *giving, ethics, and patience*.

As explained earlier *the doctrine* refers specifically to the doctrine removing the conception of 'I', which is the doctrine that presents emptiness. Until that is known and understood profoundly, one needs to take heed and pay attention to the causes for high status, which are subsumed into the sixteen practices.

In his concise presentation, Nagarjuna's advice is to engage in the sixteen practices of high status, which include the practices of giving, ethics and patience. Of the various practices, it is said that the Buddha attributed primary importance to these practices.

- *Giving* is the main cause to acquire sufficient resources in order to further our practice. So having good conditions and plenty of resources is dependent upon the practice of giving. Therefore the practice of generosity is strongly emphasised in the teachings, and Nagarjuna emphasises that point here as well. So it is really important that we take these practices to heart and not underestimate the value of the practice of giving.
- The practice of *ethics* is the primary cause for obtaining a fortunate rebirth in the next lifetime. A fortunate rebirth is said to be based on the moral ethics that we observe now. That is also strongly emphasised here.
- The practice of *patience* is a primary cause for obtaining intact sense faculties and also good physical features.

So these three practices are therefore specifically emphasised in the text.

The sixteen practices are the very core practices needed to secure a fortunate rebirth in the next lifetime. As presented earlier in chapter one, the sixteen practices are divided into thirteen that are to be discarded or abandoned, and the three that we need to adopt.

The thirteen practices to be abandoned include the ten non-virtues. The actual practice is the abandonment of the ten non-virtues and the adoption of their opposites which are the ten virtues. Practising in this way is one of the causes of the human and godly states. In addition to these ten there are three other practices to be abandoned, which are abandoning wrong livelihood (and adopting the right livelihood); abandoning intoxicants such as alcohol; and refraining from harmfulness (and thus practising non-harmfulness).

The three practices to adopt are generosity, making offerings respectfully, and practising love.

It is good to refer back to these and try to remember the actual order of the practices. We may safely assume that we are practising them, but when asked to list what is it that we are practising, if we are not be able to give an account of what they are, that would be inappropriate.

2. ACTUAL EXPLANATION OF THE CAUSE AND EFFECT OF HIGH STATUS

This is sub-divided into three:

- 2.1. Achieving the causes for high status
- 2.2. Forsaking the causes of bad transmigrations
- 2.3. Summary: Abandoning non-practices and achieving the practices

2.1. Achieving the causes for high status

This has two subdivisions:

- 2.1.1. General exhortation to practise the causes for high status
- 2.1.2. Training in the special causes of high status

2.1.1. General exhortation to practise the causes for high status

This is further sub-divided into three:

- 2.1.1.1. Practising causes having five benefits
- 2.1.1.2. Practice is the best policy
- 2.1.1.3. Forsaking bad policies

2.1.1.1. PRACTISING CAUSES HAVING FIVE BENEFITS

The verses relate to this heading are very direct.

*126 A Lord of the Earth who performs actions
With their prior, intermediary,
And final practices
Is not harmed here or in the future.*

*127 Through the practices there are fame and
happiness here,
There is no fear now or at the point of death,
In the next life happiness flourishes,
Therefore always observe the practices.*

As his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of the verses:

For a Lord of the Earth [king] who performs any action of body, speech and mind, with the prior [thought] of Dharma, intermediary [thought of] Dharma, and final practices of Dharma, there will be no harm in this and future lives.

The *Lord of the Earth* refers to the king, to whom Nagarjuna is actually presenting these points, which are that *any action of body, speech and mind*, must have a *prior [thought] of Dharma*, an *intermediary [thought of] Dharma*, and the *final practices of Dharma*. Then *there will be no harm in this and future lives*.

We really need to be mindful of these points. The motivation for any activity that one engages in, needs to be preceded by a good thought and a positive mind, which is described here as Dharma. During the activity it is good to also secure a positive mind and when one completes the activity one should also have the positive mind of the Dharma. Thus the Dharma, or positive mind, needs to be present at all three times — prior to engaging in the activity, during the actual activity and at the completion of the activity. That will ensure the activity is a meaningful activity or real Dharma, and will cause no harm in this or future lives.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary then explains the meaning of the second verse, which includes the five benefits indicated by the heading. By following the practice of securing whatever activity one does with prior Dharma, intermediary Dharma and final Dharma, that activity will be a virtuous activity

that causes no harm to other living beings. Therefore when one secures that virtuous activity into their life, there will be no harm towards other beings. To the king (who is the explicit disciple here) Nagarjuna says, 'if you engage in your practice in this way, then there will be no harm in this life and in future lives'.

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je states:

Through the practices there is fame here in this worldly existence. By refraining from negativity, there are no regrets and thus there is mental happiness. Also since one is protected from the harm of non-humans there is no fear now and at the point of death, no fear of the lower realms. And in the next life, happiness of the higher rebirths flourishes. Because there are these five benefits, [Nagarjuna exhorts] therefore always observe the practices.

It is necessary for kings to be able to work with others, and for this it is important to be well known as having a good reputation. Such *fame* provides the conditions for a king to be able to work with others. If the king actually engages in *practices* that do not harm but actually benefit others, the good reputation of the king will naturally prevail.

Furthermore, *by refraining from negativity there are no regrets*. This is really very true. When one refrains from negativity, there is no need to have any regrets and *thus there is mental happiness*. A sense of regret weighs down the mind, so having no regrets will thus bring a sense of natural ease and mental happiness. Furthermore by engaging in virtuous deeds and refraining from harming others, *one is protected from the harm of non-humans*. So there is no fear now in this existence, and at the time of death there will be no fear of the lower realms. Then, the happiness of higher rebirths will flourish.

2.1.1.2. PRACTICE IS THE BEST POLICY

More literally, in Tibetan it says 'the supreme Dharma is the best policy'

The results of the practices listed in the last section are described in the next verse, which reads:

*128 The practices are the best policy,
It is through them that the world is pleased;
Neither here nor in the future is one cheated
By a world that has been pleased.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains that:

The Dharma practices for obtaining a high status are the best policy amongst all policies of kings. Thus, it is through the Dharma practice that the world is conquered and pleased. By a world that has been pleased, oneself and others will neither be cheated here in this life nor in future lives, thus rely upon this excellent doctrine.

This is very profound advice! It describes how much benefit would be gained if a king ruled a country in accordance with the practices described previously. Nagarjuna suggests that the king should avoid adopting bad or faulty policies and adopt the correct and virtuous policies. As explained here, if the king adopts faulty policies it will only cause others in the country to become displeased, which will adversely affect the reputation of the king himself. Furthermore the king would not earn the trust of his subjects. Conversely, if the king adopts virtuous policies, then due to *Dharma practice the world is conquered and pleased*. So the way to please and gain the trust of his subjects is to adopt the virtuous policies (which encompasses Dharma practices). When the world is pleased, the king, his subjects and others, *will neither be*

cheated in this life nor in future lives. This is the best way to rule.

2.1.1.3. FORSAKING BAD POLICIES

Having presented the need to practise the best policy, the teaching now introduces the bad policies and what they are. The three sub-divisions of this category are:

2.1.1.3.1. Unsuitability of relying on bad treatises

2.1.1.3.2. Scorning reliance on bad treatises

2.1.1.3.3. Special policy for practice

2.1.1.3.1. *Unsuitability of relying on bad treatises*

The root text says:

*129 The world is displeased
By the policies of non-practice.
Due to the displeasure of the world
One is not pleased here or in the future.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains:

The world is displeased by the policies of non-Dharma practices, such as faulty policies of kings and the proclamation of violence as virtue and so forth. Due to the displeasure of the world, one is not pleased here or in the future; thus you must abandon faulty policies.

This is quite clear.

2.1.1.3.2. *Scorning reliance on bad treatises*

This following two verses relate to this heading:

130 How could those with senseless deviant minds

*On a path to bad transmigrations,
Wretched, intent on deceiving others,
Have understood what is meaningful?*

*131 How could those intent on deceiving others
Be persons of policy?*

*Through it they themselves will be cheated
In many thousands of births.*

With respect to the first verse Gyaltsab Je explains:

How could those who don't have any sense of fulfilling the goals of other living beings and thus are possessed with senseless deviant minds and on a path to bad transmigration; who are wretched [because of possessing corrupt wisdom] and intent on deceiving others, have understood what is meaningful? They have not, because they engage in contradictory harmful actions.

The reason why people do not understand what is *meaningful* is *because they engage in contradictory and harmful actions.*

Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of the second verse thus:

How could those intent on deceiving others with faulty royal policies, be persons of policy? They are not, because through it, only they themselves will be cheated in many thousands of births.

2.1.1.3.3. *Special policy for practice*

This heading can be read more literally as 'the policy of the supreme Dharma'.

The relevant verse is:

*132 Even if you seek to harm an enemy,
You should remove your own defects and
cultivate good qualities.
Through that you will help yourself,
And the enemy will be displeased.*

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

Even if you seek to harm an enemy, you should remove your defects and cultivate good qualities; as through that action you will only help or receive benefits yourself. Besides, the enemy who lacks inspiration for the Dharma will be displeased, and you will not incur the slightest misdeed.

2.1.2. Training in the special causes of high status

This section has three sub-divisions:

2.1.2.1. Training in the four ways of assembling students

2.1.2.2. Training in the four: speaking truth, generosity, peace, and wisdom

2.1.2.3. Relying on special associates who cause increase of virtue

Here again we can contemplate the profound advice and kindness of Nagarjuna.

2.1.2.1. TRAINING IN THE FOUR WAYS OF ASSEMBLING STUDENTS

This material is also explained in other teachings. Just as there are certain measures to conquer or subdue one's own mind, there are also specific practices related to gathering or assembling other students.

These four practices are presented in the verse itself, which reads:

*133 You should cause the assembling
Of the religious and the worldly
Through giving, speaking pleasantly,
Purposeful behaviour, and concordant
behaviour.*

The verse clearly and specifically states that the four ways of assembling students are *giving, speaking pleasantly, purposeful behaviour* and *concordant behaviour*.

Gyaltsab Je's explanation begins:

Through the four means of assembling, that is giving by engaging in the three types of giving;...

Here, we can see the importance of the practice of generosity. It is explained as the very first of the means to gather or assemble those who are earnest in practising the Dharma. The way to gather is through the act of generosity. We can note that the Christian tradition adopts this practice very well. The way the missionaries convert others is by firstly being very generous, which is how they attract followers, who are then converted.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

...speaking pleasantly on the topics of high status and definite goodness...

In this context *speaking pleasantly* clearly refers to the virtues and causes for obtaining high status and definite goodness. In other teachings, such as chapter 5 *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, Shantideva explains that speaking pleasantly means speech that is meaningful and concordant with what was said earlier and later i.e. there is a direct relationship between the elements of the speech, and also that one speaks briefly i.e. not too much and to the point¹. As Shantideva also mentions in his text, speaking pleasantly includes even a simple greeting² - when someone comes, welcome them, and ask them if they are well and if they would like anything, whether or not they were tired along the journey, whether they are comfortable etc. In this way pleasant speech refers to daily activities like greeting someone or just relating to someone, whatever their circumstances.

¹ Verse 79

² Verse 36

As mentioned earlier, generosity is a way to make a connection with people. When you give something to another, they appreciate it and will naturally feel some affinity, kinship or closeness to you. So when they draw close, what Dharma does one need to present to them? What is most beneficial for them at the present and in the future? The temporary benefit for them is, as explained here, the presentation of the practices that create the causes for high status, and that temporary benefit is of the most use to them at the present. Then the ultimate benefit to relay to them is definite goodness. When they feel comfort and trust and so forth, then one can present what is the most beneficial for them. So initially, give something to relieve an immediate state of suffering and then present them with the method that will relieve all suffering. That is how the sequence works.

When speaking pleasantly, we do not need to immediately resort to a high level of practice. We can work at a very practical and personal level. The very act of pouring tea for someone and then sharing stories or experiences over the tea, benefits the other person. Engaging in pleasing and beneficial speech in this way will soothe the pain of others. So this method can also be very practical. If we engage in this seemingly mundane activity with a good motivation, it can actually become very beneficial and worthwhile. It is good to bear that in mind as we engage with others in such activities as having tea, a meal and so forth; these practices can still apply.

The next way of assembling students is *purposeful behaviour*. Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

...*purposeful behaviour* in causing others to practise what is beneficial...

It is not sufficient to just present the Dharma to the other person and then leave them to their own devices. We need to really help and encourage them to put it into practice by showing them examples. Then the person receives the actual benefit of what has been presented.

The last of the four ways of assembling students is to engage in *concordant behaviour*. The commentary states:

...and to engage in *concordant behaviour* by practising what one teaches others.

This is really a very important point. It would not be appropriate to impart advice and teach others how to practise in a certain way, if we then fail to practise it ourselves. That would not go down well with others at all. This point actually refers to those so-called teachers who are complacent, thinking that as long as they have something to say to others, then that is sufficient. For them, being a teacher is limited to giving advice to others, whilst failing to put it into practice themselves. But in order to be a real teacher and to inspire others, it is necessary to put into practice whatever one teaches.

This is very profound advice from Nagarjuna. This way of benefitting others is presented really well, in a very meaningful, logical and practical way. In order to benefit others, one first needs to develop closeness by helping them on a very practical level through generosity, by giving them what will be of immediate assistance. After gaining their trust through closeness, then speak pleasingly with them, which particularly relates to giving them the advice of the teachings, thus providing them with a temporary and an ultimate benefit. Then further exhort them so as to help them to engage in the practice, and in order to that put it into

practice oneself. That is the comprehensive way to assemble students.

Finally the commentary concludes with this exhortation to the king by Nagarjuna.

You should cause the assembling of the religious and the worldly.

Before we end the session tonight, let us spend a few minutes reciting the Tara mantra. Ani Rigdal has gone to hospital today to have her knee surgery, so we can dedicate the mantras in order for her surgery to be successful. She saw me before going to the hospital and said that she was a little bit nervous, and asked me to recite some prayers for her. Of course I will do what I can, but I feel that it will also be good as a group to do some recitation together for her.

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Edited Version
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