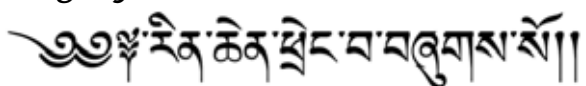


Nagarjuna's Precious Garland



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Based on the aspirations and motivation as recited in the *Refuge and Bodhichitta Prayer*, we generate the appropriate motivation and engage in the practice of meditation. [Meditation]

2.1.2.3. RELYING ON SPECIAL ASSOCIATES WHO CAUSE INCREASE OF VIRTUE

In the last session the summation or the abbreviated explanation of the four trainings was explained. It pointed out that in order to uphold one's training one needs to rely on special associates or virtuous friends who cause an increase of virtue. Under that heading there are three subdivisions:

2.1.2.3.1. Characteristics of special associates

2.1.2.3.2. Suitability of following special associates

2.1.2.3.3. Continuously meditating on the imminence of death

We have covered the first: *Characteristics of special associates*

2.1.2.3.2. Suitability of following special associates

The verse basically presents the characteristics or the sign of a virtuous friend under four particular features. As the verse reads:

140 *Wisdom and practice always grow
For one who keeps company
With those who speak advisedly,
Who are pure, and who have unstained wisdom
and compassion.*

Although the explanation of this verse was covered in our last session it is important that we generate a real good understanding of the points related here. Specifically this involves trying to recognise the qualities or characteristics of a virtuous friend in relation to oneself. As the text mentions, virtuous friends are personally important because they allow our virtues to increase. The importance of recognising virtuous friends is related to this. In relation to the four characteristics given earlier, the commentary discussed how, when one is relating to the king, one should avoid using flattering words and use instead words which are truthful but soothing and pleasant. So, as the connotation of the Tibetan word used in this first characteristic makes clear, one should first avoid flattering words because the implication is that if others want to help your virtue to increase, they should be truthful while also communicating the truth in a manner suitable or appropriate for our mind.

As the commentary explains, the second point refers to the importance of having a pure mind which in this context refers to *having less desire and having contentment*. Thus an appropriate virtuous friend should not only be truthful but also have less desire and more contentment.

The third point relates to wisdom. As the commentary explains, this refers specifically to the wisdom knowing all mundane and Dharma activities. So again here we can relate to the very sound advice that Nagarjuna is presenting to the king as the direct recipient. He is to have associates or

virtuous friends who have the wisdom that is knowledge of both the mundane and the Dharma. Likewise the king needs to be skilled in both aspects because he is interested in the Dharma and its practise as evidenced by Nagarjuna's bestowing of this teaching on him. And, in order to facilitate his Dharma progress he needs virtuous friends who are wise in Dharma practice and understanding. That is the basis. However, a virtuous friend of that kind would also have to have knowledge of the mundane because the king has a responsibility to rule his subjects. Knowledge of mundane affairs is necessary for that purpose. If such is lacking then he will be less able to deal with the mundane affairs of his subjects.

As the commentary details, the last point of the 'characteristics of a virtuous friend of the king' concerns how if you are to benefit others you must be endowed with less anger and have compassion. Once again these are vital points for the king's personal Dharma practice as well as his kingly duties of serving his citizens. If the king's associates have less anger this will influence the king beneficially in turn. Such is extremely important because, like others, the king is also open to influence and thus the influences need to be positive ones. Just as the king needs to have a positive and calm demeanour to rule his subjects successfully, so do we need such special associates in order to receive their positive influence. In the same manner, if we associate with someone who gets angry we will take that attribute upon ourselves. We will be influenced to likewise get angry. Because it is important for the king to have a positive and calm composure in order to successfully rule, it is thus important for his associates to have calmness and less anger. This is also something we need to reflect upon ourselves, as important features to possess oneself, which will assist us in helping others with whom we associate.

The commentary concludes in the explanation of the verse with:

If you were to associate with such friends who are unstained by the faults contrary to these characteristics, then wisdom as well as Dharma practice will always increase and grow.

This shows the importance of relying on such friends.

From the outline the next subdivision is:

2.1.2.3.2. Suitability of following special associates

Having defined the characteristics of a special associate or a virtuous friend, Nagarjuna now exhorts the king to rely upon such friends. When you have a special associate endowed with these special characteristics it is suitable and important to actually rely upon them. In order for the king's virtues to increase he must do this. It is suitable to rely upon them because then you would be able to get the actual benefit. This is the basis of Nagarjuna's exhortation which is extended in the next two verses:

141 *Rare are helpful speakers,
Listeners are very rare,
But rarer still are those who act at once
On words that though unpleasant are
beneficial.*

142 *Therefore having realised that though
unpleasant
It is helpful, act on it quickly,
Just as to cure an illness one drinks
Dreadful medicine from one who cares.*

Nagarjuna's use of very skilful means and sound reasoning is evident here. As the commentary explains the meaning of these verses (starting with Verse 41)

Even though it may sound unpleasant, it is advisable to listen to words that are beneficial. That is because it is *rare* to find *helpful speakers*,...

Up to this point in the commentary, the explanation deals with how it is suitable to listen to advice or to words that are beneficial. One of the main reasons for this is because it is rare to find speakers who are beneficial. In other words, there may not be many who dare speak the truth and tell beneficial words to you. Thus, it is quite rare. So when you find someone who is suitable, you should rely upon them.

As the commentary further explains:

...and *listeners* to beneficial words *are very rare*. But *rarer still are those who by recognising the beneficial words, act at once on words that though unpleasant are beneficial*.

According to the literal Tibetan translation, instead of "are very rare" we should say "*are even more rare*". Speakers who utter beneficial words are themselves rare but those who listen to those beneficial words are even rarer still. That is of course very true. We can see that no matter how much good advice we get ourselves, we seem to put it in one ear and throw it out the other. Good advice never seems to be retained. In our life this is very true. What is actually being explained here is the importance of recognising the rarity of speakers of beneficial words, those who listen to them and then implementing the advice, which is even rarer. In dependence upon appreciating such rarity we will see how such words, even when unpleasant, are actually beneficial for us. Thus, we should act on them accordingly. This is how the commentary relates to the earlier points.

The commentary now further explains the meaning of the second verse:

Therefore, O king, having realised that though other's words may be unpleasant but that it is helpful; investigate and act on it quickly. For example, just as to cure an illness one drinks dreadful medicine given by someone who cares.

These are again very essential points relayed with reasonings and examples. We must realise that others' words (of advice) even though unpleasant to hear, are personally helpful and thus should be acted upon quickly. Upon hearing them we investigate their meaning, comprehend their beneficial value and then respond accordingly, without any delay. As explained by the commentary, the analogy of foul-tasting medicine illustrates the point: *just as to cure an illness one drinks dreadful medicine given by someone who cares*. When medication is prescribed for an illness we may have, it might not be very tasty or pleasant. In fact, most times it is not at all tasty and is unpleasant to take. However, because we realise it has been given to us with loving care and will benefit us, although unpleasant, we will willingly take it in order to be cured. We can relate these points to how we define an enemy. As His Holiness explains, 'it is not just from the harm that one receives from the other that one would justify or define one as being an enemy'. As far as harm goes, even doctors may cause us pain from their treatments. However we don't consider a doctor or someone who nurses us as an enemy, but rather someone who doesn't care for us. So the basis upon which we consider someone else the enemy is not just the 'pain' but rather the harmful intent of the other person that defines them as being an enemy. Because someone has a

harmful intent we consider them an enemy and because someone has beneficial intent we consider them friend or someone who cares for oneself. These are also related points to understand.

Thus we can relate the explanations under this heading to our own daily lives in terms of how we recognise virtuous friends and special associates and how we might rely upon them. The next subdivision from the outline is:

2.1.2.3.3. *Continuously meditating on the imminence of death*

What is being related here is generating the awareness of impermanence and death.

The verse which relates to this reads:

143 *Always considering the impermanence
Of life, health, and dominion,
You thereby will make intense effort
Solely at the practices.*

As the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

Life and health are constantly surrounded by many destroyers such as hostile enemies; therefore always consider the impermanence of one's life and dominion. Having thought about death and impermanence again and again, you thereby will make intense effort, solely at the practice of Dharma.

Here the main point concerns what we regard as precious: which is our life as well as our health. Just because we are living now is not a reason to assume that death will not come; and just because we may have good health now is not a reason to assume that death will not come. The reason that death is imminent is based on the fact that our life is constantly being depleted or exhausted. Considering health, we may be in relatively good and sound health now but that is no guarantee that an illness will not become a cause of death at any given moment. Therefore by reflecting upon these realities, Nagarjuna is exhorting the king to really examine and question the validity of the belief in the permanence of oneself and of one's dominion. On a personal level, one must realise that one and one's wealth are equally changing constantly. They are in the nature of changing from moment to moment, thus there is no point being attached to them. As Nagarjuna is exhorting the king, the benefit of "*having thought about death and impermanence again and again*" will become an impetus for us to really put one's mind into the practice of Dharma and to be determined in the practise. This is how Nagarjuna encourages the king.

The presentation of death and impermanence here is basically the same as presented in the Lam Rim. For example, consider Nagarjuna's point raised here to the Lam Rim point where it mentions there are many factors that contribute to our death and very few factors that sustain our life. It is really the same point because, as the commentary explains, the king's life and health *are constantly surrounded by many destroyers such as hostile enemies, for as a king, he is more prone to having enemies who wish to invade his nation and destroy him*. So it is as if the king is constantly surrounded by the causes of his own death. Bringing that sort of reality to mind will make the king aware of the fact that his life is quite fragile. Likewise, in relation to the king's health, even though he may be healthy and strong with stamina, Nagarjuna is reminding the king that such is not a suitable reason to think 'I am invincible and will not die.' The fact of reality is that the causes for death can happen at any time. We have many examples of how having sound health is not a factor preventing death. We have seen people,

relatively in good health, actually die before someone who is supposed to be ill and sick.

In relation to someone I personally know myself, a relative of someone had gone out to play golf in the morning and he was in sound health and everything was fine. During the golf game when he hit the ball, he fell unconscious and was pronounced dead soon afterwards. So in the morning he went out sound and healthy to play a sport, but by the end of the day he was pronounced dead! This is one instance that came to my notice not long ago, but there are many similar instances. We can see so many people who go out in the morning all ready to face the day in sound health and by that evening they will face death. This happens on a regular basis. These are the facts and realities of the situation. So in relation to oneself, these are also points for us to consider and thus determine what's really important in our life. For us, while we may enjoy good health now, we should also remind ourselves that this is not a reason to be complacent [Geshe-la laughs] and to think that one is okay and that there is no rush to practise Dharma because one is in good health.

One of the points mentioned in the teachings about death and impermanence is that there is no certainty as to the time of death. That also relates to the fact that there is no fixed order as to who will die first. Conventionally, we may assume that older people die first and the younger ones follow, but in fact and reality this is not the case at all. Some younger people die way before some older people do. Therefore there is no specific order as to who dies first. It is not the case that the older people will die first and eventually the younger ones will follow. There is no fixed order like that. So these are yet further points to consider about the fact and reality that there is no certainty of when death will happen. Even though death is certain itself, there is no certainty of the time of death. It could happen at any time in one's life.

The reason these realities are presented is to impel us to practise the Dharma. That is the main point. By relating these points to our own personal Dharma practice we will notice their real force and then really feel the imminence and inevitability of our own death. Then naturally, as we bring that reality to mind, it definitely has an effect of reducing strong attachment to our immediate status and possessions and so forth. This is the reference of the line: "*the concerns for this life naturally subside*". More awareness and contemplation of the benefits of a future life will arise and become dominant and apparent to oneself. To the extent that it reduces strong attachment to the affairs of this life, it definitely gives a genuine sense of calmness and peacefulness in one's mind. It actually has this positive affect. Now in relation to reducing attachment to one's possessions (which was also mentioned previously), we must not misinterpret this to mean that in order to be a Dharma practitioner or spiritual practitioner, one needs to get rid of one's things or not care about one's possessions. It doesn't mean that. We can still use our possessions and wealth and so forth, but the main point here is to reduce attachment to one's possessions. The stronger the attachment we have to our possessions, wealth or status, the more anxiety it causes in our own mind. It makes our mind restless and anxious. So in order to be free from that, reducing attachment to our possessions and so forth will certainly help. This is the practical benefit and a way to deal with this advice.

We can consider another practical outcome of not having strong attachment to one's possessions and wealth, particularly in relation to money. During the recent financial crisis, we would have noticed those who out of a desire to make more money invested in situations that were unstable and unreliable. When their plans fell through they lost everything. The cause of this was the intention of wanting to increase whatever they had. In contrast, those who had less desire and contentment secured whatever money they had by keeping it in a bank, even though with low interest. They felt: 'its fine, I don't need to worry too much about getting more interest'. In this way, due to being content and having less desire they still have their money now. This is also a very practical example of how reducing strong desire to possessions and wealth has real advantages.

In another of his texts called *The Friendly Letter* Nagarjuna explains explicitly that the purpose of wealth is to have satisfaction. That is the purpose of wealth. Then he goes on further to explain how one gets satisfaction from *contentment*. When you develop contentment, then you get satisfaction. Therefore, in that particular context, Nagarjuna is not implying 'get rid of your wealth' but rather he points out the purpose of wealth: which is to get satisfaction. He then explains how 'the manner of getting satisfaction is by developing contentment'. So we can relate that to the same points made here.

To relate a particular instance; recently I went down to the St Kilda sea baths with Geshe Sonam and we encountered someone who was about to bathe, who was just sitting on the edge of the pool. Geshe Sonam happened to engage in a conversation with him and spoke at some length. Later Geshe Sonam related to me their discussion. He had told Geshe Sonam that he had reached a point in his life where he felt that he had accumulated sufficient amount of money which he intended to invest. He felt that was fine for him. He even quit his job and was feeling quite happy and satisfied that his invested money would help carry him through the next stage of his life. But then he said 'now at this point, I have lost all of that money and I have also lost my job, so I am left with nothing right now!' thus he was lamenting.

The main point we must draw from the meaning of the verse, is that one needs to really consider impermanence and death because that becomes a real impetus for making one's Dharma practice more genuine and stable. It is not sufficient to just occasionally think about death and impermanence, but to constantly be mindful and aware of it. This becomes the basis for us to really practise soundly. As one of my own teachers, Khensur Ugyen Tsetan Rinpoche would advise: "take refuge and contemplate on death and impermanence. If you do that regularly, it will be good for you and your mind". That was really a practical and sound advice.

I've had some very intimate conversations with Khensur Rinpoche and our conversations were never on mundane things. There was always some Dharma context, particularly from Khensur Rinpoche's side. He would never engage in 'worldly talk'. Once he asked me 'what do you meditate on?' and I responded by saying 'well I try to meditate on bodhichitta'. To that Khensur Rinpoche replied 'perhaps that is good, but your bodhichitta might be just left on mere words, skimming the surface. So maybe it is more appropriate to meditate on death and taking refuge'. Being very open and frank in the conversations I responded that 'yes, it may be on the surface and merely with words, but it does seem to have some affect on my mind'. At times I

would spend more than two hours in conversation with him. Even though he would normally spend most of his day doing his prayers, when we engage in lengthy conversations at the end he would say 'today we had a very good and worthwhile time discussing the Dharma'. He was always very happy and joyfully assisted me in the talk of Dharma.

We now come to the next sub-division from the earlier category which is:

2.2. Forsaking the causes of bad transmigrations

This is sub-divided into two:

2.2.1. Brief explanation

2.2.2. Extensive explanation

The first:

2.2.1. Brief explanation

This is covered in the next two verses:

144 *Seeing that death is certain
And that, having died, you suffer from ill deeds,
You should not commit ill deeds
Though there might be temporary pleasure.*

The commentary explains the meaning of verse 144 first, which reads:

Death is certain, thus *having seen that death is certain and that having died, you suffer from ill deeds*, experienced as completing karma in a happy rebirth and both completing and throwing karma in an unfortunate rebirth; *you should not commit ill deeds, though there may be some temporary pleasures.*

Here the explanation deals again with the topic of death and impermanence presented in the *Lam Rim* teachings, specifically, the first point of death meditation: that death is certain. Having taken that into account and accepted the reality, one needs to consider what comes next – after death you suffer the ill-deeds of either a happy rebirth or an unfortunate rebirth. Therefore, when at the end of the verse it mentions "*you should not commit ill deeds, though there may be some temporary pleasures*" you must recognise how, in committing some negative or ill deeds there might be some temporary enjoyment or pleasure but regardless of that, due to the negative consequences for our future life, we must resolve to abandon and not engage in those negative deeds.

The commentary explains that whenever one commits negative deeds or negative karma, the experience is suffering. In a happy rebirth the experience of suffering is a *completing karma*. So the explanation here is that while the *throwing karma* to be reborn human may have been virtuous, the completing karma (based on ill deeds) will ripen in that human life as suffering. This is why we see examples of humans whose whole life seems to be consumed by suffering, where so many difficulties and problems arise one after the other. There are so many misfortunes, so many things going wrong. Even though reborn as a human there is so much suffering experienced as a result of that past-life negativity. The suffering indicates that while the throwing karma had been virtuous, the *completing karma* was non-virtuous. This is how we need to understand it. What is being explained here is that even if one were to be reborn in a higher rebirth, the fact that one has to experience suffering continuously is a result of having created negative karma. That is why suffering is experienced even in a happy rebirth. In an unfortunate rebirth it due to both completing and throwing karma being non-virtuous that suffering is caused. In other words, by being reborn in an unfortunate rebirth, if both the completing and the throwing karma have

been non-virtuous, then the result is suffering in an unfortunate rebirth. That is how the suffering is experienced from the result of ill-deeds.

As the commentary then further quotes from a sutra:

As stated in the sutras:

*O King, do not commit the act of killing,
For all beings cherish their life dearly.
If you yourself wish to have a long life,
Refrain from even the thought of killing.*

Thus, even though it may cause a slight temporary discomfort, because ultimately there is benefit, it is best to perform virtuous deeds.

This is actually quite clear. In the sutra the Buddha is exhorting a certain king to not commit the act of killing because life is something most precious and dear to all living beings. All beings cherish their life very dearly. Also one should not commit an act of robbing or taking away something very dear to other beings. Considering this further we see the benefit for oneself. If you wish to have long life, then refrain even from the thought of killing. This is how the Buddha exhorted the king to refrain from the act of killing and even from the thought of killing. This quote might also be the source for the advice to liberate animals. We have a tradition of liberating animals. It is considered as a very good practice for increasing the life span of those to whom we dedicate the merits.

145 *Sometimes no horror is seen
And sometimes it is.
If there is comfort in one,
Why do you have no fear for the other?*

The commentary reads:

Sometimes the horrible effects of a bad deed are not seen until the next life, and sometimes they are seen in this life. If comfort is taken because the effects are not seen, why do you have no fear of those actions when the effects are seen? It is appropriate that you generate fear.

The king, as a direct recipient of this advice, is being exhorted to be wary of committing ill-deeds, even those for which the results might not be currently seen. This is because the effects of certain ill-deeds may not be experienced immediately in which case they might not cause fear inclining us to desist from performing such actions. In other words, understanding that ill-effects are caused by negative actions gives reason to avoid committing even those negative actions for which the suffering results are not immediately apparent. The reason why Nagarjuna presented this advice in this manner is because we can underestimate the ill-effects of certain actions, precisely because we can't see their effects. Therefore, not seeing any negative consequences we may rationalise: 'its okay, there is no negative effect from doing this'. But if one regularly resorts to committing these negative deeds, then the ill-effects will definitely occur in the next or subsequent lives. On the basis of understanding this, while there might be no immediate fear, one must nevertheless resolve to not commit such actions now. That is the main point. It also relates to the earlier point concerning how even though there is some pleasure in committing some ill-deeds now, by contemplating the negative consequences for a future life, one must avoid committing such deeds. The context is similar. Therefore Nagarjuna is mainly advising the king that one must refrain from negative deeds at all costs because of the eventual negative consequences for oneself, even if not now obvious. It is thus appropriate to develop

this 'fear' which would have us wary of committing negative deeds at all times, irrespective of the current visibility of the consequences. To give a clear illustration we can relate to our own personal life. We would not even consider committing certain deeds for which we know the consequences to be grave. If we robbed a bank we would definitely go to gaol. Being punished in this way is an obvious outcome. That is an obvious outcome of such negative consequences in this very lifetime. Knowing these we will naturally become hesitant about committing such deeds. On the other hand, if it is a matter of taking something small without asking, with the justification that it is only small, or they wouldn't know or mind it, then we mightn't have much hesitation taking that small thing. However, taking without permission, still constitutes an act of stealing even if minor. It is thus a negative or ill-deed. So, we may feel compelled to take something small, thinking that there will be no ill-consequences. What Nagarjuna is stressing is that the very fact that it is an ill-deed means that negative consequences will follow; so reflecting upon that we should refrain from negative deeds.

2.2.2. Extensive explanation

From the outline the next couple of verses are explained under the heading of *Extensive Explanation*. There are four main sub-divisions:

2.2.2.1. Stopping attachment to intoxicants

2.2.2.2. Stopping attachment to gambling

2.2.2.3. Stopping attachment to women

2.2.2.4. Stopping hunting

In relation to the actual Tibetan word, it could mean actual hunting or gathering animals for the sake of profit, by eventually slaughtering them for their skin and so forth. In either case it relates to slaughtering animals. Again, Nagarjuna goes into detailed explanation of how to refrain from these vices such as intoxicants, gambling and so forth as a means to create the causes for one's future rebirth.

We can leave the explanations for our following sessions.

Next Tuesday apparently coincides with the anniversary of Lama Tsong Khapa's passing away. Then the following Tuesday will be a discussion for you with the exam the following week. Then I think that is it, the end of the year.

A few verses further on in the chapter, what comes up in the explanation is introducing the special marks of the Buddha, the enlightened being, particularly the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks. Actually, these are very important to familiarise ourselves with and understand. When we do certain practices relating to a deity, it mentions in brief that the enlightened deity is 'beautified with all the signs and marks of an enlightened being'. So as we recite these lines in our practice, in order to gain some sort of affinity with what it relates to, it would be good for us to study and gain familiarity with at least some of the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks – to recognise what actually they are. So even if one cannot remember all of them distinctively, to study and become familiar by reading about them will mean we have some idea when we do our practices. To that extent, it has a significant benefit for oneself. But it also has the benefit of generating admiration and faith, by relating to the qualities of an enlightened being.

So, in the text, the thirty-two major marks are explained in detail, quite explicitly. However the eighty minor marks are not explained in much detail. Nagarjuna explains to the king 'I won't go into much detail with those'. However we do have other texts, translated in English, of all of those marks

and signs. So it is good for us to prepare a bit during the break; to read and become familiar so that when we come upon a reference we will have some basis of knowing what is meant. So in relation to the particular features of the Buddha-like signs, one of them with which we will be familiar from images is the spiral hair on the forehead. It is said that when pulled, this spiral hair can expand for a certain distance and when let go, it spirals back onto the forehead. Each of individual hair of the Buddha is said to spiral clockwise, which includes the hairs on the Buddha's body. There are particular causes for obtaining this feature and a specific significance of having this feature. So it is good to study and understand what all of that signifies.

Also that spiral of hair on the Buddha's head is what also makes the *ushnisha* – the crowning top-knot. In relation to the protrusion on the Buddha's head, when young kids in my home town got into fights there was a saying 'if you are not careful I will bash you on the head and make it like the Buddha's protrusion'. [*Geshe-la laughs*] So it was a remark to scare somebody else off. 'If I bash you on the head you will get a big bump that looks like the Buddha's protrusion'. That was one of the remarks to scare someone off.

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Edited Version

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