

Very white teeth, even teeth, well set,
Forty complete in number,
Azure eyes, eyelashes like a magnificent cow's:
These thirty-two are the signs.¹

The **first** of the signs, *hands and feet having the signs of wheels*, was introduced in our last session. The relevant verse from *Precious Garland* is:

177 *Through proper honouring of stupas,
Honourable beings, superiors, and the elderly
You will become a Universal Monarch,
Your glorious hands and feet marked with [a
design of] wheels.*

The verse presents the cause of this first sign. It is incredibly inspiring for us to see how, through the practices mentioned here, of *proper honouring of stupas, honourable beings* (which includes one's parents), *superiors and the elderly, you will become a Universal Monarch*, and *your glorious hands and feet marked with a design of wheels*. As the verse indicates, through specific practices one naturally obtains that sign on enlightenment. It is inspiring to relate the result of a specific sign to the practices that are the cause of that result.

The **second** sign as presented in *Ornament of Clear Realisation* is *tortoise feet*, which is a specific feature of the Buddha's feet. Unlike our own feet, the Buddha's feet are flat like the feet of a tortoise, which are rounded and very smooth. So, the Buddha's feet are said to be rounded and very soft, and not curved.

The verse in the root text which corresponds with this sign is:

178 *O King, always maintain firmly
What you have vowed about the practices,
You will then become a bodhisattva
With feet that are very level.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains:

O King, always maintain firmly what you have vowed and made commitments about the practices. Thus, you will then become a bodhisattva with feet that are very level, and are equally touching the ground.

Here, Nagarjuna is exhorting the king to engage in the practices that the Buddha engaged in. Practising in accordance with vows and commitments made in the past, is the specific cause, even for a bodhisattva, to obtain *feet that are very level and equally touching the ground*.

The **third** sign is *digits of the hands and feet joined with webs*. The corresponding verse from the root text reads:

179 *Through giving, speaking pleasantly,
Purposeful behaviour, and concordant
behaviour
You will have hands with glorious
Fingers joined by webs [of light].*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

Through giving, speaking pleasantly, purposeful behaviour and concordant behaviour, which are the four means of gathering, you will have hands with glorious fingers, like the king of geese, joined by webs [of light].

The *four means of gathering* refers to the four ways to benefit others by giving them the Dharma. The first of the four is *giving*, which is being generous with material needs and thus relieving others of a difficulty, which will endear us to others. *Speaking pleasantly* or using pleasant words makes others feel at ease. For example, if someone comes to visit

from far away, the first words you utter are, 'Have you had a pleasant trip? Do you feel like resting? Are you feeling OK?' Even in a worldly sense, we all appreciate such pleasant words as 'welcome' and 'very nice to see you' or 'how are you doing?'. They make us feel at ease and welcome, and are, in a conventional sense, regarded as being courteous. So the first two means of gathering disciples epitomise good conduct and the kind of behaviour that makes others feel at ease.

Once people are at ease, one then engages in *purposeful behaviour* which relates to encouraging others to engage in purposeful behaviour. The fourth means of gathering, *concordant behaviour*, relates to one's own behaviour. It is unacceptable if one encourages others to engage in good and purposeful conduct without personally practising such conduct oneself. Just as one encourages others to engage in good behaviour, one must also practise in the same way. In other words, one's own behaviour must be concordant with the advice one gives. Then, having gained the trust of others, one can impart the teachings of the Dharma. That is how great beings impart the Dharma to others.

Through these practices, one becomes enlightened and has *hands with glorious fingers, like the king of geese*. Now although we may not have come across the king of geese, we can see that the feet of geese are webbed. So, possessing such hands is a sign of having engaged in the four practices of giving Dharma.

Now we come to the **fourth** and **fifth** signs: *Hands along with feet smooth and tender and seven regions of the body elevated*. The corresponding verse from the root text is:

180 *Through abundant giving
Of the best food and drink
Your glorious hands and feet will be soft;
Your hands, feet, shoulder blades,
And the nape of your neck will broaden,
So your body will be large and those seven
areas broad.*

The explanation in Gyaltsab Je's commentary is:

Through your abundant giving, of the best food and drink to others...

Not just any kind of giving will suffice, it needs to be *abundant giving*, or continuously giving *the best food and drink* to others. Having engaged in such great acts of generosity in the past, the result will be that:

...your glorious hands and feet will be soft and youthful;...

As explained here, the hands and feet will be very soft, having an appearance of being young and tender.

The **fifth** sign according to *Ornament of Clear Realisation*, is the *seven regions of the body elevated*, which is also presented in this verse.

With regard to this Gyaltsab Je's commentary on Nagarjuna's text states:

... your hands, feet, shoulder blades, and the nape of your neck will broaden, so your body will be large and those seven areas broad.

As explained in the commentary, the seven points are the back of the hands, the two feet, two shoulder blades (or shoulders) and the back of the neck. Unlike our rather flat features, these seven features of the fifth sign are elevated and more rounded. Rather than being shallow like ours, the shoulders are further broadened as is the back of the neck.

Can you list the five signs we have covered thus far?

¹ From *Ornament for Clear Realisation* by the Protector Venerable Maitreya, reproduced with permission from FPMT.

Students: *Inaudible.*

You don't have to be embarrassed when answering questions! This is the wrong time to be shy and embarrassed. When we are engaged in virtue, there is no need to be shy and embarrassed at all! You can confidently engage in virtue. It's when you are engaging in negativity that you should be shy and embarrassed. In some ways it is quite disgraceful to be very competent when engaging in negativity, and very shy about engaging in virtue. So can you now list the five signs we have covered so far?

Students:

Hands and feet having the signs of wheels, tortoise feet;
Digits of the hands and feet joined with webs;
Hands along with feet smooth and tender;
Seven regions of the body elevated.

The next signs listed in *Ornament of Clear Realisation* are *having long digits, broad heels, a large and upright body.*

The following verse of the root text presents the **sixth**, **seventh** and **eighth** signs:

181 *Through never doing harm and freeing the
condemned
Your body will be beautiful, straight, and large,
Very tall with long fingers
And broad backs of the heels.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

*Through never doing harm to others and freeing those
who are condemned to death, your body will be beautiful
to look at, straight without bends, and large, very tall
with long fingers and broad backs of the heels.*

The **sixth** sign is that *your body will be beautiful to look at, straight without bends and large and very tall.* The **seventh** and **eighth** signs are, respectively, *long fingers* and *broad backs of the heels*. Here, the three signs are attributed to one main cause, which is *never doing harm to others and freeing those who are condemned to death.*

There is a minor difference between the presentation of *Precious Garland* and that of *Ornament for Clear Realisation*. The latter presents a specific cause for each of the three signs, whereas the former gives one main cause for all three signs. Otherwise, the general layout is the same and the presentation of the signs and marks is the same. Other texts also differ in their presentation of the explanation of the causes for these particular signs.

So *with the body being beautiful, straight without bends and large and very tall, long fingers and broad backs of the heels*, eight signs have now been covered.

The **ninth** and **tenth** signs are presented in the following verse:

182 *Through spreading the vowed practices
You will have glory, a good colour,
Your ankles will not be prominent,
Your body hairs will stand upwards.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

*Through spreading the words and meaning of the vowed
practices,...*

This refers to the cause of the signs, which is *spreading the words and meaning of the vowed practices*. Observing and explaining whatever vows one has taken will encourage others to keep those commitments and vows. Then, as a result of that practice:

*... you will have glory, a good colour. Your ankles will not
be prominent; your body hairs will individually stand
upwards, turning clockwise.*

The **ninth** sign is to *have glory, a good colour and your ankles will not be prominent*. The Buddha's ankles are not prominent and don't protrude, and are very smooth and rounded. The **tenth** sign is *your body hairs will individually stand upwards, turning clockwise*. Here the 'hairs' are body hairs, which spiral upwards and turn clockwise.

So how many signs have we covered?

Students: *Ten.*

And if you were to recite them?

Students:

Hands and feet having the signs of wheels, tortoise feet;
Digits of the hands and feet joined with webs;
Hands along with feet smooth and tender;
Seven regions of the body elevated;
Long digits, broad heels, a large and upright body;
Knees not protruding, hairs pointing upward.

The next verse presents the **eleventh** sign:

183 *Through your zest for knowledge, the arts,
And so forth, and through imparting them
You will have the calves of an antelope,
A sharp mind, and great wisdom.*

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

*Through your zest for knowledge, the arts, and so forth,
having learned them respectfully, and through
respectfully imparting them to others, you will have the
calves of an antelope, a sharp mind because of good
memory, and great discriminative wisdom.*

As explained here, a zest for knowledge particularly pertains to the arts. Within the arts there are the minor arts and the major arts. The minor arts incorporate general knowledge about the sciences, medicine, astrology and poetry and so forth. After having learnt them oneself, respectfully, one then imparts or teaches them to others. Having engaged in these deeds in the past, the result is the enlightened sign of *the calves of an antelope*. Unlike our own calves which are uneven in size and shape, the calves of an antelope reduce very evenly down to the hoof.

Here extra features are presented that are not part of the thirty-two signs. However they are part of the qualities of an enlightened mind: *a sharp mind because of good memory, and great discriminative wisdom*. These natural qualities are attained after having engaged in the arts with diligence, and then conveying the knowledge to others.

Now we come to the **twelfth** sign. Is that correct?

Students: *Yes.*

The root verse is:

184 *If others seek your wealth and possessions,
Through the discipline of immediate giving
You will have broad arms and a pleasant
appearance
And will become a leader of the world.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

*If others seek your wealth and possessions, through the
vowed discipline of immediate giving,...*

This refers to the cause. Having previously engaged in the practice of *immediate generosity*, means that when others seek one's wealth or possessions, they are immediately given without any hesitation. Through such a virtuous action in the past:

*...you will have broad and long arms and a pleasant
appearance with nice complexion.*

Here, the resultant sign or enlightened feature is to *have long arms*. Unlike our arms, the arms of enlightened beings are very long and if they were completely relaxed, their hands would almost touch the ground. They wouldn't ever have to bend down to pick up anything! [*soft laughter*]. This isn't just an external feature, because a buddha is miraculously able to pick up anything they desire.

Other specific features arising from this cause are *a pleasant appearance with a nice complexion*. Many of the signs or features of the Buddha's body specifically relate to having engaged in great acts of generosity in the past, helping the needy and the poor many times over. Thus the practice of generosity is one of the primary and predominant practices in Buddhism, which is good to know, lest one thinks that Buddhism doesn't emphasise the need to be generous.

Now we go to the **thirteenth** sign, which is presented in the following verse:

185 *Through reconciling well
Friends who have become divided
You will become the best of those
Whose glorious secret organ retracts inside*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary, the cause is:

Through reconciling well, friends who have become divided,...

The actual sign that is the result is:

...like the great elephant and the precious horse, you will become the best of those whose secret organ retracts inside.

We need to understand that each of the causes are practices that we can engage in now, which inspires us to engage in them. This is a very practical presentation indicating the importance of helping others to maintain good relationships, and helping to bring them together.

The specific cause here is to assist in reconciling friends or relatives who are divided or parted. Thus helping to restore relationships or friendships is a very good deed. This inspires us to not engage in acts of divisiveness or slander and so forth in our everyday life. By engaging in the positive deed of helping others to maintain their good relationships, and to dispel conflict or disharmony when it arises (by using pleasant words and so forth), one creates the causes for those enlightened signs or marks to be obtained in the future.

When we study these causes of the thirty-two signs of a buddha, we are being presented with specific practices. For each cause, the practice incorporates two parts: things to adopt and things to avoid and discard, i.e. adopting virtue as a practice and discarding non-virtue, which is its opposite.

Using the thirteenth sign as an example, we need to abandon causing division between friends and relations. The point of the practice to be adopted is to engage in ways and means to reconcile those who may be divided, or who may be experiencing relationship difficulties. This is how we need to incorporate these practices into our own daily life.

When we think about it, there is really great deal of meaning and purpose in all of these presentations. By contemplating these points, and the points of the teachings in general, one will become more aware of one's own faults and ill-deeds, and understand that we need to overcome them. Furthermore one will also come to recognise the positive qualities that need to be strengthened and further developed. This is how we engage in our practice.

As I have previously mentioned, when one listens to the Dharma, one should regard the teachings as being like a

mirror. The purpose of looking into a mirror is to beautify ourselves; the mirror is a medium to detect any dirt on our face, which can then be cleaned off. Similarly, the Dharma is like a mirror, in that it shows us our faults, particularly those in our own mind. Using the Dharma as a mirror to see the faults of our own mind also shows us how to overcome those faults.

As the teachings present, our practice can be summarised into two main points:

1. Practices that are to be adopted;
2. Practices that are to be abandoned.

So how many signs have we covered so far?

Students: Thirteen.

As a way to distinguish them properly, it might be good to develop a list of them so that you can recognise the individual signs clearly. Gaining some understanding of the signs is a way to strengthen our refuge practice as well. As presented in the advice on taking refuge, we need to relate to the qualities of the Buddha in order to develop strong faith in him. Then taking refuge in the Buddha becomes more powerful.

The qualities of the Buddha can be divided into three: his qualities of body, speech and mind. The thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of the Buddha basically summarise the qualities of the Buddha's *body*. Then there is the Buddha's eloquent *speech* and so forth. The qualities of the Buddha's *mind* are his omniscience along with great love and compassion, which gives him the great ability to benefit others.

It is by understanding the qualities of the Buddha's body, speech and mind, and his great deeds, that one's faith and sense of refuge in the Buddha becomes much stronger and firmer. These are ways to practise in daily life.

The great significance of contemplating the qualities of the Buddha is that it inspires us to become like the Buddha ourselves. When we are inspired, then, as one of the main causes for achieving enlightenment is bodhichitta, our inclination to develop bodhichitta will also develop naturally. To take a conventional example, when, in our worldly, everyday life, we see a prominent or influential person with many good qualities we wish to emulate that person. When we really admire them, we have the spontaneous thought, 'Wouldn't it be nice if I could be like them and have those same qualities myself'. So along with admiration, there is a natural tendency to want to emulate the qualities one notices. Then one will naturally examine the causes of those qualities, how they trained and how they have gained those qualities and then strive to achieve the same result.

The same applies to admiring the Buddha. Having faith in him and taking refuge in the Buddha is a means for us to aspire to become like the Buddha, and thus to engage in the practices of love and compassion and bodhichitta, which are the main cause to achieve the state of enlightenment. That is the significance of this teaching.

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version*

© *Tara Institute*