
Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷན་པོའི་བཀའ་བཀའ་ལྟོས་པའི་སྒྲིག་པོ།

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Generating a positive motivation, we will now engage in the meditation practice. (*meditation*)

The motivation for receiving the teachings can be along these lines: 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, and so for that purpose I will listen to the Dharma. I will not just pay it lip service, but I will actually put the Dharma into practice'.

2.2. Actual explanation of the thirty-two marks of a Buddha

We covered a few of the marks and signs in our last session, so we can begin by reciting the verses from *Ornament of Clear Realisation*.

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,
Calves like the antelope's, long and beautiful arms,
Secret organ well retracted in a sheath.

Golden-hued skin, soft skin,
Hairs growing singly and excellently clockwise,
Face adorned with a treasure hair, torso like the lion's,
Tops of the shoulders rounded, broadness between the
shoulders,

With respect to this, the appearance of even tastes that
are not delicious as the best of tastes,
Body is symmetrical like a nyagrodha tree,
Possessing a protrusion on the crown, tongue beautiful
and long,
The melodious voice of Brahma, cheeks like a lion's,

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

In our last session we left off at the **thirteenth** sign, the *sexual organ* is modestly *retracted* and remains concealed.

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

The main point is that through the cause of *reconciling* friends who have become *divided* or separated, *you will become the best of those, with the glorious secret organ retracted inside*. The cause of this sign is that in the past, when the Buddha was practising on the path, he repeatedly engaged in actively reconciling shattered relationships amongst friends and so forth.

On a personal level, what we need to learn from this is that we must make every effort to reconcile others. If we are not careful, we may find that, rather than practising the virtue of reconciling others, we are spending time in gossip and slander, which actually creates divisions between people. That non-virtuous deed harms others, so we need to be mindful and practise the opposite of this, which is to adopt the virtuous practice of reconciling.

The purpose of studying the Dharma is not just to gain superficial knowledge, and then put it aside while continuing with our habitual ill-behaviour. If there is a discrepancy between the Dharma that we have learnt, and the behaviour that we adopt, then our knowledge and conduct are not concordant. We need to put into practise whatever knowledge or understanding we gain from the Dharma, otherwise it will not serve its purpose.

There is a saying in Tibetan: with Dharma practice, we should not become like the hide in which butter is stored. That is because no matter how long the butter is kept in the hide, the hide just becomes harder and tougher rather than being softened by the butter. This example is used to illustrate the misuse of Dharma to make our self-cherishing and ego even stronger. If our mind hasn't softened with the understanding of Dharma then the point of learning the Dharma has not been served.

Given the choice, we all want to become an enlightened being. Thus, it is essential that we engage in acquiring all the causes for obtaining the qualities of a buddha. The external characteristic of an enlightened being is that all the signs and marks are intact. So in order to become enlightened, we need to create all of the causes for each of those signs. If we neglect to create the cause for even one of those thirty-two signs, then because one of the causes for enlightenment is missing, we would not become enlightened. That is why it is important to understand how it is necessary to create each one of the causes.

We should avoid becoming the sort of person who gains a significant level of understanding of the Dharma, and who, when he or she hears certain points thinks, 'oh yes, I understand that', but then fail to actually put it into practice. It is important that our initial enthusiastic, and sometimes zealous, acquisition of Dharma knowledge does not deteriorate into a complacent acceptance, without any attempt to check whether the Dharma is actually being applied in our practice and daily life.

If we behave in that manner then it would be like the line from the *Guru Puja*, which says that although countless numbers of buddhas have descended, we have not yet been subdued.² We will fall into the category of not having acted to put the teachings into practice even though the teachers have come, and thus we will remain in samsara.

The **fourteenth** and **fifteenth** signs, *golden-hued skin*, and *soft skin* in *Ornament Of Clear Realisation*, are described in the following verse:

² We make our requests to you, O compassionate refuge protectors:
With precision you impart the good way of Those Gone to bliss
To the unruly beings of this degenerate age;
Who are difficult to curb, and were not tamed
By the countless Buddhas of the past. (Verse 46)

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

186 *Through giving good houses
And nice comfortable carpets
Your colour will be very soft
Like refined stainless gold.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

Through giving good houses and nice comfortable carpets, your colour will be very soft, like purified and refined stainless gold.

Through repeatedly engaging in the virtue of *giving material necessities, such as good houses and nice comfortable carpets* and so forth, while training on the path, the result is that on achieving an enlightened body, the colour of the skin will be golden *like purified and refined stainless gold*. Refined and stainless gold refers to gold in its purest form, which is very *soft*. Having a skin like that is the result of practising generosity while on the path.

Actually the literal meaning of the Tibetan word *sapa*, as used in *Ornament of Clear Realisation*, should be translated as *thin*, but in *Precious Garland* the word *soft* is used.

Now we come to the **sixteenth** and **seventeenth** signs, *hairs growing singly and excellently clockwise, and face adorned with a treasure hair*, which are covered in the following verse:

187 *Through giving the highest powers
And following a teacher properly
You will be adorned by each and every hair
And by a spiralling hair between the eyebrows.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Through giving the highest monarch powers and following a teacher's advice properly, you will be adorned by each and every hair that grows from individual pores, and by a spiralling hair between the eyebrows.

The **sixteenth** sign is the body hair that curls clockwise and points upwards. The **seventeenth** sign is the spiral of hair on the Buddha's forehead, which also spirals clockwise as well as pointing upwards. It is said that when uncurled this hair stretches out a great distance and when let go, it springs back its place as a spiral on Buddha's forehead. In images and statues of the Buddha this spiral is depicted as a dot on his forehead; sometimes a jewel is placed there to represent this spiral of hair that is one of the major signs of the Buddha.

Like his body hair, each strand of hair on the Buddha's head curls clockwise. Far from being strands of individual hairs like the Buddha's hair, our own hair is intertwined, and if we don't comb our hair regularly it becomes tangled and matted. The unique feature of the Buddha's hair is that each strand of hair spirals clockwise. Statues of the Buddha depict this sign as bumps in his hair.

Now we come to the **eighteenth** and **nineteenth** signs, *torso like a lion's*, and *tops of the shoulders rounded*. The relevant verse is:

188 *Through speech that is pleasant and pleasing
And by acting upon the good speech [of others]
You will have curving shoulders
And a lion-like upper body.*

With respect to this verse, Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Through speech that is pleasant when heard and pleasing when recalled, and by acting upon the good speech [of others]; you will have curving shoulders and a lion-like expansive upper body.

To clarify the commentary, pleasant speech refers to speech that others find pleasing when heard, and which later brings great pleasure when recalled. The Buddha, while training on the path, engaged in this virtuous deed repeatedly, and so when he became enlightened, he obtained the two signs mentioned here—the **eighteenth** sign of curving shoulders and the **nineteenth** sign of a lion-like upper expansive upper body.

Now we come to the **twentieth** and **twenty-first** signs, *broadness between the shoulders*, and *the best of tastes*, which are covered in the next verse, which reads:

189 *Through nursing and curing the sick,
The area between your shoulders will be broad,
You will live in a natural state,
And all tastes will be the best.*

Gyaltsab Je further expands on this in his commentary:

Through nursing and curing the sick with care, the area between your shoulders will be broad, you will live in a natural state without immediate distractions, and through having given medicine to the sick all tastes will be the best.

This is another essential point for us to consider. The Buddha was not a spontaneous or miraculous manifestation. Rather he achieved his enlightened state by virtue of having actually engaged in benefitting others while he was on the path. As a trainee on the path he helped other beings in such practical ways as helping them to bathe, cooking for them, and nursing the sick. It was as a result of these virtuous deeds while he was on the path, that the seed was planted for the **twentieth** sign—the area between the shoulders is broad, and it is also the cause for one to be able to live in a natural state without any distractions. The **twenty-first** sign, is that all food is appealing and tasty as a result of the virtue of providing medicine for the sick and the needy.

The practice of the caring for the sick is held in high esteem. While training on the path, the Buddha did not dwell in his own world of prayers and so forth; rather, he actively engaged in caring for, and nursing the sick many times over. It is mentioned in many teachings that care of the sick is of great importance. In a monastic environment, therefore, care for the sick is held in high regard as a most important good deed. So when I meet those who train or work as a nurse, I applaud them for their work. I say, 'It is a really good deed to be a nurse, helping the sick'. Of course to derive the full benefit of that practice one also needs to have a good motivation. But even without a high level of motivation, any nurse going about their duties in a proper way, will, by the very nature of that work, definitely benefit. That's why I encourage them.

I have heard that in some nursing homes there are times when some of the residents miss out on meals, because someone doesn't do their duty properly. Apparently everyone is allocated responsibility for a certain area, but some staff will bring in the breakfast for a resident and leave it on the tray, without making an attempt to help the resident eat. Then later they come around to take away the

dishes—even if the resident haven't had their breakfast, they just take it away. That means the resident is left without a meal, which often occurs. The person who told me this said that they are really unhappy when they see this happen, but sometimes it is difficult to intervene. I heard that some staff even eat the untouched food, which is appalling.

On a positive note there others who really make a point of trying to coax the residents into eating a bit, and feed them until they start to eat for themselves. It just goes to show that even though people have the same duties, when work is done out of a sense of genuine concern and care for the other, then that is really benefitting others.

The **twenty-second** and **twenty-third** signs, *body symmetrical like a nyagrodha tree*, and *possessing a protrusion on the crown*, are explained in the next verse:

190 *Through initiating activities concordant
With the practices, your crown protrusion
Will stand out well as a primary feather and
your crotch and other body parts will be
Symmetrical like a banana tree.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads

*Through initiating activities concordant with the
Dharma practices, your crown protrusion will stand
out well as the primary feature and your crotch and
other body parts will be symmetrical like a banana tree.*

Although this translation refers to a banana tree, that is not the term originally used. The text actually refers to a tree that is very symmetrical with respect to its bark, branches and leaves. The cause of these two signs is that one's *activities are concordant with the Dharma*.

The **twenty-second** sign, the *crown stands well*, refers to the protrusion on the Buddha's crown which has a height of four finger-widths. The **twenty-third** sign is that, unlike us, the crotch and other body parts are symmetrical. Sometimes our limbs, and other parts of the body are out of proportion and not symmetrical, but the Buddha's enlightened body has very symmetrical and even parts. I saw a picture of a very tall person, from England I think, who was very skinny too, and he just didn't look quite right. In Tibet we also have quite tall people, but they are often quite broad and well built, so their height suits their body shape.

The **twenty-fourth** and **twenty-fifth** signs, *tongue beautiful and long*, and *voice of Brahma* are related to the following verse.

191 *Through speaking true and soft words
Over a long time, O lord of humanity,
Your tongue will be long
And your voice that of Brahma*

In his commentary then Gyaltsab Je further expands on the meaning of the verse:

*Through speaking true and soft words to others over a
long time, O lord of humanity, your tongue will be long
and your voice pleasant like that of Brahma.*

With respect to the cause, we know that, even on a conventional level, speaking the truth is regarded as a virtue. Here, however, speaking true words is not enough—they have to be spoken softly and in an appealing manner. It was the combination of speaking the truth softly over long period of time while he was

training on the path that the Buddha has these two enlightened signs.

The **twenty-fourth** enlightened sign is that the tongue is beautiful and long. Other commentaries go into more detail, saying that the Buddha's tongue is so long it can touch his forehead and even his ears. The analogy is that his tongue is like a dog's tongue, which is also quite long. The Buddha's tongue is very red in colour and, like a lotus petal, is very pleasant to look at.

The **twenty-fifth** sign is that the voice is very pleasant, like that of the celestial god, Brahma, which has five specific features. In fact the Buddha's voice is said to have sixty different qualities. The primary quality is that it reaches out to all at a level appropriate to their understanding, and even in their own language.

Another quality of the Buddha's speech is that even when many are asking questions at the same time, the Buddha is able to answer all those questions simultaneously, with just one answer. This is said to be the most amazing and incredible feature of the Buddha's speech. Although these features seem to be quite beyond our comprehension, they were obtained by the Buddha because, while he was training on the path, he made very strong prayers to be able to benefit sentient beings in whatever language that is necessary to converse with them. It is said that in any one teaching the Buddha simultaneously gives the teaching to gods, humans and many other beings. This feature of the Buddha's speech is said to be its primary quality, because that is how he is able to benefit all sentient beings at their respective levels.

The **twenty-sixth** sign, *cheeks like a lion*, is introduced in the following verse:

192 *Through speaking true words
Always and continuously
You will have cheeks like a lion,
Be glorious, and hard to overcome.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

*Through knowing what is true speech, speaking
true words always and continuously, you will have
cheeks like a lion, be glorious and hard to overcome by
others.*

As indicated here the cause of the **twenty-sixth** sign is, having fully comprehended the truth, engaging in the virtue of always speaking true words continuously to others. As a result of engaging in that virtue, the enlightened sign will be cheeks like a lion. Unlike our cheeks, which can sometimes be quite sunken, the enlightened sign is naturally rounded cheeks, like those of a lion, which are very pleasant to look at. Furthermore an enlightened being has great stamina, and is not easily influenced by others.

The next verse relates to the **twenty-seventh** and **twenty-eighth** marks, *very white teeth*, and *even teeth*.

193 *Through showing great respect,
Serving others, and doing what is fitting,
Your teeth will be very white,
Shining, and even.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je says:

*Through showing great respect towards other living
beings, serving others, and doing what is fitting in*

accordance to their needs, *your teeth will be very white, shining and even.*

So the cause of great respect to others results in two signs: the teeth are white and shining, and even. Here *even* refers to teeth being larger or taller than the others.

The **twenty-ninth** and **thirtieth** signs, *well set*, and *forty in number*, are explained in next verse:

194 *Through using true and non-divisive
Speech over a long time
You will have forty glorious teeth
That are set evenly and are wondrous.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary further explains:

Through using true and non-divisive speech over a long period of time, you will have forty glorious teeth—twenty upper and twenty lower—that are set evenly and are wondrous.

So as explained here, the causes of these signs are the virtuous deeds of using true and non-divisive speech over long period of time. The result is the enlightened sign of having *forty* intact *teeth*, with twenty lower and twenty upper teeth, which are *evenly set*, and very *wondrous* and pleasant to look at.

The **final two** signs, *azure eyes*, and *eyelashes like a magnificent cow* are covered in the next verse:

195 *Through viewing beings with love
And without desire, hatred, or delusion
Your eyes will be bright and blue
With eyelashes like a bull.*

Gyaltsab Je's explanation is:

Through viewing beings with love that wishes them to be happy, and without desire, hatred or delusion, your eyes will be bright and blue, with eyelashes distinct, black and flowing downwards, just like that of a bull.

The specific cause of the **thirty-first** and **thirty-second** signs is that during his time as a trainee on the path to enlightenment in previous lifetimes, the Buddha cultivated and then developed a strong wish for others to be constantly happy. That wish, called love, is an unbiased wish without desire or attachment, hatred, or ignorance. It is free from the bias of only loving some people, such as relations and close ones because of attachment, and does not exclude others out of hatred, or indifference towards some out of ignorance. This unbiased love that is free from discrimination is the love that the Buddha practised. Mahayana practice esteems this type of love, which forms the core of the bodhisattva practices in Shantideva's *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*.

Having engaged in this kind of practice, the result is the **thirty-first** mark, which is eyes that are bright and blue. Here the eyes are very clear, the pupils, the iris and the white being sharply delineated from each other. Sometimes the eyes are cloudy with cataracts or a bit bloodshot, but the thirty-first mark is that the eyes are free from all these types of defects. In other words the eyes are very pleasant to look at and very bright.

The **thirty-second** mark is that the eyelashes are very distinct, in that each eyelash is individually separate from all the others, and curls downwards. This is quite unlike the measure that some people have to take to separate the

eyelashes with mascara. The Buddha doesn't have to worry about that at all, as his lashes are naturally distinct.

That covers all of the signs and now there is a brief **summary**:

196 *Thus in brief know well
These thirty-two signs
Of a great lion of beings
Together with their causes.*

Gyaltsab Je's summary is:

Thus in brief know well these thirty-two signs of a great lion of beings, together with their causes.

That being explanation of the verse, the commentary continues:

You must show respect for the accomplishment of the causes of the signs. Also while in the process of accomplishing the causes, you must understand the interconnected relationship between the causes and effects, and establish the link by making stainless prayers to obtain the distinctive features of the signs.

Here Gyaltsab Je is elaborating on how one needs to utilise an understanding of cause-and-effect in one's own practice. By relating the causes of each of the signs to the virtue and practice that was involved in obtaining these signs, one can develop a strong admiration and respect for the signs themselves.

We also need to gain the further understanding that having a mere understanding of the interrelationship between the cause (virtuous deeds) and the effect (the signs) is not sufficient. While we engage in accomplishing the causes, we must seal the link by making stainless prayers to obtain the distinctive features of the signs.

This means that having engaged in any of these positive practices of virtue, one must ensure that they do actually become causes by dedicating one's practices. Without such a dedication then the practice could be stained with worldly concerns. When we do a good deed in our ordinary practice, we might be attached to an immediate result, such as a good reputation or being appreciated by others and so forth. If that was our concern then even that good deed is stained with worldly concern. So what is being emphasised here is that in order for the good deeds (which can be practiced by anyone) to become a cause, you need to understand the effect, i.e. the signs, and be focused on that. So you need to engage in practice as a means to obtain the effect, and make a proper dedication towards that end, so that the practice becomes the cause for the end result of achieving the sign of an enlightened being, rather than being stained with worldly concern.

As those who attend study group regularly are aware, the next session will be the discussion session, which is followed by the exam in the following week. As usual I encourage to conduct the discussion in a good spirit of sharing and so forth, and to take the initiative in the exam to write the answers well.

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Edited Version*

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