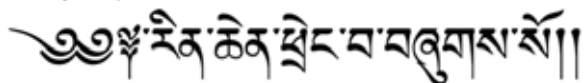

Nagarjuna's Precious Garland



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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We can now engage in some meditation, and the motivation can be along the lines of the refuge and bodhichitta prayer that we have just recited. [Meditation]

In order to receive the teaching, one can generate this motivation: 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, and so for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well'.

Generating a motivation is an essential part of one's practice, and taking refuge and generating bodhichitta forms the very basis of one's practice. When one recites the refuge prayer, it is important to bring to mind the object of refuge itself. It would be ideal if one is able to visualise the merit field; and if not the whole merit field, then at least understand that the essence of the Three Jewels, the Buddha and the guru are combined into Vajradhara. For those familiar with the Vajradhara deity, one can visualise Vajradhara or one's lama. With respect to the Three Jewels, the Buddha jewel is the guide; the Dharma jewel is the actual refuge, and the Sangha jewels help us along the path to enlightenment.

One can also reflect on the reason for taking refuge. Like all living beings, none of us wishes to experience suffering, and we take refuge out of fear of that suffering. So, one can visualise oneself and other sentient beings as being deprived of happiness, and completely overwhelmed by the suffering of the three unfortunate realms. Bringing that to mind, one then develops the conviction that the objects of refuge (the guru Vajradhara or the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) have the full potential and ability to protect all beings from all forms of suffering. That potential to protect and free all living beings from all suffering is the actual cause for taking refuge. Having taken refuge, one then generates a keen aspiration to free oneself and all other beings from experiencing all forms of suffering.

No living being wishes to experience suffering, even for one moment. Thus the strong aspiration to lead all living beings to the ultimate state of enlightenment is an attitude of aspirational bodhichitta. This aspiration is followed by a determination to put the advice and commitments and so forth into practice, which in turn allows one to engage in the path leading to enlightenment, thus leading all sentient beings to the state of enlightenment.

When one visualises all other sentient beings, and takes refuge and generates bodhichitta with that intention in mind, then one is actually engaging in the giving and taking practice called *tong len*. As one has already envisioned all surrounding sentient beings as part of the refuge practice, it is very easy to extend it to the *tong len* practice.

We need to be mindful of what incorporating the refuge prayer into our practice actually entails. It is not just a matter of merely reciting the words and leaving it at that. In fact many of us would have recited this particular refuge and bodhichitta verse hundreds of thousands of times. But if we don't bring to mind the actual meaning of those words, the

practice becomes quite empty and there will be no real benefit. We need to remember what the words mean.

- The first of the four lines, *To the Buddha, the Dharma and Supreme Assembly*, indicates the objects of refuge. The Buddha is the supreme guide, while the Dharma encompasses the oral transmission and realisations. It also incorporates the ultimate truth, in particular the Mahayana truth of cessation and the truth of the path. The Sangha refers to the Mahayana arya beings. So the first line identifies the objects of refuge.
- The second line, *I go for refuge until I achieve enlightenment*, refers to the uncommon Mahayana refuge. The common refuge is to take refuge until the end of one's life rather than until the attainment of enlightenment. So based on the intention, refuge is being established as the uncommon Mahayana refuge.
- The third line *From the merit that I accumulate from generosity and so forth*, relates to the merit accumulated from ethics, morality and concentration. While the words used are *from generosity and so forth*, you will recall that His Holiness the Dalai Lama has indicated many times (most recently in Varanasi) that it would be good to use the words *from the collections* which encompass both collections – merit and wisdom. The word *merit* indicates only one of the collections, whereas the two collections encompasses both merit and wisdom. As His Holiness has mentioned, the term *collections* is vast in its scope, so one can use that term as well as the conventional words.
- The final line, *May I obtain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings*, focuses on the goal, which is enlightenment.

The intention of leading all sentient beings to enlightenment is the ultimate Mahayana refuge, and envisioning all other sentient beings around oneself when engaging in the practice makes taking refuge much more meaningful. Taking refuge encompasses bringing to mind the objects of refuge, the causes of refuge, and the intention of taking refuge, not just merely for oneself, but for the sake of all sentient beings. In this way, the practice itself becomes really meaningful - otherwise it is just empty words. I have pointed this out in the past, and some of you might think 'oh, I know where that part fits in, I know all of that, I've heard it before' But if we get into that kind of habit and don't actually implement it in our practice then, like the common Tibetan saying, one has become 'polluted by the Dharma'.

This term applies to one who has knowledge of the Dharma, but who has not put it into practice. The Tibetan analogy is of cooking a radish. If one adds cold water when it is boiling, then that makes it harder to cook the radish. In effect the cold water is polluting the boiling water, thus preventing the radish from cooking thoroughly. Likewise if knowledge of the Dharma becomes polluted it is a hindrance to actually putting that knowledge into practice. Then we really lose out.

We are incredibly fortunate in having access to the unmistakable teachings and to those who present them. The conditions that we now have don't come about easily. It is very rare for all of these conditions to be in place and if we don't utilise them in our practice, then we lose a great opportunity to benefit ourselves. Since we all want to progress and gain benefit from the Dharma, we have to put it into practice.

Those of us who have taken refuge, and who practise regularly, recite the refuge prayer every day, sometimes many times over. Most of us have probably recited it over one hundred thousand times, which, if we have done it properly, will suffice as a preliminary practice. Perhaps the reason why we need a specific preliminary practice of one hundred thousand refuges is because we had not done it properly in the past.

If we don't incorporate the actual meaning of refuge and bodhichitta into our recitation of that prayer, and if we don't familiarise with it in our daily practice, then it is questionable whether or not it could ever become a good practice - even if we were to recite it one hundred thousand times. As we recite the refuge and bodhichitta prayer in our daily practice, it is critical that we make it a meaningful practice.

If we take the time to incorporate the visualisation and our understanding of the refuge and bodhichitta prayer, then due to that familiarity, it will become a really profound practice, and will be of great benefit when we actually recite it.

It is essential to have help when we are facing death, because no-one else can help us. Whatever wealth we may have accumulated during our life will not help us at that time; not even one penny will assist us on our journey. Whatever medication we may have been reliant on will no longer make any difference, as there is no medicine that can prevent death. Our very good friends and companions cannot help to prevent our death, nor can they help us on our journey. What will unfailingly help us at that time is the recollection of the objects of refuge and the bodhichitta mind. Whether or not this occurs is dependent on our everyday practice in our everyday life. If we have invested time and energy in our everyday practice then, by default, the natural consequence is that it will become even more vivid and clear at the time of death.

I cannot claim that I have had any great experiences, however there definitely seems to be a time when the objects of refuge are a great source of encouragement, energy, strength and a means to really uplift one's mind, especially when everything else seems bleak and difficult and questionable. I can really attest to the fact that it definitely has great value. So if we take the time to engage in the practice with sincerity, there will be a time in our life when we will see the great significance of that practice. In order to gain benefit from a practice, we need to incorporate it in our everyday life, and in that way, taste the real essence.

At the most vulnerable times of our life, particularly at the end of our life when we will be alone on our journey, generating and taking refuge can be more profound than tantric practices. If those who engage in tantric practices fail to develop a basis of genuine love and compassion and bodhichitta, then the tantric practice will have no essence; it will render no real result. Whereas if one undertakes refuge sincerely, it will definitely bring about great solace and benefit to our mind.

The reason for taking refuge and the manner of taking refuge are not very profound concepts. It is a practice that we can readily understand and thus can incorporate into our daily life. Furthermore, to touch on the more profound levels of the prayer of refuge, His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that when you recite 'from the merit I have accumulated through generosity and so forth, may I obtain enlightenment', you can recall that the referent 'I' is empty of inherent existence. Therefore, the recollection of

emptiness can also be incorporated into the refuge prayer itself. We have heard about and studied what selflessness or emptiness means. So to actually incorporate it in one's practice can be done by simply using the word 'I'. You can incorporate the understanding that the referent 'I' is empty of substantial existence and particularly of inherent existence. Incorporating both aspects of the path - method and wisdom - into the refuge prayer in this manner makes it even more profound. The reason why I re-emphasise all of these points is because it is a practice we are already doing daily, so it's important to take its essence and practise it well.

The importance of taking refuge, particularly the form with which we are familiar, the Mahayana refuge, cannot be underestimated. When we really think about it, it really encompasses the whole path to enlightenment. Being aware of the objects of refuge, and the initial cause of refuge, the fear of samsara and wishing to be free from samsara, and then actually taking refuge, encompasses the practices that are common to both the small and medium scopes. When one generates bodhichitta by relating to the cause, which is the practice of generosity, then generating bodhichitta itself is the result that allows us to enter the Mahayana path. So in this way, we can see how the practice of taking refuge and generating bodhichitta encompasses the whole path to enlightenment.

Furthermore, if we really pay attention and do this practice well, then we need not fear having to rely upon something else when the time comes. As mentioned previously, there will definitely be a time when one will be in great need of real help, which can't be provided by friends or wealth etc. At that time, when we really need spiritual help, having taken refuge regularly and having strong faith in the practice will be of great solace.

To re-emphasise the essential nature of the practice of refuge, Lama Tsong Khapa very clearly mentions that the entry point to the teachings and the doctrine is refuge. He indicates that without proper refuge, we cannot assume that we have entered the Buddha's doctrine. Other practices - tantra or whatever - may be profound, but if we have not established refuge well and truly in our mind, then we have missed the point and not entered the Buddha's doctrine. That is the point that we really need to consider and incorporate into our practice.

There is a saying that profound advice comes from experience. I don't have any profound experience - all I have is a crazy old monk's experience. *[laughter]* Indeed some may feel that what I say are the words of a crazy person.

2. LIMITLESSNESS OF THE COLLECTION OF MERIT

2.1. Actual explanation (cont.)

2.1.2. Achieving one beautiful feature of a Buddha through a hundred times the merit for achieving a hair-pore

This section is covered in the next two verses:

- 204 *Through multiplying by a hundred
The merit which produces
All the hair-pores of a buddha
One auspicious beauty is acquired.*
- 205 *O King, as much merit as is required
For one auspicious beautiful feature,
So much also is required
For each up to the eightieth.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je does not provide much elaboration; he more or less quotes the verse itself:

It is thus explained, *through multiplying by a hundred the merit which produces all the hair-pores of a buddha, one auspicious beauty [mark] is acquired. Thus, O King, as much merit as is required for one auspicious beautiful feature, so much is also required for up to the eightieth.*

2.1.3. Achieving one mark of a Buddha through a hundred times the merit for producing all the beautiful features

This relates to the following verse:

206 *Through multiplying a hundred-fold
The collection of merit which achieves
The eighty auspicious beautiful features
One mark of a great being arises.*

Basically, Gyaltsab Je's commentary just reiterates the verse, which is quite clear:

Through multiplying a hundred-fold the collection of merit which achieves the eighty auspicious beautiful features, one mark of a great being arises.

2.1.4. Achieving the hair-spiral on a Buddha's brow through a thousand times the merit for producing all the marks

207 *Through multiplying a thousand-fold
The extensive merit that is the cause
Of achieving the thirty signs
The hair-treasure like a full moon arises*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Through multiplying a thousand-fold the extensive merit that is the cause of achieving the thirty signs; the hair-treasure like a full moon arises.

2.1.5. Achieving the crown protrusion through a thousand times the above merit

The verse relating to this is:

208 *Through multiplying a hundred thousand-fold
The merit for the hair-treasure
A Protector's crown-protrusion
Is produced, imperceptible as it actually is.*

The commentary just mentions the verse again, as it is clear:

Through multiplying a hundred thousand-fold the merit for obtaining the hair-treasure, a protector's crown-protrusion is produced, imperceptible as it actually is.

The phrase *imperceptible as it actually is*, has been explained more extensively in other texts. One of the features of the *crown-protrusion* is that no matter how often it is viewed, beings have the need to see it again and again. Its beauty and majesty are so great that looking at it never reaches the point of satiation. The next verse relating to this outline is not numbered. It reads:

*Through increasing ten million times
A hundred thousand the merit
For the crown-protrusion there comes
The excellence producing the euphony
Of a buddha's speech and its sixty qualities*

The 'sixty qualities' of the Buddha's speech were mentioned in our last session.

2.2. The collections are infinite but are taught to trainees as measurable

The second chapter explained the causes of the signs, however the measure of how much merit is needed to obtain those signs was not really explained. Even though the collection of merit and wisdom is infinite (meaning immeasurable) an indication of how much merit is needed is presented here for the purposes of comparison.

The verse relating to this outline reads:

209 *Though such merit is measureless,
It is said for brevity to have a measure,
Just as [the merit of] the world is said
For brevity to be included in the ten directions*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

Though such merit to accomplish Buddhahood is measureless, it is said for brevity and in accordance to the level of the disciple's mind, to have a measure, just as [the merit of] the world is said for brevity to be included in the ten directions.

The merit of the world is an infinite amount of merit, which is, of course immeasurable. When the merit of all the individual beings is combined together it is *measureless*. However, as explained here, for the sake of comparison we can say that *all the merit is included in the ten directions*. So even though it is measureless, the merit in the ten directions provides some sort of comparative measure.

I think we may have previously covered up to this point. When I check with you which verse we are up to, you need to be able to immediately respond 'we have come to verse number...'. When we went to receive teachings at the monastery, the teachers would often ask us, 'So where are we up to?' 'Which root verse are we up to?' or 'Where are we up to in the commentary?' Of course it wasn't that the teacher didn't know, but it was a means of checking how much attention the disciples have paid to their study. Therefore we were very apprehensive, and when we went to the teachings we would have to be really prepared. If the teacher asked where we were up to, we had to be confident and be immediately ready to say where we were up to. So if one has paid attention to one's studies, one will be confident enough to say 'we are up to here in the teaching'. But people are not showing that confidence.

Even though some are physically unable to attend teachings, they are still interested. For example, Carol is now unable to come to the teachings because of work commitments and living so far away, but apparently as a mark that she was using the transcripts to follow the teachings, she could tell Lynn exactly where we are up to, what has been covered from the text. So she is able to pass on to others what has been taught and what we are up to etc. That is a sign that she has been keeping up to date with the studies.

3. LIMITLESSNESS OF THE COLLECTION OF WISDOM

The verse relating to this subdivision is:

210 *When the causes of even the form body
Of a buddha are as immeasurable
As the world, how then could the causes
Of the truth body be measured?*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

When the causes of even the form body of a buddha are as immeasurable just as the world is infinite, how then could the cause of the truth body be measured? For it is indeed immeasurable.

4. LIMITLESSNESS OF EFFECTS OF THE TWO COLLECTIONS

The verse that relates to this subdivision is:

211 *If the causes of all things are small
But they produce extensive effects,
The thought that the measureless causes of
buddhahood
Have measurable effects should be eliminated.*

As the commentary explains:

From the tiny seed of the *nadota* [or Banyan] tree an enormous tree can grow, with branches and leaves

that expand to give shade to a king's army and protect them from rain.¹

Those of you who have attended Lam Rim teachings will be able to immediately relate this to the Lam Rim teachings on karma. The Lam Rim describes the four attributes or characteristics of karma: karma is definite; karma increases; one will not meet the results of karma that has not been created; and once created, karma will not disappear of its own accord. This verse particularly relates to the way karma increases; whatever karma is created, no matter how minute or insignificant, regardless of whether it is a positive or negative karma, has a natural tendency to increase by its very nature.

The analogy used here is the Banyan tree. From a tiny seedling the Banyan tree grows up and branches out to the point where a network of roots grows downwards from the branches, allowing more trees to grow. In ancient India, there were enormous Banyan trees which, as mentioned here, could shade the king's large army. These huge, enormous trees with their extensive branches and leaves grew from small seeds. Even though the seed may seem small and insignificant, when planted with good conditions, it will grow into an enormous tree, i.e. the seedling carries the potential to become an enormous tree.

This external analogy is used to illustrate how karma works. The cause and effect sequence is that once karma is created, it naturally increases in our mental continuum. Therefore we should not neglect creating even the smallest positive karma, thinking that somehow it is insignificant. We should take every opportunity to accumulate even small virtues because of the fact that even a small virtue carries the potential to render great results in the future.

Likewise with negative deeds: a small negative deed carries the potential to produce enormous results in the future. So we should not neglect to avoid small misdeeds. We might think, 'Oh its okay to forgo this practice or deed. Even though it's inappropriate, it's a very minor thing, so its okay'. We may also have the tendency to utter white lies and so forth. By recollecting how even small negative deeds carry the potential to produce enormous results in the future, we can understand why we need to be wary of small misdeeds and try to avoid them at all costs.

With this understanding of karma in general, we can immediately understand the profound nature of the point being presented in this part of the text. We need to see how the various teachings are interconnected with respect to their meanings and so forth.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary then reads:

Thus, if the causes of all things are small but they produce extensive effects, the thought that the measureless causes of buddhahood have measurable effects should be eliminated; as it is not possible to conceive the amount of merit needed to obtain buddhahood.

Just as a tiny seed can produce an enormous tree, similarly small causes can produce extensive effects. As the accumulation of the collections of merit and wisdom are in themselves enormous causes, the result that one obtains is definitely immeasurable; one cannot possibly comprehend the measure of the results they will produce.

To incorporate that concept of immeasurable merit with the understanding of karma and to relate it to our own practice,

we need to be mindful of our actions, so that we avoid accumulating negative deeds and, in every possible way, accumulate virtue. We all naturally want to experience happiness and the cause to experience happiness is virtue. There is no other substantial cause for happiness other than virtue. Thus for our own well-being, we need to take responsibility for accumulating virtue.

Likewise there is no-one amongst us who willingly wants to experience any kind of physical or mental suffering or misery. Accordingly, we need to take the initiative and be responsible for ourselves, by not creating negative karma. We need to avoid even the slightest negative karma, knowing that the consequences will only be misery and suffering. We need to really consider this very carefully and try to put it into practice.

If we adopt the opposite course of willingly creating negative karma, and shy away from accumulating virtue, then we will experience the negative consequences. We really have to keep checking up on ourselves; we might even feel regret that we have not had the opportunity to create some negative karmas. 'Oh what a shame, I was not able to carry out that deed'. Is that good? Should we be proud of such a thought? It is not something to be proud of. If that is how our mind is working, then we need to try and transform our attitudes.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I see some people who seem to have that attitude about negative karma. When we are feeling a little bit depressed or troubled and we have many problems and unwanted things are happening in our life, we need to consider 'why is this coming about?' 'Why am I experiencing these difficult circumstances?' 'Who is actually causing it?' At that point it is essential that we consider the real causes of our problems. When we relate our circumstances to the teachings on karma, it will become quite apparent that it is none other than ourselves who have created the causes to experience those unwanted results.

There are some people who are really unhappy. While they don't like to be in that state of unhappiness and misery, as I see it there seems to be a sense of unhappiness or deprivation because they feel they have been deprived of engaging in negative sorts of actions, which in nature are negative karma. Feeling unhappy about not having had the opportunity to create negative karma is really mindboggling!!

Maybe I'm wrong, but this is what I see. If one feels sad or unhappy because of being deprived of the opportunity to engage in negative karma, then it is completely contradictory to think 'I'm missing out on happiness', let alone contemplating a future result of happiness. That is completely at odds with what the teachings explain, and it is something we need to be mindful of.

Before we conclude for the evening, following the recitation of the *Heart Sutra*, we can pause and make prayers and aspirations to Buddha Amitabha particularly dedicating the merits to Carol's mother, who passed away recently. Of course we send Carol our condolences. She is a very good and old friend of ours, so at this time the best we can offer for her mum is our prayers and dedications.

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Edited Version

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¹ Trans: I couldn't find a translation of the word *nadota*, but Geshe-la explained that it is like a Banyan tree.