

Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷན་པོའི་བཀའ་སློབ་ཀྱི་རྒྱུ་རྐྱེན་གྱི་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ལྟར་།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

5 July 2011

With the motivation we generated during the refuge and bodhicitta prayer, we can now engage in the practice of meditation. [*meditation*]

We can now generate the motivation for receiving the teaching 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 teaching and put it into practice well'.

1.2. Branches of the collection of wisdom

Verse 238 reads:

238 *You should make donations of pages and books
Of the word of the King of Subduers
And of the treatises they gave rise to,
Along with their prerequisites, pens and ink.*

Gyalsab Je's commentary gives this explanation:

You should make donations of pages and books of the word of the King of Subduers, which is the dominant condition for the treatises they give rise to; along with their prerequisites, pens and ink.

Here the *conditions* include the writing of the treatises as well as *their prerequisites, pens and ink*. This means making *donations* towards the purchase or production of *books* of the Buddha's own words as well as *the treatises they give rise to* (such as the commentaries and so forth). In addition, writing them oneself or contributing to the conditions for writing them, is also a highly meritorious act. Just as writing the Buddha's words or teachings is highly meritorious, writing the study group exams is, as I remind you regularly, also a very meritorious act, and thus shouldn't be taken lightly.

239 *As ways to increase wisdom,
Wherever there is a school in the land
Provide for the livelihood of teachers
And give lands to them [for their provision].*

As Gyalsab Je's commentary explains:

As ways to increase the collection of wisdom, wherever there is a school in the land, provide for the livelihood of teachers who teach reading, writing, mathematics and so forth, and give lands and homes to them [for their provision].

As indicated here, the ultimate purpose of providing *for the livelihood of teachers who teach* in schools and so forth is to increase the means for the collection of wisdom. Basic levels of study, such as the general arts of *reading, writing and mathematics and so forth* form the basis that provides the means to ultimately engage in the collection of wisdom. Thus engaging in study, as well as providing for others to engage in study, serves as the means to increase the collection of wisdom, which is a highly meritorious deed.

As I regularly emphasise, as we have the right conditions it is important that we try to gain a clear understanding of what emptiness is. Even though at our level it may only be a mere intellectual understanding, it becomes the platform to gain a more profound understanding of emptiness. By

working at accumulating the means for the collection of wisdom, an intellectual understanding of emptiness will eventually turn into a conceptual understanding, which can then lead on to the direct realisation of emptiness. So we need to understand that providing the means for even the very basic level education that is means to collect wisdom, is highly meritorious.

Lest we lose the point with the detailed explanations that are presented here, we need to refer back to the earlier presentation, where Nagarjuna exhorts the king not to be daunted by the prospect of having to accumulate vast amount of merit and wisdom in order to achieve enlightenment. You will recall that Nagarjuna explained that there is no need to be daunted, because there are so many different ways to engage in collecting merit and wisdom. These verses are a presentation of some of those many ways.

As explained in sutras such as the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*, which many of you would have read a number of times, the merit gained from the mere recollection of emptiness is unimaginable and inexpressible. Even if the three worlds were to be filled with precious jewels, it would still not equal the value of the merit collected from reading, writing and contemplating, as well as explaining to others the points on emptiness. Therefore we need to remember those points, and encourage ourselves to contemplate emptiness as much as possible. We need to make queries such as: What does emptiness mean? What is the benefit in gaining an understanding of it?

As the realisation of emptiness is the ultimate antidote for overcoming the delusions, the process of gaining an understanding of emptiness will definitely help to reduce those delusions. So there is great benefit in studying to gain the understanding of emptiness.

2. EXTENSIVE EXPOSITION

This is sub-divided into two:

- 2.1. Branches of the collection of merit
- 2.2. Branches of the collection of wisdom

2.1. Branches of the collection of merit

Here there are four sub-divisions:

- 2.1.1. Giving one's own property
- 2.1.2. Other giving
- 2.1.3. Giving away all wealth
- 2.1.4. Giving based on different needs

2.1.1. Giving one's own property

240 *In order to alleviate the suffering
Of sentient beings—the old, young, and
infirm—
You should establish through the estates [that
you control]
Doctors and barbers throughout your country.*

Gyalsab Je's commentary explains that:

Giving one's own property has fourteen categories.

These fourteen sub-categories are relatively easy to understand and is just a matter of putting them into practice.

The **first** category is

In order to alleviate the suffering of sentient beings – the old, young and infirm, the sick and impoverished...

The suffering of our human existence is very obvious, so the king is being exhorted to engage in providing for those who are incapable of caring for themselves, including *the old*, the *young* (the literal translation of the Tibetan is 'infant'), *the infirm, the sick and the impoverished*. All these beings are

incapable of caring for themselves and there is always a need to provide for their well-being.

We can all relate to these very practical ways of helping when we consider our social welfare system. There are, for example, educational schemes to assist those who are younger than 18; there are sickness and disability benefits available to those who are incapable of working; and the elderly have access to pensions and other benefits. The system is in place because of the needs of those groups, and we need to understand the very practical nature of these benefits.

Earlier we meditated (as we do regularly) on the practice of giving and taking, which is specifically the practice of taking in the suffering of other beings, while giving them one's joy, merit, wealth and so forth. This practice can assist us in practical ways. Indeed, when we sincerely undertake this meditation practice, we will definitely notice a difference in our own attitudes when we encounter suffering beings.

During an early part of our life when we had no specific training for taking the suffering of others, we may have felt a bit helpless when we saw someone suffering. Likewise we did not know how to give our joy to others. After having engaged in this meditation practice, however, our whole attitude will be different when we see someone suffering. If there is no practical or physical way to benefit them, we can work on imagining taking in their suffering and try to give our benefits and so forth to them. To that extent it is really important that we train our mind to engage in these ways of benefiting others.

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary states, the practical way to benefit these beings is:

... you should establish through the estates [that you control] doctors and barbers throughout your country.

The advice to the king is to use his wealth and estates to help the needy, including infants and minors, the very old and the sick and those who are impoverished. The king is thus exhorted to provide the means, for example establishing hospitals and clinics with doctors, as well as practical services like barbers for those who cannot afford to pay, as well as other personal needs. The reference to the king's estates means that he should not expect the help to come from others, but that he should use his own wealth and resources. Rather than leaving his wealth to his own sons, daughters or relatives the king is being told to use it to benefit others, in particular the needy. We can also take this advice on a personal level.

The **second** of the fourteen categories relates to the next verse:

241 *O One of Good Wisdom, please provide
Hostels, parks, dikes,
Ponds, rest-houses, water-vessels,
Beds, food, hay, and wood.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains:

O one of good wisdom, please provide hostels for guests in towns and along the road. In the middle of cities provide parks with flowers and trees,...

Here there is a traditional distinction between towns and cities. I have explained this previously, so we need not go into any further detail of that here. However, as indicated by the English terms, a town has fewer people than a city. Practical ways of benefiting those living in towns are to provide hostels for guests in towns and along the road, as well as providing parks with flowers and trees in the cities. We can all relate to the great benefits of having parks; seeing flowers in

the beautiful gardens of the parks gives us a sense of joy, and even a sense of relaxation. It brings pleasure to the mind, so to that extent it actually benefits others. As the commentary further explains:

... dikes, ponds with beautiful arches on either side and beautiful paths, rest houses, water vessels, beds, food, hay and wood.

Providing these things is a very practical way to benefit those who live in towns and cities. As the king is someone who is endowed with *good wisdom*, it is appropriate for him use his wealth to ensure the life of his subjects in towns and cities is comfortable and pleasant. Of course that is also of benefit to the king, as it is easier to rule subjects who are content and happy. So what it is of benefit to his subjects is, in turn, beneficial for the king.

The **third** category relates to these two lines:

242ab *Please establish rest-houses
In all towns, at temples, and in all cities*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

Please establish rest-houses in all towns, at temples and in all cities,

This relates to the practical benefits of providing rest-houses and so forth for those who visit these places.

The **fourth** category is:

242cd *And provide water-vessels
On all arid roadways.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains:

... and provide water-vessels on all arid roadways.

This refers to roadways where there is a scarcity of water.

We can see how Nagarjuna was extremely skilful in providing advice to the king in relation to his own spiritual development i.e. practices relating to Dharma, as well as how to engage in his kingly duties. Specific advice to the king about how to perform his duties is explained in the fourth chapter, Royal Policy.

The **fifth** of the fourteen categories is:

243 *Always care compassionately
For the sick, the unprotected, those stricken
With suffering, the lowly, and the poor
And take special care to nourish them.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

Always care compassionately for the sick, the unprotected, those stricken with suffering, the lowly from lower castes and the miserable poor. And take special care to nourish them respectfully.

As indicated here, the special instruction is to again care for those who endure unfortunate circumstances, such as the sick. We all know that it is a very difficult period for everyone concerned when someone is stricken with disease. The second group referred to here are *the unprotected*, those who don't have protection, for example, the victims of domestic violence and so forth. Then there are those who are stricken with other types of *suffering*. *The lowly*, as indicated in the commentary, are those from the lower castes.

In ancient India and even to this day the lower castes are subjected to discrimination. As you may well know, they are looked down upon and are scorned. Thus the king is exhorted to take care of those who are from a lower caste. In Australia we may not be confronted by castes, however we could perhaps relate to the distinction between rich and poor. The rich seem to scorn those who are not as wealthy,

and those who are less wealthy may despise the rich, calling them 'snobbish' and so forth.

We should make a note of two main points from this explanation.

1. To *always care compassionately for the sick the unprotected, those stricken with suffering, the lowly from lower castes and the miserable poor*. Caring compassionately indicates that it is not enough just to have a compassionate thought, but that one actually needs to extend care to those who one feels compassion.

2. To *take special care to nourish them respectfully*. This is in line with the practices for developing compassion that are explained in other teachings such as Lama Tsong Khapa's teachings. Having developed a compassionate attitude towards others one should then extend compassion and care to others to the extent of one's own ability.

This is a great point that we need to consider. Even though we have not yet developed the capacity to give all our wealth or sacrifice our body and so forth; we can train in that practice at the level of intention through practices such as *tong len*, which is the giving and taking practice that we did earlier. On a practical level we can engage in benefitting others to best of our capacity. This is a very important point.

Initially we train our mind and cultivate compassion in our heart. The next step is to benefit others by practical means. As indicated here, it is not enough to just feel compassionate, but important to actually extend care, particularly to those who are less fortunate. Also indicated here, the care should be offered respectfully. The king is being advised against feeling proud and pompous about his good deeds and to undertake these practices in a respectful manner.

We need to apply these instructions at a personal level to the best of our capacity. When we encounter those who are sick, or in need, or less fortunate than ourselves, we can provide help to them in a respectful manner to the extent that we are capable.

The verse relating to the **sixth** category reads:

244 *Until you have given to monastics and beggars
Seasonally-appropriate food and drink,
As well as produce, grain, and fruit,
You should not partake of them.*

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

Until you have given to monastics and beggars seasonally-appropriate food and drink, warm in the winter and cooling in the summer, as well as produce, grain and fruit, you O king, should not partake of them.

In countries like Thailand and Burma, the tradition is that when the lay community serve food, monastics are served first, and the lay people eat only when the monastics have eaten. This follows ancient traditions when the Sangha were held in high esteem. In Tibetan monastic communities, when the lay community come to offer the monks food and drink at a puja, for example, members of the lay community can only eat after the monks in the main assembly hall of the monastery have offered the food and begun to eat. This is in line with that ancient tradition. Thus the king is exhorted to provide *seasonally-appropriate food* for others, particularly the *monastics* and the impoverished such as *beggars*, and advised not to partake of the food until the monastics have taken their food.

The **seventh** category is indicated in this verse:

245 *At the sites of the water-vessels
Place shoes, umbrellas, water-filters,*

*Tweezers for removing thorns,
Needles, thread, and fans.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

For those who do not have shoes and are exhausted by the heat, *at the sites of the water-vessels, place shoes, umbrellas, water-filters, tweezers for removing thorns, needles, thread and fans.*

The king is instructed to provide for the needy in other ways, such as providing *shoes* at places like rest houses. For those who are exhausted by the heat, the king should place things such as *umbrellas, water filters* (for the ordained to filter the water prior to drinking), *and tweezers for removing thorns; needles and thread* as well as *fans* to keep cool.

The verse relating to the **eighth** category reads:

246 *Within vessels place the three medicinal fruits,
The three fever medicines, butter,
Honey, eye medicines, and antidotes to poison,
And write out mantras and prescriptions)*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains:

For sick patients and guests, *within vessels place the three medicinal fruits, the three fever medicines, butter, honey, eye medicines, and antidotes to poison.*

Here the king is being exhorted to take care of the sick, as well as guests who are in great need because they have come from a different region and are unfamiliar with the place, and so a list of the provisions they may need is presented.

The commentary continues with further instructions:

And write out mantras which by merely reciting, alleviates illnesses *and prescriptions* that prescribes the correct antidote for particular diseases.

The **ninth** category is:

247 *At the sites of the vessels place
Salves for the body, feet, and head,
As well as wool, stools, gruel, jars [for getting
water] ,
Cooking pots, axes, and so forth.*

These are very practical items. Their modern equivalents are all the things that are provided when we stay at a hotel or an apartment.

Gyaltsab Je explains:

For the purpose of guests, *at the site of the vessels place, salves for the body, feet, and head. As well as wool, stools, gruel, jars [for getting water], cooking pots* to cook foods such as meat, *axes* to chop wood *and so forth.*

The next category is the **tenth**:

248 *Please have small containers
In the shade filled with sesame,
Rice, grains, foods, molasses,
And suitable water.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Please have small containers in the shade filled with sesame, rice, grains, foods, molasses and suitable water.

The verse relating to the **eleventh** category reads:

249 *At the openings of ant-hills
Please have trustworthy persons
Always put food, water,
Sugar, and piles of grain.*

As the commentary reads:

At the openings of ant-hills, please have trustworthy persons. Always put food, water, sugar and piles of grain. Trustworthy persons could include the king himself.

This particular instruction to the king is similar to the instruction in the Vinaya teachings about how to care for one's environment. If there are *ant-hills* and so forth, one needs to protect them and not disturb the ants. That is because in the event of a disturbance, the ants lose the ability to provide for themselves, so food and the items listed in the verse should be placed at the opening of the ant-hill to help the ants.

The next verse corresponds to the **twelfth** category:

250 *Before and after taking food
Always appropriately offer fare
To hungry ghosts, dogs,
Ants, birds, and so forth.*

As the commentary states:

Before and after taking food, always appropriately offer fare to hungry ghosts, dogs, ants, birds and so forth.

Little explanation is required for these verses as they are quite clear. The practice of offering to hungry ghosts is that after dedicating a portion of food to the hungry ghost, imagine them to be in your circle and then offer the food to the hungry ghost. Then they will get the essence of that food, which is beneficial for them.

The following verse relates to the **thirteenth** category:

251 *Provide extensive care
For the persecuted, the victims of crop failure,
The stricken, those suffering contagion,
And for beings in conquered areas.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

Provide extensive care such as foods and so forth, for the persecuted by the king and like,...

This could refer to those persecuted by kings of other lands, and those who have been banished from other countries and so forth.

... the victims of crop failure, the stricken, those suffering contagion, and for beings in conquered areas.

This refers to providing for *the victims of crop failure*, which could also refer to being on the verge of famine; *contagion* refers to a contagious disease; and *the beings in conquered areas* are the victims of wars and the like.

The **fourteenth** and last category, relates to the first two lines of the next verse:

252ab *Provide stricken farmers
With seeds and sustenance.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je states:

The king is instructed to *provide stricken farmers* who lack seeds, plough oxen and so forth, *with seeds and sustenance.*

A farmer's crop may fail, or he may not have sufficient seeds to plant a crop. When such events occur, the king is instructed to help those farmers with the seeds for the right crop, along with sustenance and nourishment to enable them to work in the fields while preparing their crops for harvest.

2.1.2. Other giving

This section has nine categories, which we can leave it for our next session. This part of the text should be relatively easy for you to follow.

Student: How do we actually practice the offering of food to hungry ghosts? Do we leave some food on our own plate? Do we place it outside, and for how long do we leave it out for them?

The practice mainly involves having good intentions rather than performing it as mere ritual. However along with the good intention, you can offer them some food. After your meal, you can place the portion of your meal that you put aside for them in your garden, for example. You don't have to leave it on your plate. The key thing is that once you have made up your mind to leave a portion to the hungry ghosts, you don't then eat it yourself!

The main part of the practice is the intention of giving to the hungry ghosts who are far less fortunate than ourselves. Their primary suffering is hunger and thirst, therefore the intention is that they will benefit from being given a portion of one's food. With that intention, dedicate that food to them, and finally generate the thought that they have been satisfied with that food. It is said that some beings will actually benefit from such a positive intention and act of giving.

Actually it is a mutually beneficial practice as it is also a way to increase one's practice of generosity. At a more expansive level, there is the meditation practice of giving and taking, where you imagine give sustenance to the vast number of hungry ghosts in their realms, who are stricken with great pangs of hunger and thirst.

On a practical level, however, if one is not careful and someone were to see you taking out food on a daily basis, they might think you have gone a bit crazy, because there are no hungry ghosts to be seen. Therefore we need to know the real significance of this practice and not get too carried away with how to do it. This reminds me of a young girl who would tell her grandmother, (who has a habit of saying mantras wherever she went, even in town) not to recite mantras too loudly, otherwise people might think she had gone crazy.

Sometimes there is purpose for keeping quiet about what we experience with particular practices and so forth. If you start blurting out your experiences to others, people might be taken aback and think that you are talking about weird things, or nonsense, and conclude that you might have gone crazy. So that is good reason to keep certain practices to oneself.

Thinking in this practical way sheds light on the purpose for keeping certain practices secret. If you tell someone, who has no idea who Tara is and no knowledge of the deity aspect, 'I have visions of Tara and she speaks to me', the person you are telling might think 'he or she has gone completely crazy!' So if one does not pay heed to these things, there may be the danger one will be taken away to a mental institution!

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*