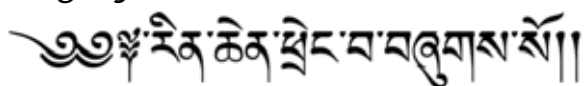

Nagarjuna's Precious Garland



Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Maintaining the motivation of the refuge and bodhicitta prayer that we have just recited, we will now engage in the practice of meditation.

[meditation]

We set the motivation for receiving the teaching along these lines: for the sake of all mother sentient beings, in order to free them from every suffering and lead them to ultimate happiness, I need to achieve enlightenment myself, so for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well. We need to try to develop this positive attitude from the depths of our heart.

1.2.3. Special Achievement (cont.)

The last two verses under this heading read:

316. *Because of lack of power while dying,
You will be unable to make donations by way
of your ministers
Who will shamelessly lose affection for you
And will seek to please the new monarch.*

317. *Hence while in good health create foundations
of doctrine
Immediately with all your wealth,
For you are living amidst the causes of death
Like a lamp standing in a breeze.*

Although this very sound and pungent advice is explicitly directed to the king, we can also take it as personal advice for ourselves. The king is being reminded of the certainty of his approaching death. In effect we are being told that we should not be complacent, thinking that although practices are worthwhile we will probably do them next year, or the year after, or maybe the year after that. We procrastinate in this way, assuming that we can always do the practices later on. However for every moment that passes our death is that much closer.

The uncertainty of the time of death is explained with the analogy that it is *like a lamp standing in a breeze*. In the same way as a small flame is easily extinguished by a breeze, our approaching death can occur at any time. So, with that analogy, the king is exhorted to engage in the practices right now.

We should pay heed and take this as personal advice. Death is definitely approaching, thus we cannot neglect Dharma practice thinking that we will find the time later on. Rather, we should try to incorporate practice into our daily life.

At best that would mean leaving worldly affairs behind and placing the Dharma practice in the forefront. For an ordained monk or nun, of course that is an essential part of ones responsibility, as the very intention of taking ordination is so that one can be fully committed to engage in Dharma practice. Thus an ordained person is not encouraged to engage in many worldly affairs. However, that does not mean that it is not necessary for lay people to engage in Dharma practice as well.

In fact, if practising Dharma is understood to mean trying to acquaint one's mind with virtue, then that applies to everyone, in whatever activity they are engaged. Incorporating a virtuous mind into daily life can begin at the start of the day when one generates a compassionate attitude — a motivation of wishing to be of benefit and service for others. Whenever the opportunity arises during the day, it is worthwhile to spend some time recollecting the value of compassion and love, thus generating a virtuous state of mind. That is much better than allowing one's mind to be carried away with whimsical thoughts, becoming completely immersed in worldly affairs. Whenever we cultivate such a compassionate attitude within ourselves, we are practising the Dharma. As I regularly stress, Dharma practice really comes down to generating a compassionate loving attitude towards other sentient beings, and maintaining that attitude at all times.

We all have the capacity to engage in a virtuous state of mind. When we look within ourselves we can all see that we have both virtuous states of mind as well as negative states of mind. When we come to recognise that our negative attitudes are harmful and detrimental to our own well-being, and virtuous states of mind are beneficial for ourselves as well as for others, then it would be absurd to willingly foster negative attitudes and engage in non-virtue. Who in their right mind would want to willingly adopt states of mind that are detrimental and harmful for their own well-being — unless you were completely insane? As we are able to distinguish between what is good and what is harmful for us, we need to discard the negative attitudes.

If one is intelligent and of sound mind then it is very obvious that the most useful path is to voluntarily choose to adopt attitudes and states of mind that are not only beneficial and useful now, but also beneficial for our future lives. Lama Tsongkapa mentioned that the positive effect of practising patience, for example, is that one will definitely experience an immediate benefit, as well as the positive results to be experienced in the next lifetime. From the moment that we begin to practise patience, we feel the definite and immediate benefit of being protected from the mind of anger.

We all know that whenever a negative state of mind arises it harms us. When negative states of mind such as anger arise we don't feel settled, and we don't feel calm or peaceful. Therefore adopting a positive state of mind that opposes anger will definitely be of benefit. So we really need to take the initiative to implement our practice into our everyday life.

As mentioned earlier, the best way to engage in the practice of Dharma is to consider the welfare of this life as being secondary, rather than of primary importance. When the attitude towards the benefit of this life become less important and the focus is on the welfare for our future life time, then our Dharma practice becomes more authentic.

But that does not mean that we completely neglect the welfare of this life. Rather, because our primary focus is the practice of Dharma, engaging in the activities for the welfare of this life is of secondary importance, and the benefit of that is that acquiring the wealth and so forth, which is necessary to sustain ourselves in this life, will not disturb our minds. As our primary focus is not based on mundane worldly success and so forth, the ups and downs of work and life will not affect us to the point of causing great sorrow and misery, overwhelming us with stress and depression and so forth. That is the practical benefit of adopting a lifestyle

where the focus of Dharma practice is on benefitting of our future life.

Of course, the direct recipient of Nagarjuna's advice is the king, but we need to see how this advice is also a personal instruction to ourselves. Indeed every aspect of this teaching has some relevance to improving our own daily life.

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of the verses in this way:

If you resolve on giving near the time of death; because of lack of power while dying, you will be unable to make donations by way of your ministers, who are forgetful and will shamelessly lose affection for you and will seek to please the new monarch.

Here the king is being exhorted to engage in the practice of giving and so forth right now, while he still has full control over his wealth. We might find that, like a lot of people, we are complacently thinking, 'I am still fit now so I can make decisions about how to use my wealth for the benefit of others later, nearer to the time of my death. That is when I will make the necessary decisions and leave instructions about how my wealth is to be used'. Here, Nagarjuna is clearly explaining that at the time of death the king cannot be certain as to whether his wealth will be used in the right way for virtue, *because of his lack of power while he is dying.*

When you are in the process of dying your mind will not be capable of dealing with your wealth. So the king is reminded that at that time he will lose his power and that he *will not be able to make donation by way of his ministers.* That is because at the time of death, he cannot rely upon his ministers, *who are forgetful*, which indicates that because they are no longer within his sphere of authority, they will *shamelessly lose affection for him, and will seek to please the new monarch.* Knowing of his imminent death, the king's ministers will have no reason to serve or please him anymore, rather they will be seeking to please and serve the new monarch. So they will neglect the king's wishes. That is why you will not have the power to use your wealth to give to others when you are dying.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues to explain:

Hence while now you have the power and are in good health, create foundations of doctrine immediately with all wealth. Don't put it off thinking you will do it next year or the year after, for you are living amidst the causes of death like a lamp standing in a breeze.

This explains very clearly to the king that he must resolve to use his wealth right now, 'while you are in sound physical and mental *health* and therefore *have the power*, use your *wealth* to *create the foundation of doctrine*, i.e. for the purpose of the Dharma, and *not put it off.* *Using it now* means using it while you have the full power to do so; because at the time of death your ministers will not obey you, and will basically rob you of the power that you have now'.

Also emphasised here is that another reason to use one's wealth immediately is that you will be able to utilise it for the Dharma. The fact is that *you are living amidst the causes of death like a lamp standing in a breeze.* As mentioned previously, a small flame can be extinguished at any given moment by the slightest breeze. Likewise your life can cease at any moment. So the king is being exhorted to use his wealth to engage in the practice of giving.

Engaging in the practice of generosity when one is of sound mind is incredibly worthwhile, as it can secure a peaceful death. As mentioned in the teachings it is hard for a person who is excessively attached to their wealth to have a swift,

painless, peaceful and good death. Rather they will have a prolonged dying process, where it takes a long while for the breath to actually cease; their strong attachment means that they are not able to let go. Because the death process is more unpleasant the dying person will not have a peaceful state of mind. If one can be generous with one's remaining wealth when one is able to make clear decisions about how it is to be used, then at the time of death there will be a sense of contentment, knowing that whatever one has accumulated is to be used in a positive, virtuous way. Thus, being generous with one's wealth will secure a calm and peaceful death. So it is really worthwhile for us to consider this advice.

We need to definitely pay attention to this very obvious and practical advice. This is not a presentation of high level practices that are beyond our capacity. They are not practices meant for great bodhisattvas on the higher grounds. We can definitely adopt practices such as generosity in our everyday life. Once we have made the decision to be generous, we are more than capable of engaging in the act of generosity. It is the same with the practice of morality. Once we make the decision to practise ethics, we can engage in the practice of morality, and it is the same with patience and so forth.

Not only are these practices of benefit in this life, but they are also way to prepare for our future life, so that we can enjoy good conditions at that time. As the teachings explain very clearly, the basic cause of a fortunate rebirth, such as a human rebirth, is the practice of ethics. So the practice of **morality** is the main cause for obtaining a good rebirth in the next lifetime.

Engaging in the practice of **generosity** in this life is the main cause to obtain sufficient conditions of wealth and so forth to sustain ourselves without worry in the next lifetime.

The practice of **patience** is the way to secure a beautiful body and intact faculties that we can utilise for the practice of the Dharma.

Likewise **enthusiasm** or joyous effort is way to ensure that he have a charismatic appearance of majesty.

Bodhisattvas have created the earlier conditions to ensure a fortunate rebirth, with wealth to sustain themselves, good features, a beautiful body, sound faculties and a charismatic appearance of majesty. Having all those good conditions means they won't be distracted and can focus entirely on the Dharma. Thus they will be able to practise **concentration** without the influence of worldly affairs.

The practice of **wisdom** arising from concentration will enable one to be completely liberated from the whole of cyclic existence.

This is how the six perfections become a complete practice that enables one to utilise not just the immediate conditions of this life and the future life as well, but they are also the means by which one can become completely free from the cyclic existence. The main thing we need to resolve is that it is a matter of a choice. We have the ability to see the great advantage of practising virtue and disadvantages of non-virtue, so it is then up to us to decide to actually adopt the practice and implement it in our life.

The essential point is although we enjoy a human rebirth, our contaminated aggregates are in the nature of samsara, and so we ultimately have to abandon the contaminated aggregates. However, temporarily, we do need to obtain such a human rebirth again. We need to understand that even though our human body is a contaminated body that has to be completely abandoned, we need to have a body

like this while we are in the process of acquiring the causes and conditions to free ourselves from samsara to achieve liberation and enlightenment. Accumulating virtue and the two collections would be quite difficult without a human rebirth.

1.3. Maintaining what was established earlier

This is subdivided into three:

1.3.1. General teaching

1.3.2. Way of appointing caretakers

1.3.3. Equal maintenance

1.3.1. General teaching

The root text reads:

318. Also you should maintain other centres of doctrine

Established by the previous kings—

All the temples and so forth—

As they were before.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary adds an additional point of clarification:

Also you should maintain and prevent from decline, other centres of doctrine established by the previous kings – all the temples and so forth – as they were before.

The meaning of this is quite clear, which is that while utilising your wealth to establish the basis for the doctrine, you should *also maintain and prevent from decline other centres of doctrine established by previous kings*, which includes *temples and monasteries and so forth*. While establishing new places of doctrine to benefit others, it is equally important to maintain already established centres of learning, worship and so forth, *and thus prevent them from decline*. So the king is being advised to take responsibility for places set up by other kings.

1.3.2. Way of appointing caretaker

319. Please have them attended by those

Who are not harmful, are virtuous,

Keep their vows, are kind to visitors, truthful,

Patient, non-combative, and always diligent.

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

Please have them attended by caretakers possessing the eight qualities: those who are not harmful; are virtuous; who practice to keep even one aspect of their vows; are kind to existing dwellers as well as newly arrived visitors; who speak truthful words; are not weary and patient with tasks; non-combative and always diligent in acquiring virtue.

Again, this is very pungent advice that we should adopt. We need to adopt the qualities of a caretaker for monuments and temples and so forth that are listed here. *Who are not harmful* refers to those who do not harm others and who do not carry any harmful intentions towards other beings. Not only does it refer to not harming other beings, but it also refers to objects that belong to others such as temples and so forth.

Who are virtuous and *who practice to keep even one aspect of the vows* refers to diligence in maintaining virtue by maintaining even just one aspect of their vows well (for example, refraining from killing).

Kind to existing dwellers relates to the residents of a place. For example we have residents here at Tara Institute, some who are new residents along with older residents. As explained here, we should be kind to all, and not neglect one group. We should not neglect the welfare of long time residents, thinking, 'Oh, they are old timers so we don't have to pay attention to them' or treat newcomers with contempt

thinking, 'Oh, this is a newcomer'. There should be no distinction between long-time dwellers and newcomers, and we should be equally kind to both.

Being *truthful* is clear; being *patient* protects us from being daunted by tasks; while *non-combative* means not being quarrelsome. Although this advice is directed to those who dwell in monasteries, temples and so forth; it can also apply to any residential community. Here at Tara Institute we are living in a Buddhist institution which is equivalent to a temple, so those who live here need to have all these qualities of being non-combative and so forth. *Always being diligent in acquiring virtue* refers engaging in virtue on a daily basis, not just once in a while. These are *the eight qualities* that the *caretakers* need to have.

1.3.3. Equal maintenance

The verse relating to this heading is very clear in its meaning.

*320. Cause the blind, the sick, the lowly,
The protectorless, the destitute,
And the crippled equally to obtain
Food and drink without interruption.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Be a cause for the blind, the sick, the lowly, the protectorless, the destitute and the crippled to equally obtain sustenance such as food and drink unceasingly and without interruption.

As clearly explained here, the king is being exhorted to help the needy such as the *blind*, the *sick*, those who are of *low* status and so forth. The *protectorless* (those who are bound by cruel masters, debts and so forth), the *destitute* and the *crippled*, to help them *to equally obtain sustenance such as food and drink*. Here, *equally* indicates that we should serve others in an unbiased manner, not favouring some and neglecting others. Rather you need to ensure that your help can be equally obtained by all who are needy. A simple analogy is when we are given something and told to share it amongst ourselves, which means that we want to ensure that everyone has an equal share, and that no one is left out. *Unceasingly* refers to helping without interruption, which means not turning people away while engaged in the act of giving and so forth. It also has a connotation of providing without interruption.

1.4. Providing even for those who do not seek it

The relevant verse is:

*321. Provide all types of support
For practitioners who do not seek it
And even for those living
In the countries of other monarchs.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je adds some clarification:

Provide all types of support, such as food and the like, to the best of your ability, for practitioners who do not seek it, and even deliver them for those living in the countries of other monarchs.

The king is being advised to try to extend his generosity not only to those who are destitute in his own domain, but to others who may not particularly seek it. When you notice that others are in need of your help, such as with food and the like, then you must try to extend it to them. This refers to other practitioners who may not come to you, but who nevertheless are in need, as well as those who are destitute in the countries of other monarchs. So again the king is being exhorted to go beyond the limits of his own domain, and have an unbiased attitude of compassion even for the

subjects of other monarchs, and then extend help to them when they need it.

1.5. Way of appointing ministers

This section is further subdivided into four:

1.5.1. Appointing religious leaders

1.5.2. Appointing ministers

1.5.3. Appointing generals

1.5.4. Appointing treasurers, etc.

1.5.1. Appointing religious leaders

Having established temples and so forth, what kind of teachers need to be appointed. The verse reads:

322. *At all centres of the doctrine
Appoint attendants who are
Not negligent, not greedy, skilful,
Religious, and not harmful to anyone.*

As explained in Gyaltsab Je's commentary:

At all centres of the doctrine such as temples and the like, appoint attendants and the like who are not lazy and negligent, not greedy for wealth, retinue and so forth, skilful, religious and not harmful to anyone, including cattle and so forth.

Rather than *attendants*, a better translation would refer to those who provide Dharma activity in centres of the doctrine, such as temples and the like. Such spiritual leaders should *not* be *lazy*, which refers particularly to the laziness of being distracted with worldly affairs. As indicated here, a spiritual teacher should be free from the faults of being attracted to worldly affairs, so they will not be *negligent*, meaning neglecting those who are earnest seekers. Such a teacher should also *not* be *greedy for wealth* or *retinue and so forth*, they should be *skilful* in presenting the teachings, be of a *religious* mind, meaning having a keen interest in accumulating virtue themselves, and *not harmful to anyone including cattle and so forth*. This means those who dwell in the temples are kind not only to inner seekers like the people who *visit the temple*, but also to that which belongs to the temple, such as cattle and so forth, These are the qualities of a spiritual teacher.

1.5.2. Appointing ministers

The next verse relates to nine desirable attributes for the king's ministers.

323. *Appoint ministers who know good policy,
Who practise the doctrine, are civil,
Pure, harmonious, undaunted, of good lineage,
Of excellent ethics, and grateful.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of this verse:

Appoint ministers who possess the nine qualities: *knowing good policy* such as fostering good relations with other kings and giving them some of their wealth; are skilled in appointing or dismissing governing bodies; *who shun non-virtue and practise the doctrine* - thus fearful but faithful (*civil*) to the king; *pure* from stains of selfishness; *harmonious* having close relations with the other retinue and subjects; *undaunted* - being free of a hostile mind; *of good lineage*; *of good conduct* because of *excellent ethics*; and with the understanding of kindness and aggression, being very *grateful*.

Being *grateful with the understanding of kindness and aggression* indicates seeing the kindness that is extended to oneself, and being able to repay that kindness. Dealing with *aggression* means dealing with it in an appropriate way without hostility, and with compassion and love. It also means

correcting what is wrong. If others act aggressively then you need to be able to actually stand up for your rights. This is an important attribute for both the king and his ministers, otherwise others will take advantage of them. There will be instances where one will have to right wrongs, or take a stand against wrong things that are done out of aggression; it should be done with the right motivation, one that is imbued with compassion and love.

It is good to really bear in mind the main points of the advice which has been presented here this evening. We have heard very sound advice about our state of impermanence, and the need to be generous with our wealth and so forth, at a time when we have the capacity to act on it,

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