

# Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷན་པའི་བུ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

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Having generated our motivation during the refuge and bodhicitta prayer, we can now engage in the meditation practice. [meditation]

Last session we listed the next sequence of outlines, of which there are quite a few.

## 3. ACHIEVING LIBERATION AND NOT FORSAKING THE SCRIPTURES OF THE GREAT VEHICLE

### 3.1. Training in the path of liberation

#### 3.1.1. Refuting inherently existent objects of attachment, pleasant and painful feelings

##### 3.1.1.1. REFUTING REAL FEELINGS OF PLEASURE

###### 3.1.1.1.1. Transition

The first verse relating to this heading is:

346. *Although Universal Monarchs rule  
Over the four continents, their pleasures  
Are regarded as only two—  
The physical and the mental.*

I have presented this point many times over the years, maybe over a hundred thousand times, with a particular focus on the importance of mental pleasure. It seems that what I have been trying to emphasise over and over again is in fact supported by Nagarjuna [laughter]. In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains:

Although O King you may obtain the state of a *Universal Monarch* who *rules over the four continents; their pleasures are regarded as only two – the physical feelings of pleasure and mental pleasure*. If asked how profound is this pleasure?<sup>1</sup>

The four continents refers to the four directional continents around Mount Meru, with our earth being the southern continent. The main point is that even if the king were to *rule over all four continents*, 'the pleasures that you would be able to experience, even as a great ruler are only twofold – *physical feelings of pleasure and mental pleasure*'.

This is actually a very significant point. When it comes to the pleasures that we can experience as humans they can be subsumed into just two, physical and mental, and there are no exceptions, even for a king. Even though he is a great regal king, he can only experience two kinds of pleasure — physical and mental. Likewise there is no other experience of suffering except physical suffering and mental suffering.

Simply put, the Dharma is the means to obtain genuine pleasure or real happiness and to alleviate suffering, which is what we are all striving to achieve. It is quite easy to keep this point in mind. The cause of pleasure is a virtuous state of mind and all the positive deeds motivated by the virtuous mind, and the cause of suffering is a non-virtuous state of mind and the negative deeds arising from that state of mind. The Lam Rim teachings present these essential points very clearly, and it is good to keep them in mind.

As we all wish to experience happiness and do not wish to experience any kind of suffering, it is worthwhile to consider whether we are creating the appropriate causes to experience happiness, and whether we are engaging in the right actions to alleviate suffering. These are important points for self-analysis.

If we really investigate within ourselves, we might find that rather than pursuing the real means of happiness and relieving suffering, we are actually engaging in the opposite. In his text, *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, the great master Shantideva mentioned that although wishing for happiness, sentient beings intentionally avoid and destroy the causes of happiness as if they were an enemy; and while wanting to avoid suffering, they eagerly pursue the causes of suffering.

So, isn't this also true for us? Are we actually creating the appropriate causes for happiness while abandoning the causes of suffering? With respect to the ten non-virtuous deeds, if we at any time intentionally engage in the act of killing then we are voluntarily accumulating the causes of suffering, because the natural consequence of engaging in the act of killing is to experience suffering. Likewise with stealing: if we take something that does not belong to us we might feel we are gaining something, but actually we are just creating the cause for much greater suffering in the future. It is the same with sexual misconduct or adultery. We have all seen how engaging in an act of adultery causes so much suffering right down the line.

These are very practical ways of checking our conduct to see whether we are appropriately engaging in the causes of happiness and avoiding the causes of suffering. This is advice that we need to put into practice in our daily life. Neglecting this very practical advice while attempting to engage in some high level of practice is missing the point; we must really establish a sound basis on which we can further develop ourselves.

In making the attempt to accumulate virtue and avoid non-virtue, we need to first be very clear about what virtue is and what non-virtue is, which can be understood through their definitions. *Virtue is that which brings about pleasant results, and non-virtue or negativity is that which brings about unpleasant results.*

So you need to consider which states of mind bring about pleasant experiences. The virtuous thoughts of kindness and genuine consideration towards others, are states of mind which, by their very nature, bring about the positive result of pleasant experiences. Whereas negative states of mind, such as harmful intentions and so forth, are the ones that bring about unpleasant experiences. As I emphasise in my teachings regularly, we need to really pay attention to protecting a kind mind and a kind heart at all costs, and then further increase and protect whatever qualities we already have. That is the way to progress in our spiritual practice.

The second verse under this outline reads:

347. *Physical feelings of pleasure  
Are only a lessening of pain.  
Mental pleasures are made of thought,  
Created only by conceptuality.*

The main point of this verse is extensively elaborated in Aryadeva's *400 Verses*, which we have studied in the past.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

*Physical feelings of pleasure are only a lessening of pain. Except for the pleasure experienced as result of the lessening of pain, there is no specifically characterised*

<sup>1</sup> This question is a lead-in to the next verse.

pleasure in this world, but there is specifically characterised suffering.

*Specifically characterised* is a literal translation of the Tibetan word, *rangtsen*, which has the specific meaning in this context as *true* or *real*. There is *no specifically characterised or real pleasure in this world but there is specifically characterised suffering*. Worldly pleasure is none other than a lessening of suffering. The lessening of suffering is experienced as, and called *pleasure* but, as explained here, it is not a real pleasure, i.e. it is not specifically characterised as a real pleasure. For example, when we experience a cool breeze on a very hot day then the sensation of feeling very hot and uncomfortable is immediately alleviated. Because the earlier experience of extreme heat has been removed, that cool breeze is experienced as pleasurable.

To re-emphasise the point, from our own experience we have a sense that suffering seems to be at the core of our existence. Happiness, called pleasure in a worldly context, only occurs when the predominant, underlying suffering is lessened a bit. The predominant underlying experience we seem to have is of one suffering and that is quite apparent if we really think about it.

However it would be wrong to say that there is no happiness or pleasure at all for, conventionally speaking, we do experience happiness. But when we investigate, we find that what we term pleasure is none other than a lessening of an underlying suffering. It is only when that underlying suffering is lessened that we experience pleasure or happiness. That is the main point being presented here.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary further explains:

'Specifically characterised' here does not refer to a specifically characterised phenomenon which is negated by reason, but rather refers to there being no specific pleasure except for the lessening of pain.

Lest one misunderstands the point about there being no specifically characterised pleasure, Gyaltsab Je explains that not being specifically characterised can also mean that pleasure does not exist from its own side, by its own characteristic. In other words it can also refer to the negation of inherently existent pleasure, which is established by Nagarjuna's syllogism: The subjects, persons and aggregates—are empty of inherent existence—because they are dependent arisings<sup>2</sup>.

So when the commentary refers to negation by reasoning it is referring to both suffering and pleasure equally lack inherent existence by virtue of their own characteristics. Therefore the negation of inherent existence is same for both pleasure and pain.

The point being made here is that *specifically characterised*, as used here, refers to the fact that there is no specific pleasure apart for the lessening of pain, rather than referring to the negation of its inherent existence.

Gyaltsab Je continues his commentary with an example:

Just as 'blue' and not 'yellow' comes to mind when the colour blue is placed side by side with the colour yellow, similarly for the feeling of pain to come to mind, it does not have to depend on the lessening of pleasure.

This is explaining very clearly how what is conceived of as being pleasure in a worldly sense is actually none other than the lessening of pain. This is illustrated with the example of how when *yellow is placed* beside a predominant *colour* such

as *blue* then you perceive it as blue and not yellow. The experience of suffering *does not depend on the lessening of pleasure*, because suffering is the predominant experience, and the experience of pleasure depends on the lessening of pain.

Another example Gyaltsab Je presents is:

The feeling of pain is always present, however just as 'short' is posited in relation to 'long', it is at the time when a degree of suffering has decreased and a slight relief is experienced, that the notion of pleasure comes to mind.

As explained here when the term *short* applied to any object it is always *in relation* to something that is longer than it. And if an object is described as *long* it is only longer in relation to something that is shorter than it. Likewise, *pleasure* is characterised as being the lessening of pain, i.e. pleasure is experienced relative to pain.

Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary cautions:

However you must be careful not to deny the conventional existence of feelings of pleasure.

Lest we again fall into a misinterpretation, Gyaltsab Je is pointing out that we *must be careful not to deny the conventional existence of feelings of pleasure*. We cannot deny that the fact that we say, 'I experience this as pleasurable', so our experience of pleasure at a conventional level does exist. However, the mode of existence, which is the main point, is that what we experience as pleasure is none other than the lessening of pain.

When the predominant underlying level of suffering is minimised, that is when we experience pleasure. But other than that there is no real lasting underlying pleasure that we experience at all times. As explained in the teaching, what is referred as worldly pleasure is a contaminated, worldly pleasure. The teachings explain that contaminated pleasures are a form of suffering called the suffering of change. So, contaminated worldly pleasures fall into the category of suffering.

When we think about it, we can see that that whatever pleasurable experience we have starts to feel uncomfortable after a while. For as long as it is a contaminated pleasure there is no real lasting pleasure. These are essential points, and I feel that if you really look into them and think about them, you can derive a profound understanding of the reality of our situation in samsara.

The main point being presented to us here is a very profound way of using logical reasoning. Experiencing pleasure as pleasure that which is none other than the lessening of pain indicates that when our problems reduce a bit then that is when we consider we are experiencing good times. But actually what we experience as good times is merely a lessening of some of our problems and difficulties.

Simply put, no pleasure can be experienced in perpetuity. What we consider as being pleasure is just the lessening of an earlier experience of suffering. That is all there is to it. So we really need to be aware that what we consider as a happy or pleasurable life in samsara is, in truth, not real pleasure or happiness.

This is the reality and nature of samsaric pleasures, which is that it is not really true pleasure in the first place, and that whatever we experience as pleasure doesn't last. Consider again the example of the heat of the sun: when go out and sunbathe we experience the pleasure of the warmth of the sun's rays, but if we stay too long in the sun then the earlier experience of pleasure is transformed into unpleasantness.

<sup>2</sup> See teaching of 24 May 2011.

Then we have a longing to go into the shade. When we first go into the shade, and feel a cool breeze then we experience relief from the earlier uncomfortable experience of heat. However if we stay in the shade for too long and there is too much of a cool breeze then we start to feel uncomfortable again. So this is how our feelings constantly fluctuate between the experience of suffering and momentary contaminated pleasantness and pleasure.

We need to understand why contaminated pleasures are called the suffering of change, and how they are a form of suffering. From the logical explanation, we can understand the statement that samsaric pleasures are a suffering.

Thinking in this way can help us to develop renunciation. When we really think about this point carefully, not only does reflecting on the obvious suffering of pain become the means for us to develop renunciation, but even contemplating the reality of the pleasures of samsara becomes a cause for us to develop renunciation.

So the advice being given to the king is very profound, and we need to try to integrate it into our own lives. In our personal practice we need to really think about the nature of what we call pleasure and pain, and see how every pleasurable experience has the nature of pain and suffering, and thus see that there are no real redeeming qualities of samsara. When we meditate in this way again and again then we can develop renunciation.

The commentary concludes:

A more extensive explanation on this point is presented in the *Four Hundred Verses of Yogic Deeds*. Conventionally *Mental pleasures are made of thought, created only by conceptuality*. Thus, you need to understand that mentally imputed specifically characterised suffering exists, but specifically characterised pleasure does not exist.

### 3.1.1.1.2. Brief indication

348. *All the wealth of worldly pleasures  
Are just a lessening of suffering,  
Or are only [creations of] thought,  
Hence they are in fact not meaningful*

The meaning of this verse is quite straightforward. In his commentary Gyaltsab Je says:

*All the wealth of worldly feelings of pleasures are just a lessening of suffering, or are only conceptually imputed by thought, hence they are in fact not meaningful [or specifically characterised].*

This supports the earlier point. *All the wealth of worldly feelings of pleasures and so forth, are just the lessening of suffering and only conceptually imputed by thought, hence they are not specifically characterised*, meaning there is no real pleasure. What we conceive of as pleasure is basically a mere imputation by our conceptual mind, and other than that there is actually no real pleasure.

### 3.1.1.1.3. Extensive explanation

This section is subdivided into two:

3.1.1.1.3.1. Refuting proofs of real pleasure

3.1.1.1.3.2. Refuting the entity of real pleasure

#### 3.1.1.1.3.1. Refuting proofs of real pleasure

This is again subdivided into two:

3.1.1.1.3.1.1. Refuting proofs for real mental pleasure

3.1.1.1.3.1.2. Refuting proofs for real physical pleasure

#### 3.1.1.1.3.1.1. Refuting proofs for real mental pleasure

349. *Just one by one there is enjoyment  
Of continents, countries, towns, homes,  
Conveyances, seats, clothing, beds,  
Food, drink, elephants, horses, and women.*

Gyaltsab Je begins his explanation with a doubt that is raised by others:

If you say that specifically characterised mental pleasure exists because the cause of that, which is that Ishvara and so forth exist, that is not so, because what you accept as the causes of pleasure are not inherently existing causes of pleasure, as [the syllogism to prove the theses lacks the forward and reverse pervasion].<sup>3</sup> *Just one by one there is enjoyment of the following thirteen: continents, countries, towns, homes, conveyances, seats, clothing, beds, food, drink, elephants, horses, and women.*

Here there is a list of thirteen objects that are said to give rise to pleasure, but pleasure only exists with one object at a time. The explanation of this reasoning will be presented in the following verse. Meanwhile we need to gain the understanding that if, as claimed by others, Ishvara or a creator God is the cause of pleasure and so forth, then logically that would mean that one could experience all pleasures at the same time. That is because there is only one cause of all pleasures, which is Ishvara – the creator. However, as explained here, these pleasures are individually experienced, one by one, and they cannot be experienced simultaneously.

Within the thirteen categories of pleasures, for example, there is the pleasure in riding a horse and there is the pleasure in riding an elephant. When you are riding an elephant, you can't say that you are experiencing the pleasure of riding a horse can you? So if one experiences enjoyment with one object and not the rest, then that is proof that all pleasures cannot be created by one cause, such as a creator.

The next verse continues to explain this point:

350. *When the mind has any [one of these as its  
object],  
Due to it there is said to be pleasure,  
But since at that time no attention is paid to  
the others,  
The others are not then in fact meaningful  
[causes of pleasure].*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

*When the mind pays attention to any one of these as its object, due to this there is said to be pleasure at that time. But since at that time when the mind takes pleasure in one of these objects, no attention is paid to others. Thus, the others are not then in fact meaningful [or more literally specifically characterised] causes of pleasure. If these thirteen objects were in fact inherently<sup>4</sup> causes of pleasure, the others are not then in fact meaningful [or specifically characterised] causes of pleasure. If these thirteen objects were in fact inherent causes of pleasure, then even when not engaged and no attention is paid to them, they would still give rise to pleasure. However that is not the case. Rather when*

<sup>3</sup> The Dalai Lama at Harvard said: A correct sign, or reason, is tri-modal. In brief, this means that 1) the sign is established as being a property of the subject, 2) the forward pervasion is established, and 3) the counter-pervasion is established.

<sup>4</sup> Here *inherently* can be understood as the negation of the inherent existence of phenomena.

one object is enjoyed the rest cannot be enjoyed. Thus, just their existence cannot be a cause of pleasure.

Using the thirteen objects as an example, this is a further refutation of the assertion that there is one supreme cause of pleasure, such as the creator Ishvara. One experiences pleasure while engaging with one particular object at a particular time, and not all at the same time. It is only when we pay attention to a particular object that we engage with that object, and experience pleasure. Therefore pleasure does not arise from a primordial cause, such as a creator or from inherently existent causes. *If these 13 objects were in fact inherent causes of pleasure, then even when not engaged and no attention is paid to them, they would still give rise to pleasure.* But that is not the case.

This points out how the experience of pleasure is a dependent arising. In order to experience pleasures from an object, we have to engage with that object. By engaging in a particular type of object it gives rise to a particular type of pleasure and not randomly. So the pleasure that is experienced with a particular object is a dependent arising in relation to that particular object and does not arise independently or inherently.

We have come to verse 350, and thus we have finished half of chapter four, so we will conclude for this evening. We have the remaining half of chapter four, plus chapter 5, which is not too extensive or complicated.

The remaining verses contain some great advice, and useful instructions. In chapter five there is lot of discussion about mind and mental factors, which will be very useful and practical for us.

As you know the next session will be discussion, followed by the exam in the following week. I don't have to really remind you too much because you have been paying attention to the discussion as well as the exams over the year. I want to thank you for your attention and for taking it seriously, and I exhort you to continue to do so.

The Tuesday after the exam, December 20 will be an evening puja to celebrate the anniversary of Lama Tsongkapa's passing. You need to keep in mind that it was suggested that maybe the study group should do a guru puja as part of their commitment. I mentioned at that time that there is no necessity to specify the date of that guru puja; the Lama Tsongkapa puja will suffice for that purpose.

The commentary on *Precious Garland* was written by Gyaltsab Je, who was one of the chief disciples of Lama Tsongkapa. Even the work of one of his disciples shows us how great a scholar Lama Tsongkapa was. The elder disciple of Lama Tsongkapa was the disciple Gyaltsab Je and the second was Khedrub Je.

Prior to meeting with Lama Tsongkapa Gyaltsab Rinpoche was a renowned scholar of the Sakya tradition. The story is that Gyaltsab Je came to meet Lama Tsongkapa with the intention of debating with him. Apparently Gyaltsab Je arrived while Lama Tsongkapa was actually engaged in giving a teaching. Gyaltsab Je had only small sack of belongings, indicating that he was really a wandering monk, and apparently he was wearing a hat as well. There is a story about how that hat actually flew away but I think that is probably a bit of an exaggeration. Maybe it just fell off, but it was seen as significant as it occurred just as he came into the gathering.

Since he had come with the intention of debating with Lama Tsongkapa, Gyaltsab Je went up and sat on the throne beside him as an equal, which was somewhat presumptuous. Lama Tsongkapa continued to teach, not paying much attention to Gyaltsab, even though he was just sitting there right beside him. When Gyaltsab started to listen to the teaching, he slowly descended from the throne, and did three prostrations and sat down with the rest of the disciples.

Gyaltsab Je was a renowned scholar in his own right, and of course after meeting Lama Tsongkapa he excelled in his understanding of the great treatises. He composed many profound commentaries on the work of the great Indian masters, such as the *Treatise on Valid Cognition*, the *Pramanavatika*, which is a very profound explanation of valid cognition. I have two cousins who study in India in the Sakya college, and they mentioned that they use that commentary by Gyaltsab Je. His other texts such as the great commentary on the *Prajnaparamita* are also used in Sakya monasteries.

When we studied Aryadeva's *400 Verses*, we used Gyaltsab Je's commentary. Those who studied it will recall his very clear explanations. We also used Gyaltsab Je's commentary when we studied the *Bodhicharyavatara* text. And now, as we study Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, we are using a commentary composed by Gyaltsab Je. So you can see how his explanations are very precise and very clear.

An example of this is the verse we did this evening, which indicated that there is no specifically characterised pleasure, which could also be understood that to meant that there is no inherently existent pleasure. If we were to just refer to the root text, it would be very easy to assume that that this point actually refers to non-inherently existent pleasures. But then we would wonder why just pleasures are being negated as inherently existent when sufferings also lack inherent existence. So in order to clarify that doubt Gyaltsab Je made it very clear that 'not specifically characterised' in this context refers to the lessening of pain and does not refer to non-inherent existence in this context. This is just one example of Gyaltsab Je's clear and precise explanations. Through his commentaries we begin to understand the real depth and profundity of the root texts.

To return to the story of Gyaltsab Je, it is believed to this day that initially sitting on the throne alongside Lama Tsongkapa was actually an auspicious omen, in that when Lama Tsongkapa passed away Gyaltsab Je was appointed as the first throne holder of Lama Tsongkapa's tradition.

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*Edited Version*

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