

# Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

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In accordance with the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* that we have just recited, we can set our motivation. This consists of two most important elements:

- **Refuge**, which ensures that we are protected from following an incorrect path, and
- **Bodhicitta**, which ensures that we are protected from following the path of the lower vehicle.

These two elements of our motivation actually constitute the whole Mahayana path along with its fruits. Thus it is most beneficial. Now we will do the meditation practice. (*meditation*)

For us to be able to gather again like this is a great fortune. Thus it is important that we generate the right attitude for engaging in the study program. In particular we need to generate the strong intention of putting the Dharma into practice - that is what is most important.

A Dharma practitioner is one who is inclined to practise the Dharma. And if there is a strong intention to really put the Dharma into practice then, without doubt, the fruits of the Dharma will naturally be experienced.

As Dharma practitioners our initial concern is how to develop a strong intention to practise Dharma. How do we develop that enthusiasm and sense of joy in practising Dharma? This, of course, is explained extensively in the Lam Rim teachings.

We may assume that we are interested in and willing to practise the Dharma, but if we don't pay attention to developing a keen interest in practising the Dharma, coupled with the right motivation and a kind mind, then we will find that whatever practice we do will not carry much substance. Then we will either not be able to follow through with a practice, or be easily discouraged and give up. That is the consequence of not being able to implement a strong interest with a kind mind and right motivation. When these elements are missing the natural result is that the practice will begin to wane.

When we really examine our state of mind and our practice, we find that even though we can easily claim that we have an interest in practising the Dharma, or that we are actually putting it into practice, something is still lacking. We feel that something is missing, so it is worthwhile to really consider what is causing that to happen.

When we really check, we find that there is something that defiles or pollutes our practice. When we further investigate, we detect that it is concerns about merely this life that is polluting our practice. A strong concern for the welfare of this life pollutes and thus weakens our practice of the Dharma.

When concern for and attachment to this life's affairs become a priority then that naturally weakens our Dharma practice. So it is the particular attitude of strong attachment to the welfare of this life that actually prevents us from developing a pure motivation for our practice. We will be able to detect that very clearly if we really look into ourselves.

Thus, if we want our Dharma practice to be a proper undefiled Dharma practice that brings about good results, such as developing a compassionate and kind attitude, then it is really worthwhile to consider how to cultivate such qualities. The way to secure the best conditions to ensure a pure Dharma practice is summarised in the very first teaching of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths.

Also as explained in Lama Tsongkapa's *Condensed Lam Rim Prayer*<sup>1</sup>,

*This life which has leisure  
Is more precious than the wishing jewel;  
So difficult to find, it is as quickly gone as  
lightning in the sky.  
Thus realise that all worldly activities  
Are like chaff in the wind,  
And seize the essence of leisure and opportunity  
day and night.  
The reverend Lama practised like this;  
Those desiring liberation should do likewise.*

In essence Lama Tsongkapa is explaining that we really need to acknowledge the rarity of this human life with its ten endowments and eight freedoms. The rare and precious conditions that we have now do not last long; as Lama Tsongkapa's prayer says, our life is like a flash of lightning in that it could end at any moment. So we need to bring to mind the impermanence of our life. While we have the opportunity, we need to engage in the practice of Dharma to make optimum use of this life and derive the greatest meaning from it.

## The greatness of a precious human rebirth

It is really important that we contemplate these points. As explained in the prayer, having the conditions of the ten endowments and eight freedoms is what makes our human life more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel. The reason a human rebirth is more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel is because the very best such a jewel can do is eliminate poverty in this life. Although it can provide good food and shelter, it does not have much benefit beyond this life—in fact it will be of no use at all in a future life.

We can utilise this human life that we have now, with its ten endowments and eight liberties:

- To practise in order to ensure that, at the very least, we are free from an unfortunate rebirth in the next lifetime;
- The next best thing is that we can use the conditions that we have now to obtain liberation, so that we are free from the entire cycle of existence, and thus free from all suffering;
- The very best thing is to utilise the human life we

<sup>1</sup> This prayer is found on pages 36 to 40 of the prayer folder.

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have now to obtain the complete state of enlightenment. This is the ultimate state of the perfection of all qualities and ultimate goodness, in order to be of benefit to all other beings. That is why this human life is incredibly more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel.

### The precious human rebirth is hard to obtain

Having contemplated the preciousness of our human rebirth, the next point to consider is that we are incredibly fortunate to possess this human rebirth. If it was easy to obtain again in the future, then we might not consider it as being so critical to utilise it now. Thus it would not be an impetus to put our life into the practice of Dharma. However, as the teachings explain a human rebirth is also extremely difficult to obtain for three reasons.

a. The **causes** required to obtain a precious human life are difficult to obtain.

The basis of a human rebirth is practising morality, and engaging in the practice of generosity, coupled with making stainless pure prayers. When we consider our own life, and question our own ethical morality, are we confident that we are practising morality purely? Of course we all intend to practice morality and generosity, but we might find that it is not really a pure practice. How many of the ten virtues are we actually observing? How many of the ten non-virtues of killing and so forth, are we successfully avoiding? And how much do we engage in making stainless prayers?

And even if we do engage in the practice we might find that the purity of our morality and our practice of generosity is defiled with impure thoughts of clinging to the affairs of this life.

b. Obtaining a precious human life is difficult because of its very **nature**. The precious human rebirth is defined as having the ten endowments and eight liberties. What are the ten endowments? What the eight liberties? When we contemplate this we will find that it is extremely difficult to obtain such conditions again.

c. The third reason is that of **number**. Compared with the vast number of other beings, precious human rebirths are very scarce, and therefore rare. When we look around, even the animal world outnumbers the number of human lives. Precious human rebirths are definitely outnumbered by unfortunate rebirths. The teachings mention that there are numberless beings in the hell realms and so forth. So we really need to contemplate these points carefully.

### The precious human rebirth is easy to lose

The third point to contemplate as an impetus to utilise our precious human rebirth is that having obtained a precious human rebirth, more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel, we might feel we can relax, thinking, 'Well, now that I have obtained this precious rebirth everything is OK, and I'll be fine'. However, as Lama Tsongkapa says, it is very easy to lose the precious conditions that we have right now. This is another crucial point.

When we contemplate how the precious human life is difficult to find but easy to lose, then that becomes the

impetus to practise Dharma. In order to emphasise how easy it is to lose this precious human life and how difficult it is to obtain it again in the future, Lama Tsongkapa mentions that we have found this human rebirth this one time. He is not, of course, indicating that having found it this time and we will never obtain it again. What is being emphasised is that because the conditions to obtain a precious human rebirth are so rare and difficult it is as if we have found it just this one time. This implies that once we lose it now it will be very difficult to obtain it again in the future.

We need to contemplate these points really carefully, taking time to go over them, and try to really generate a strong feeling. Then the reality of our condition will dawn and any defiled, impure states of mind mixed with the affairs of this life will naturally subside. Our mind will become much clearer and the motivation to practice Dharma will become very pure.

A further analogy that Lama Tsongkapa uses to illustrate the momentariness of the good conditions that we have now, is that it is like lightning; which means that within a flash it is all over.

Lama Tsongkapa goes on to mention that all the worldly affairs are like chaff, the husks of grains such as rice. Using an analogy of a husk for worldly affairs shows how there is no essence in them. Once the grain has been extracted, the husk can easily be blown away by the wind because it is very light and has no real substance to it. The real substance is the actual grain, whereas the husk is just an empty shell.

Worldly affairs are to be thought of in the same way; they have no real substance and thus no real essence. Contemplating this, we see why Lama Tsongkapa advises us to put the teachings into practice, and take essence of the precious human life day and night.

### Taking the essence

The next question is how do we take the essence of this precious human life? What is the manner of taking the essence of our precious human life? Our precious human life can be utilised to obtain temporary goals, intermediate goals and ultimate goals, so we contemplate taking the essence with respect to each.

The **temporary** or **small goal** of taking the essence of our precious human life is to engage in the practice of morality and generosity in their purest form, thus creating the causes to obtain a good rebirth in the next lifetime. That is the very least way in which we can put our precious human rebirth to optimum use.

The **intermediate goal** of taking the essence of our precious human life is by engaging in the practice of the three trainings, thus creating the cause to obtain liberation, and so becoming entirely free from samsara.

The **ultimate goal** is to engage in the practice of bodhicitta and the practice of the six perfections, thus creating the cause to obtain enlightenment. This is the optimum goal that can be achieved with a precious human rebirth.

Creating the causes for the first goal is definitely within our reach; it is a matter of making a decision to engage in the practice of morality by living an ethical life and

engage in the practice of generosity. We can definitely avoid the ten non-virtues while practising the ten virtues. The practical effect of this practice is that it creates the cause for us to obtain a future rebirth. Then, if we haven't been able to obtain highest goal in this life, we still continue along that path in our next life. That is the practical approach to securing our practice from life to life. So we need to implement this practice in our daily life.

In addition by engaging in the practice of ethics and morality on a daily basis, day and night, we are also achieving the first stage of both the medium goal and the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

So we can see how much is condensed into these two verses from Lama Tsongkapa's prayer. There is so much material for us to contemplate and think about in our meditation practice.

The two lines at the end, 'The reverend Lama practised like this; Those desiring liberation should do likewise' indicate that we should practise in the same way as Lama Tsongkapa engaged in practice. As mentioned previously, there is so much depth to this verse; the whole path to enlightenment is explained in this it. When Lama Tsong Khapa elaborates on taking the essence of the precious human rebirth he is actually presenting the three scopes of the path to enlightenment—the small scope, the medium scope and the great scope.

We need to consider the main goal of the practice of the small scope and identify what the practices are. Then we need to consider the practice of the medium scope and the goals to be achieved in that scope. Likewise with the great scope and the goals to be achieved there. When we contemplate in this way, we can leave very strong imprints of the entire path to enlightenment on our mind. This is how we can develop a meaningful practice even in a short time.

I really encourage you to become familiar with this prayer and try to implement it in your daily practice. Then it will be even more meaningful.

Having indicated that this precious human rebirth is easily lost, the next verse from Lama Tsongkapa's *Condensed Lam Rim Prayer* states:

*You cannot be certain that after death  
You will not be born in lower states of being.  
To protect you from this fear, firmly take refuge  
in the Three Jewels  
And do not lapse from your precepts*

Once we lose this precious human rebirth and experience death, there is no guarantee that we will not be reborn in an unfortunate rebirth. Thus we must earnestly take refuge in the Three Jewels and abide by the law of karma. Here Lama Tsongkapa is explaining how taking refuge is related the practice of securing, at the very least, a fortunate rebirth the next lifetime, coupled with the practice of abiding by the law of karma. The *Foundation of All Good Qualities Prayer*<sup>2</sup> also includes this essential point. It would be very good to really read, recite and contemplate the meaning of both prayers.

In relation to my own practice I cannot boast of any high level practices, but I can definitely say that I have made many attempts to meditate on these points, by memorising the text while reciting it, and trying to really contemplate its meaning. Now while I can claim that I have made many attempts to meditate on the teachings, I cannot claim that I have gained any sort of profound realisation. Because my mind is so stubborn and unruly, it has been really difficult to subdue. However I feel that some sort of transformation has taken place. Somehow my mind feels happier and more relaxed compared to my youthful years.

These are things that we really need to contemplate and practice in daily life. The attempts that we make on a daily basis will definitely result in some transformation taking place. It is only by becoming familiar with the practices of the common paths, which means the small, medium and great scopes, that we become suitable vessel to practice the tantra. Lama Tsongkapa explained tantra in detail and with great profundity, and this is preceded by practice on the common path of the Lam Rim teaching.

Those of you who recently went to India to receive His Holiness's teaching on the Kalachakra, will recall how he emphasised very strongly, 'The Kalachakra is not the main thing that I am presenting to you here. It is the preliminary teachings that are of the utmost importance'. His Holiness was emphasising that we need to really pay attention to the preliminary teachings, which is called training in the common paths.

When we successfully engage in practice of those common paths then we can slowly become a suitable vessel for tantric practice. If we don't really implement this practice in our daily life then even though we may be sitting rigidly and assuming that we are doing our prayers or meditating, there is not much essence to be found. So it is really important that we pay attention to these essential points.

### **Taking refuge in the Three Jewels**

We really need to consider the point that Lama Tsongkapa makes about there being no guarantees about our future rebirth. We may assume to have done our practice and we may have faith in the practice and the Three Jewels, but when we question if there is any guarantee of avoiding an unfortunate rebirth, we might find that it is hard to be confident that there is any such a guarantee.

As Lama Tsongkapa indicates, when we realise that there is no guarantee that one will not take an unfortunate rebirth in the next life then that is the time when it is most appropriate that we take earnest, strong refuge in the Three Jewels. We do that because they have the ability to protect one from an unfortunate rebirth.

When we actually engage in the practice sincerely and continuously over time, we will reach a point where we become more certain that there is now some sort of guarantee that we will not take an unfortunate rebirth. We won't have to rely on anyone else to tell us that, but we will develop that belief for ourselves. However, until we reach that point we really need to make sure that we engage in the practice.

<sup>2</sup> See pages 45-46 in the prayer folder.  
Chapter 4

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As the Three Jewels have the ability to protect one from an unfortunate rebirth in a future lifetime, we need to understand the manner in which the Three Jewels give that protection.

- The **Buddha** is the supreme being who is free from all negativities and endowed with all good qualities. He is the supreme guide who shows the path.
- The actual **Dharma**, is the realisation that is endowed in the mental continuum of an arya or noble being's mental continuum.
- The actual **Sangha** refers to the noble beings who are endowed with the Dharma jewel.

So how do the Three Jewels actually protect us? While the Buddha is an extremely compassionate being who shows us the path, he himself, as he said, cannot liberate us out of his own will. Rather we need to actually engage in the path ourselves. To pinpoint what is that actually protects us, it is whatever level of Dharma that we have developed within our own mental continuum.

### Applying our understanding

There are, of course, different levels of Dharma practice. However on our level if we observe the practice of morality, adopting the ten virtues and discarding the ten non-virtues, then that is the Dharma that we develop within ourselves. It is that practice, which we have voluntarily engaged in, that will protect us from an unfortunate rebirth in the next lifetime. So this is how we need to understand the way in which the Three Jewels protect us on a practical level. It is directly connected with our own practice.

This is a crucial point. It is not sufficient just to have faith in the Three Jewels and pay respect to them. As His Holiness Dalai Lama emphasised in his recent teachings, it is the Dharma that we develop within ourselves which protects us. He emphasised this again and again, and as those of you who were there you would recall, he was directing this to the new arrivals from Tibet, who had made the arduous journey to India. He would look at them and say, 'Have you understood? Have you got the point?' He was really teaching in a very nurturing way so that the people would get the main point.

In essence His Holiness was emphasising that it is not sufficient to merely have faith in the Three Jewels and consider them as holy objects, imagining the Three Jewels somewhere above us while we make salutations, prostrate and pray to them. That is not how one will be liberated. Rather, the way to protect ourselves is by engaging with the Dharma jewel and cultivating it within ourselves by actually practising it. That is how His Holiness the Dalai Lama emphasised the practicality of the practice of Dharma, and how it actually works.

The main point is that as much as it is important for us to study and understand the Dharma, it is equally important to put it into practice. It is worthwhile to endeavour to put into practice whatever one has understood.

### Conduct and View

His Holiness Dalai Lama gave very clear teachings about the essence of the Buddhadharma and now to put it into

practice. The essence of the Buddha's teaching, as His Holiness emphasised and explained in detail is:

- the **conduct** of Buddhism is non-violence,
- the **view** of Buddhism is that of interdependent origination.

These two summarise the essence of the Buddha's teaching.

His Holiness really clarified this point as a way to emphasise how one needs to abide by the conduct of non-violence, and the view that one needs to abide by is interdependent origination. Understanding interdependent origination then helps one to gain an understanding of emptiness, and also develop bodhicitta. In this way His Holiness was laying the very foundation for the high levels of practice that we aspire to.

The reason I am emphasising this here is that I am in the habit of regularly sharing certain points with you. Occasionally I might say, 'This is a very important point to consider, so try to keep it in mind', which is my meagre attempt to try to bring to your awareness some essential points of practice and so forth. Regardless of what I say, whether you keep it in mind or not, when His Holiness emphasises a point it is really worthwhile to pay attention to it.

In relation to conduct, i.e. non-violence, His Holiness further clarified that non-violence actually consists of two points, which are not harming others and actually benefiting others. Those two are condensed into the term 'non-violence'. As His Holiness said, non-violence may be one word, but when one actually engages in that practice it actually consists of not only not harming others but also benefiting others. When His Holiness clarifies this point in this way it gives much more weight to the meaning of non-violence.

It is really crucial that we implement an authentic, pure practice in our lives. As mentioned earlier, a pure practice is a practice that is undefiled by worldly concern, one that actually works to subdue one's unruly mind. The delusions are really very tricky; while we may feel that our practice is being effective in overcoming a particular kind of delusion such as attachment, anger slowly starts to creep in somewhere else. Then attachment may be replaced by anger. And if we initially feel like anger is a big issue and that we need to deal with it, when we begin have some sort of success in overcoming anger, we find that attachment might creep in very, very subtly. Then, before we know it we might become obsessed with attachment.

In this way we need to be extremely mindful of the delusions creeping in at any time, and try to develop a diligent mind, being watchful that our mind is not completely dominated by the delusions. To that extent we need to try to really be diligent, and be very wary of the delusions. As His Holiness Dalai Lama mentioned, when, as Buddhists, we believe there is a future life then we have gained something with that belief. Whereas if one does not believe in a future life, that can be a loss. So if there is a gain and we don't wish for a loss, then it is right that we practice the Dharma.

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As Lama Tsongkapa advises, we need to strive for a subdued mind coupled with wisdom. He emphasises that a subdued mind and wisdom are equally important. While we may engage in methods of subduing our mind such as calm abiding meditation, if we don't actually engage in gaining wisdom then there can be great danger. Meditation may have a temporary calming effect, but if we lack of wisdom, then when delusion arises we fail to detect it for what it is. Then it may really overpower us. We have all seen people who may have been seemingly quite subdued, but when strong attachment arises then anything can happen, with disastrous effects.

Therefore we need to be mindful that we need to strive to gain wisdom. But if we just gain an intellectual understanding and fail to work towards subduing and calming the mind, then that too will hinder our practice. Therefore Lama Tsongkapa's advice is to practise subduing the mind in conjunction with gaining wisdom. This is clearly explained in the text *Meditative Stages*. As mentioned earlier, if we are not careful then we might end up at a point where we are voluntarily putting all our energy into non-virtuous deeds, while being hesitant when it comes to acquiring virtue. So if we were to reach that point then how could we ever assume to be real Dharma practitioners? That is something we need to be really mindful of.

#### **Nagarjuna's advice**

I would like to remind you of the great value of the text that we are studying. As you would recall, thus far in the text Nagarjuna has given much profound and practical advice that we can implement in our daily life. When you refer back to what we have already studied it should be an impetus for us to actually engage in the practice of Dharma. So we can really consider ourselves to be extremely fortunate to have this opportunity to engage in the practice of Dharma, and in particular to study such a profound text as this. It is extraordinarily valuable if we read the text and become familiar with it.

While we can acknowledge the great opportunity and conditions that we have now, it is important to ensure that we maintain these good conditions. If we just leave the good conditions as they are now, taking them for granted and making no effort to maintain them, then such conditions can be easily lost.

As Nagarjuna advised the king in the text, the wealth that you have amassed now is a result of your acts of generosity in a previous life. Although you may be naturally endowed with so much wealth now as a result of previous acts of generosity, you need to engage in further acts of generosity so that you will be able to secure sufficient wealth for the future.

That is just one example. We need to understand that whatever good conditions we experience now are, without doubt, the result of our past good karma. However, we need to ensure that we create further good karma or accumulate the merit to maintain and be able to utilise these conditions again. So is in this way that we need to be mindful of the need to make our practice an aid to add to our store of merit.

In the following study group sessions I will make an attempt to go through the text and explain it to the best of my knowledge. Those of you who have come to the study group are aware of what the commitments of joining the study group involve, and I encourage everyone to take that on board.

The main thing is that whoever comes to the study group and participates in it will, from the outset, be mindful of the purpose of gathering here. Not only is it to study for ourselves, but it is also to be of benefit and service to others. The motivation of gathering here is one of mutual benefit, which means coming with a kind attitude, and an attitude of helping rather than harming one's fellow students.

In fact, harming another Dharma practitioner is an extremely negative deed. If you harm them they may lose faith in the Dharma, or they may develop a wrong view. If one is the cause of that, then that is very, very heavy negative karma. One has to be really mindful of that. It is incredibly difficult for someone to actually come the point of coming here to study and so forth. So to cause them to lose interest or become distant would be very unfortunate.

The main thing is that if one comes with a good motivation, such as 'How can I help others? How can I assist others in the study group?' then with that sort of attitude, accompanied by nice, kind and pleasant gestures and a kind mind, we can all work in harmony. Then we can all benefit from it in a very meaningful way. So I encourage everyone to be mindful of this, and in that way we will continue with our study program.

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