

Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇིགས་ཀྱི་ཆེན་པོའི་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

28 February 2012

With the motivation that we generated when we recited the *Refuge and bodhicitta prayer*, we can now engage in meditation practice for a few minutes.

[meditation]

It would definitely be beneficial to adopt a daily meditation practice such as the one we have just attempted to do. Using this meditation technique further develops and enhances the basis of love and compassion that we all have within our heart. The *tong-len* meditation is a most essential and meaningful practice with which we need to familiarise ourselves.

We should not consider this practice as merely imaginary as, if we do it sincerely, it imbues our mind with love and compassion. Then whenever an opportunity arises to help others, feeling compassion will be easier and more spontaneous.

If everyone actually practised developing love and compassion, then our world would indeed be a better place. The more people who practise love and compassion, the more benefit it brings to the world. On a personal level we can see that the more we familiarise our mind with developing love and compassion, the gentler it becomes. When love and compassion become an intrinsic part of our being, then wherever we go and whatever we do that sense of love and compassion, which in essence is a genuine concern for others, will always be present.

The result will be a genuinely relaxed and calm state of mind. Others immediately relate to someone who is genuinely happy too, because it brings about a good effect for them, so it has benefit for others as well as ourselves. There is no doubt about the great value and benefit that the practice brings to our daily lives.

As I regularly mention, the best way to develop a harmonious relationship with others, particularly those with whom we associate most closely, is to generate a genuine concern for the other, with a happy mind ourselves. After having meditated for many years, and done a lot of research, the Buddha found that the best way to benefit sentient beings is by developing bodhicitta.

Furthermore, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama emphasised recently in his teachings in India, even if we may have not yet developed the bodhicitta attitude, we can try, at the very least, to familiarise our mind with the attitude of wishing to benefit others. That genuine wish to benefit others should be at the forefront of our mind. As His Holiness mentioned, having the wish to benefit others will bring about a genuine sense of well-being. When I regularly think about the best way to benefit others, what I have understood, is that at the most basic level familiarising ourselves with the attitude of wishing to benefit others is the best way to begin helping others. One can further enhance that with love and compassion and then, of course, develop bodhicitta.

Developing bodhicitta is the optimum way to benefit other sentient beings. Even a semblance of bodhicitta or just an attitude of wishing to benefit others, is a very, very valuable state of mind. With only that attitude in mind, there is no room for any harmful intention to arise.

There is no-one who would not appreciate the value of someone who wishes to benefit them, as no-one wants to be harmed and everyone wishes to be happy. All sentient beings are alike in that they all naturally wish to be happy and do not wish to experience any suffering, or harm from others. So when we have secured the attitude of wishing to benefit others, we have secured a kind of a guarantee not to harm others, and to possibly be only of benefit to others. That is why other beings will definitely appreciate us.

When we think about someone who is trustworthy, what are the qualities on which we base that trust? It is when we are confident that their only wish is to help us and not hurt us that we consider them as a true friend. We can all understand this, even on a basic mundane level. When we have to determine whether someone is a good person, these are the qualities that we rely upon.

In contrast, when someone is considered as a bad or evil person, it is based on the perception that they intentionally harm others and have no intention to benefit and help others. Such a person is considered to be bad company. When parents and teachers advise their charges, 'Don't go near that person', their advice is based on that reason. Rather parents advise their children, and teachers their students, to associate with people who have the qualities of an intention of helping and not harming. These are points that we need to keep in mind.

3.1.1.1.3.1.2. Refuting proofs for real physical pleasure

This has three further subdivisions

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.2.1. Refuting inherently existing consciousnesses

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.2.2. Refuting inherently existing objects

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.2.3. Refuting inherently existent senses

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.2.1. Refuting inherently existing consciousnesses

The relevant verse reads:

355. *Just as a child is said to be born
In dependence on a father and a mother,
So a [visual] consciousness is said to arise
In dependence on an eye sense and on a form.*

Older students would already know about what the term *consciousness* relates to, and what types of consciousnesses there are. However, to refresh your memory there are six types of consciousnesses. They include the five related to the five sense consciousness, the eye, nose, ear, tongue and body or tactile consciousness, to which is added the mental consciousness, and these are called the six primary consciousnesses.

To understand this sub-division, we first need to understand that consciousness itself is not being refuted, as we all know that the six consciousness do exist. What is specifically being refuted is *inherently* existent consciousnesses. This section specifically refutes the assertion that consciousnesses exist inherently, by showing that there is no inherently existing eye consciousness, no inherently existing ear consciousness and so forth.

This point also applies to the *Heart Sutra* in which it says, 'There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind' etc. We need to understand immediately that this

refers to there being no inherently existent eye, no inherently existent ear, no inherently existent nose and so forth.

The presentation in this text refutes the assertion that the sense consciousnesses are inherently existent, which is the view held by non-Buddhist schools of thought as well as the lower Buddhist schools, from the Svatantrika downwards. All of these schools of thought assert that consciousnesses exist inherently. The view that is being presented here, is that of the highest Buddhist school—the Prasangika or Consequentialist Buddhist school—who refute the assertion that there is an inherently existing consciousness.

In his commentary on the meaning of the verse Gyaltsab Je begins by stating the assertion that is being refuted.

If you say: Objects and senses do exist by way of their own entity, because their result, which is consciousness, exists.

The reasoning that the opposing schools use is that *the object and the senses* (referring to the sense faculties) *exist by their own entity, because the result, which is consciousness, exists.*

An object and a sense faculty are necessary conditions for a consciousness to arise. Thus, for example, the eye consciousness exists because there is a visual object and an eye sense faculty. These are the conditions necessary for an eye consciousness to manifest. So the eye consciousness arises as the result of a sense object and a sense faculty being present.

Now, of course, this is accepted in all Buddhist schools. However the lower Buddhist schools from the Svatantrika down say that because the object and the sense faculties exist inherently, the result, which is consciousness, has to necessarily exist inherently too. So the reason why they assert an inherently existing consciousness is that as the object and the senses exist inherently, the result, the consciousness, also exists inherently.

To understand the Prasangika objection to, or refutation of, this assertion we need to understand that in stating that the sense object and senses exist inherently, the Svatantrika and the lower schools assert that things exist independently, i.e. that the object and sense exist independently without the need for any other factors or conditions for their existence.

The Prasangika refute that view by showing how both objects and senses are dependent on other factors and conditions for their existence.

Gyaltsab Je explains this in his commentary:

[Refutation:] *Just as a child is said to be born in dependence on a father and a mother, so a visual consciousness is said to arise in dependence on an eye sense and on a form. Thus, consciousness cannot exist inherently because it is dependent on an eye sense and a form. For example it is like the interdependent connection between child and their parents. Thus the syllogism of interdependent origination is presented here.*

The very fact that *a visual consciousness arises in dependence upon the eye sense and the form*, is the reason why an eye consciousness cannot exist inherently. So the sense consciousnesses cannot possibly exist independently, because a sense consciousness depends on an object and a sense faculty (eye, ear, nose etc.). The analogy used here is that a child is dependent on its parents. If a child were to exist inherently, then that would imply that the child exists independently, and thus not be dependent for its existence on either the father and mother, which is absurd. It is impossible for a child to exist without depending on the parents as a cause.

The main point here is that the *syllogism of interdependent origination*¹ is used as to prove that, in this case, the eye consciousness lacks inherent existence, because it is dependent on other factors. It is said that this syllogism with the reasoning of dependent origination, is an extremely profound reasoning. All Madhyamika texts consider this reason [referred to as the king of reasonings] as one of the best to prove the lack of inherent existence. Thus it is considered a very precious reasoning.

In order to understand these points, we need to be able to get a good understanding of the logic presented here. Then we will be able to relate this understanding to other presentations as well. We particularly need to understand the distinction between the higher and lower schools and how the Prasangika contradict the lower schools' view. The lower schools and the Prasangika both agree that consciousness arises from its causes. However the lower schools reason that because consciousness arises from its cause, which is inherently existent, it must also be inherently existent. The Prasangika, to which Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti belong, use this very same syllogism as their reasoning to refute inherent existence.

To go over the reasoning again, the schools such as the Svatantrika, reason that because the object and the eye sense are inherently existent (which they assume to be the case), the resulting eye consciousness also has to be inherently existent too. The Prasangika use the same reasoning to assert that because the eye sense consciousness is dependent on an object and the eye sense faculty, it must lack inherent, independent existence. So we need to understand how the syllogism is used on both sides, but as proof of completely different points.

We, of course, come from the tradition where we assume that Nagarjuna's logic is best, and that his word is the final word. But rather than accepting his work at face value, we need to really understand how the logic and reasoning works. It is only when we have really thought about it and really understood how the logic works that we get a true sense of the lack of inherent existence of all phenomena. We need to become really familiar with the logic so that it becomes our own personal understanding.

If we want to enhance our understanding of emptiness so that we can eventually be able meditate on emptiness, we need to gain the correct understanding of emptiness from the outset. It is, of course, rightly presented as being a very profound subject, in part because those who present the opposing view that establishes inherent existence are also great masters, such as the great masters of Svatantrika tradition, Bhavaviveka and Kamalashila. They have such a great understanding, but their presentations were refuted by Nagarjuna and later by Chandrakirti. So we need to thoroughly understand the view of the masters of other schools, and how these views are refuted. As their views are refuted in Nagarjuna's presentation we need to have a really sound understanding of them, because if we don't, we won't get the correct understanding of emptiness.

Without the proper understanding, if we attempt to go off to do some meditation on emptiness, we may achieve some sense of vacuity, where temporarily we have no conceptual thoughts in our mind. However if, at that point, we assume that we have understood emptiness, it can be detrimental to actually gaining a correct understanding of emptiness.

¹ In general form this syllogism is: Take the subject [any phenomenon] —it lacks inherent existence—because it is a dependent arising.

Without a clear understanding of emptiness, it is very easy to fall into one of the extreme views. If we have not made an attempt to meditate then this might all seem theoretical, and we may not really see the significance of gaining the correct understanding. But if you are sincere, and wish to make an attempt to get a realisation of emptiness, then getting the correct understanding first, is of paramount importance.

If we were to take the passage from the *Heart Sutra*—there is no eye, no form and so forth—literally, and meditate on a sense of vacuity, or absence of forms and feelings and so forth, it is apparently possible to reach a state that is quite pleasant, as temporarily there are no disturbing thoughts in one's mind. Some years ago Ven. Gyatso and I went to St Kilda Pier where we met someone who said that he lived in a boat at the marina. He mentioned to us that he meditates on emptiness and that when he meditated he had a sense of vacuity—that there was nothing, and that gave him a really nice feeling.

We can't blame someone who does not have a correct understanding of emptiness for experiencing that sense of nothingness. However we are also in the danger of arriving at the same point if we only have a partial understanding of emptiness. Without the correct understanding of emptiness we can easily fall into the trap of meditating on nothingness, which is more like nihilism rather than actual emptiness.

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.2. Refuting inherently existent objects

There is a very profound logic in the presentation of these sub-divisions. We have just completed the refutation of the assertion by the lower schools, which is that consciousness is inherently existent because the object and senses exist inherently.

The next refutation focuses more specifically on refuting inherently existent objects. Those of you who were at the recent teachings of His Holiness Dalai Lama will recall how His Holiness presented this logic very, very clearly. When this logic is clarified by great masters like His Holiness, who have a profound understanding of emptiness, we gain a much better understanding ourselves.

When we understand how the logic is presented, it enhances our own intelligence which we can utilise in every aspect of our life. Whenever we do something, even mundane activities, we need to have sound intelligence and good reasoning. When there is some sort of debate and someone has to be refuted, if the opponent is known to be an intelligent person, someone who is of equal intelligence has to be sent to engage in the debate. It can't just be anyone who says clever things.

This goes to show that intelligence is really of paramount importance in whatever we do, and especially when presenting the profound teachings of the Buddha. When it is presented with sound logic and reasoning, we gain a very concrete and stable understanding, not a wishy-washy semblance of an understanding of emptiness.

Nagarjuna is considered to be great scholar and master because of, amongst other things, his clear and accurate use of logic. Within the Buddhist tradition, Nagarjuna is considered to have been extremely kind in presenting us with so many different works that are suitable for different occasions. In addition to his philosophical works on Buddhist tenets he also composed works on medicine and the arts and so forth. Furthermore Nagarjuna's advice was directed to a wide range of people. He gave essential advice to the lay community as well as the ordained community. He also gave specific advice to lay people of high status,

such as text we are studying, which gives advice to the king about how he should govern the country and so forth. Then there are other works of Nagarjuna that relate to the general populace as well. In the text we are studying there are many parts which relate to how the general populace should conduct a meaningful life. So in every aspect Nagarjuna provides so much profound advice.

Referring back to his use of logic, in presenting the profound meaning of emptiness Nagarjuna initially refutes non-Buddhist schools in order to establish the Buddhist view as a correct view. Within the Buddhist schools there are those who have not reached the correct understanding and who still hold a lesser view of emptiness.

Even though none of the Buddhist schools would openly challenge Nagarjuna and contradict him, Nagarjuna presents very sound reasoning and logic to show the profound view, lest the others fall into an incorrect understanding of emptiness. So he helps them to gain the correct understanding.

This sub-division, Refuting Inherently Existent Objects, follows the earlier refutation of consciousnesses. The verse that relates this heading reads:

356. *Past and future objects
And the senses are meaningless,
So too are present objects
Since they are not distinct from these two.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary begins by explaining the view of the other:

If you say: Consciousness does exist inherently because it apprehends an object [that exists inherently].

Then the commentary provides a refutation of that assertion.

[Refutation:] *Past and future objects and the senses are meaningless* for nothing is obtained when they cease. A present that is not related to past and future cannot be established.

In order to establish an object there has to be a consciousness that perceives the object. Thus, when the object is established it is either related to a consciousness that has already perceived an object, or to a consciousness that will perceive the object in the future. However the consciousness that perceives the object in the past has already ceased, and the future is yet to be established.

Furthermore, when we look at the present, we cannot establish a present that is not related to either the past or the future. Therefore if the object is not related to the past or the future, the present object cannot be established. So in other words, how can an inherently existent object be established?

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

Thus, wouldn't it be the case that a non-inherently existent present would have to depend on its past and future? That would have to be the case. If you claim that the present exists at the time of past and future, then *present objects will be meaningless too, since they are not distinct from these two.*

Here, the very establishment of the object is being questioned. How do objects exist? There cannot be an object that does not depend on the past and the future. What we consider to be a present object relates to both the past and the future. But if the present object exists in the past and the future then there is no reason to establish it as a present object, because it already exists in the past and will exist in the future. So if the present is not distinct from the past and

the future, there is no point in establishing a present object. Thus the conclusion is that there cannot be an independently inherent existing object in the present, because the object that exists now is an object that is dependent on the past and the future. So it cannot be an inherently existent object as it is not independent.

The next assertion to be refuted refers to the present consciousness perceiving a present object with a sense faculty. It is asserted by the opponent that both exist inherently.

The refutation of that assertion is presented in the next verse:

*357. Just as due to error the eye perceives
A whirling firebrand as a wheel,
So the senses apprehend
Present objects [as if real].*

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

If you say: Since a present consciousness is apprehending a present object, thus sense and object exist inherently.

[Refutation:] *Just as due to error the eye perceives a whirling firebrand as a wheel, so the senses apprehend present objects as if real.* The senses, objects and consciousness equally lack inherent existence, for they merely appear to exist [inherently] to a mistaken consciousness.

Even though an object is perceived in a certain way by a consciousness, that doesn't mean that it has to necessarily exist in that way. This is explained with the analogy of someone rapidly whirling a fire on a stick which from a distance looks like a wheel of fire. But even though it is perceived as a wheel of fire there is, in fact, no real wheel of fire. It is only perceived like that because of the condition of the firebrand being whirled around very quickly. This analogy is an example of a mistaken eye consciousness that sees a wheel of fire, when in fact a wheel of fire does not exist.

Using that analogy, the commentary explains that *the senses, the objects and consciousness all equally lack inherent existence, although they appear to a mistaken consciousness as inherently existent, in reality they lack inherent existence.*

I have explained these points several times in the past so of course older students will be already familiar with this. However there may be people who are not familiar with this understanding, so we can use another analogy of a mistaken consciousness perceiving inherent existence.

Take the example of a close friend who appears in the distance. We instinctively perceive them as being independently existent, i.e. they appear to exist from their own side. What doesn't appear to us are the conditions that contribute to the existence of our friend; rather they appear as inherently and independently existing from their own side. When the friend first appears to our eye consciousness our mental consciousness apprehends that appearance, and believes that the appearance is true. This is what is called grasping at a self.

As explained in the teachings, all our mistaken views are caused by grasping at a self that appears to be independently existent, and then the mental consciousness actually grasping at that appearance. In relation to the appearance of a friend, we need to understand how the person appears to us and how we totally believe in that appearance. We don't question the validity of that appearance, rather we totally believe in and grasp to that

appearance, and thus apprehend an inherently existent friend.

If we question why we have that appearance of inherent existence to begin with, the answer presented in the teachings is that it is because the imprint of the false perception has been implanted in our consciousness from time immemorial. So we have a strong imprint in our mind that serves as a condition for us to have that mistaken appearance. Due to the influence of the imprints in our mind, we first have a mistaken appearance, and then the consciousness apprehends and believes in that mistaken appearance. It is this combination that causes us to grasp at an inherently existent self.

The analogy used in the teachings is the spectators who are under the influence of a magician's spell. They perceive the illusory objects, such as horses and elephants that the magician conjures. The conjured horses and elephants appear to them due to the influence of the spell, and they believe that they are real and actually existing. However, the latecomers will not see the magician's illusions, because they are not under the magician's spell.

Using that analogy, it is explained that ordinary sentient beings, due to the influence of their imprints, have a mistaken appearance and strongly belief that things exist inherently. Whereas those who have the correct understanding of emptiness, will still have the appearance of inherent existence, but strong belief in the appearance will not be present. In their mind they will know that even though things appear to be truly existent, or inherently existent, they do not exist in that way.

It is very important that we remind ourselves again and again, that whatever we perceive is like an illusion, and that it does not exist in the way that it appears to us. Reminding ourselves like this again and again is really crucial for gaining the correct understanding of emptiness, and essential for our Dharma practice.

Otherwise if appear as being inherently existent; when something beautiful appears as being inherently beautiful, we will begin to grasp at it. By totally believing in an inherently beautiful object, we develop strong attachment to the object. For example, when a beautiful vase appears to us, there is, of course, a vase that does exist, but what appears to us is an inherently, independently existent beautiful vase. As we totally believe in an inherently existent, independent vase, we longingly desire to possess that vase. But such a vase is totally non-existent. So we need to really train our mind by constantly reminding ourselves that things do not exist in the way that they appear to us. Rather they are just like an illusion.

We need to gain a good understanding of this point made in the teachings: in meditative equipoise the appearance is *space-like*, while in the post-meditative state, the appearance is *like an illusion*. These are the crucial points that we need to understand.

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.3. Refuting inherently existent senses

There are three sub-divisions.

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.3.1. Refuting inherently existent senses and objects through refuting inherently existent elements

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.3.2. Refuting inherently existent elements

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.3.3. Therefore forms are not inherently existent

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.2.3.1. Refuting inherently existent senses and objects through refuting inherently existent elements

The verse that relates to this sub-division reads:

*358 The senses and their objects are regarded
As being composed of the elements.
Since the elements are meaningless individually,
These also are meaningless in fact.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of the verse:

If you say: Sense and object exist inherently because their cause—the elements—exists.

[Refutation:] The senses are meaningless in existing inherently, for *the senses and their objects are regarded as being composed of the elements. Since the elements are meaningless, lacking inherent existence individually, these [sense objects] also are meaningless, lacking inherent existence in fact.*

The opponent asserts that *the senses and their objects* exist inherently *because their causes, which are the elements, exist inherently*. The refutation shows how the elements also lack inherent existence, by showing how they cannot exist individually by themselves. The way elements act as a cause is when they are combined, and as a combination they depend on each other. So the way to refute inherently existent elements is by showing that if elements were inherently existent, then each individual element would be able to independently function by itself. If they were independently existent, they would function independently, but that is not the case.

The commentary shows that *since elements are meaningless, meaning that they lack inherent existence individually, the sense objects are also meaningless, lacking inherent existence in fact.*

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.2.3.2. Refuting inherently existent elements

The next verse explains how the elements individually lack inherent existence.

*359. If the elements are each different,
It follows that there could be fire without fuel.
If mixed, they would be characterless.
Such is also to be ascertained about the other
elements.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

If the elements are each individually different, it follows that there could be fire without fuel. If mixed, they would be inherently characterless. As such they do depend on each other. Such is also to be ascertained about the other three elements.

If you assert that *the elements are individually inherently different*, then it would logically have to *follow* that there would have to *be fire without fuel*. Fire would be independent and inherently existent, and thus would not depend on the other elements such as the wood, which consists of the other elements. If fire were to be inherently existent then it would have to exist by itself without depending on the other three elements, which are the components of the fuel. However, that goes against the obvious fact that in order to have fire you need to have fuel.

If the elements were mixed, implying that if they were inherently mixed, then they would have to be inherently characterless, but they do depend on each other. It is absurd to be inherently different as well as inherently combined together.

3.1.1.1.3.1.2.2.2.3.3. Therefore forms are not inherently existent

The relevant verse is:

*360. Because the elements are thus meaningless in
both these ways,
So too is a composite.
Because a composite is meaningless
So too are forms meaningless in fact.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Because the elements are thus meaningless, lacking inherent existence in both these ways—individually and collectively—so too is a composite meaningless. Because a composite is meaningless, so too are forms meaningless, because they lack inherent existence in fact. Thus, the cause for meaningful [or autonomous] physical pleasure does not exist as well.

This is a summary of the main refutation of the main assertion that there is real physical pleasure. The refutation is that:

- Because the elements lack inherent existence, both individually and collectively, the composite of them is meaningless.
- Because the composite is meaningless then forms are also meaningless, because they do not have true or autonomous existence as they lack inherent existence.
- Thus the conclusion is that physical pleasure cannot exist autonomously or inherently.

*Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*