
Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇིག་རྟེན་ཆེན་པོའི་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Based on the motivation that we generated in the refuge and bodhicitta practice that we have just done, we can now engage in the meditation practice. [meditation]

It would be really beneficial to try to incorporate this meditation practice into our daily life. Then, when we have become quite familiar with the *tong len* practice, it can be naturally integrated into the act of breathing.

We should note the difference between the practice of developing single-pointed concentration based on focussing the breath, and the practice where one utilises the breath for the visualisation of the *tong len* practice.

The practice of developing single-pointed concentration by focussing on the breath involves focussing on the natural rhythm of breathing, allowing the mind to be completely absorbed into the natural inflow and outflow of the breath, focussing just on that and nothing else. This diverts the mind from a lot of discursive thoughts, and allows it to settle down. So it is a technique specifically tailored to temporarily settle the mind.

The *tong len* practice requires one to develop an association of a strong feeling of taking in the suffering of all sentient beings with the in-breath, and energetically extending one's body, health and merit when breathing out. It might be the case that there is a more forceful inhalation and exhalation so as to help the process of taking in the sufferings of others, and giving out one's happiness and so forth.

It is good to understand this significant difference between these two techniques:

- When focussing on the breath in order to develop single-pointed concentration, one should refrain from any effort. Every breath should be effortless, thereby bringing one's mind down to a very settled state.
- The *tong len* practice involves some level of effort, forcibly taking in the suffering of sentient beings, their imprints and so forth, and extending one's happiness to other sentient beings.

3.2.1.1. Reason for unsuitability of forsaking the Great Vehicle scriptures

3.2.1.1.2. THEREFORE, THE UNSUITABILITY OF DESPISING THE GREAT VEHICLE (CONT.)

3.2.1.1.2.2. Though there is a little suffering in the deeds of the Great Vehicle, it is unsuitable to despise what completely eliminates suffering

Practising the deeds, and sometimes austere, practices of the Great Vehicle involves some effort and hardship, but the intention of doing so is to overcome great suffering. Understanding that intention, one needs to refrain from despising the suffering that is endured through following the practices of the Great Vehicle.

This heading has two verses, the first of which reads:

373. *It is renowned [in Great Vehicle scriptures] that motivation determines practices
And that the mind is most important.*

*Hence how could even suffering not be helpful
For one who gives help with an altruistic
motivation?*

The main point being emphasised here is that our motivation or state of our mind is most important in whatever we do. As explained here, and in other teachings, all bodhisattva deeds of the three doors of body speech and mind are virtuous, and hence ways to collect merit, because of their motivation. Thus, it is the motivation that determines whether or not an act is meritorious and virtuous.

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je offers this explanation:

Even though Dharma is a cause for suffering, it is not appropriate to despise it. Because through minor suffering one can accomplish great benefit for others.

This is clearly explaining that enduring suffering with the proper understanding is a means to accomplish great benefits. This is a point I have emphasised in the past. One of the main points of overcoming the eight worldly dharmas is that our concern for our well-being is very much related to wanting to avoid suffering. Without proper training, the moment suffering occurs we will immediately feel disturbed by it, and our mind will always be unhappy. So training the mind involves not being daunted by suffering and intentionally and willingly taking upon suffering. This is really a crucial point to understand.

It is good for us to remember again and again that suffering is something that has to be endured and willingly accepted, and not avoided. Although this is being presented in the context of practising the Dharma, it is good for us to relate it to mundane examples. From a worldly perspective, we all know that if we wish to accomplish something, it requires hardship and difficulty. I think the equivalent saying in English is 'without pain there is no gain'.

The *tong len* practice is appropriate for someone who is willing to take suffering upon themselves, while giving away their happiness.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

This is so because when motivated by a virtuous mind, physical and verbal actions become virtuous as well, as *it is renowned* in the Great Vehicle scriptures *that motivation determines practices and that the mind is most important. Hence how could even the suffering of a bodhisattva's austere practices not be helpful for one who gives help with an altruistic motivation?* It is definitely helpful.

These are essential points for us to consider. The commentary is clearly explaining that it is our motivation that determines whether or not our practice is virtuous. So I regularly encourage students to adopt a kind attitude, and to try to maintain that attitude at all times. An attitude of kindness and consideration towards others will help to protect your own mind. Even if negativities arise, such a kind attitude and considered mind will help to override them, or reduce their strength and influence.

Familiarising our mind with a kind attitude is essential to ensure that we are free from the negative states of mind that would otherwise pollute our practice. For example, a sense of pride (i.e. feeling superior to others), attachment, competition or jealousy, or anger, will pollute any practice. So prior to engaging in any practice, we need to be mindful about generating the most positive motivation. Having an attitude of kindness is essential in order to secure our practice as an authentic practice.

The second verse that relates to this heading reads:

*374. If even [in ordinary life] pain can bring future benefit,
What need is there to say that [accepting suffering]
Beneficial for one's own and others' happiness will help!
This practice is known as the policy of the ancients*

Gyaltsab Je's explanation of the meaning of this verse is:

If even in ordinary life *pain* such as cutting and burning, even though uncomfortable now, *can bring future benefit, what need is there to say that accepting minor suffering that is a cause for one's own and other's happiness will help! This practice is known as the policy of the ancient buddhas of the three times, or the excellent policy.*

Here again, these are essential points for our daily practice and our daily life. When we think about it, feeling daunted by any kind of practice is usually associated with some sort of hardship and difficulty, which causes us to feel discouraged about pursuing it any further. If we are not willing to endure some hardship and difficulty in our practice, then there is no possibility for us to maintain any practice in our daily life.

As Gyaltsab Je explains clearly, we are willing to endure some suffering now if we understand that it will relieve greater suffering later on. We are willing to undergo surgical methods such as *cutting and burning* to relieve greater suffering due to a disease. If smaller suffering for greater benefit later on is accepted at a mundane level, *then what need to mention the benefits of enduring minor suffering now for greater happiness in the future?*

What is being clearly explained here is that we need to adopt an attitude of willingly accepting austerity and hardship in order to achieve the goals of our practice. This is yet another presentation of the need to adopt patience in order to practice, particularly the patience of willingly enduring suffering. The definition of patience is a mind that is not disturbed in the event of suffering or harm. In order to engage in practice, we need to have patience so that our mind is undisturbed in the face of austere practices and hardship.

It is when we allow our mind to become disturbed that anger arises, which we can put down to a lack of endurance. If we are not able to endure hardship and difficulties, we easily become upset and angry. When anger arises our practice is disturbed, and we are unable to engage in it properly. So the main point here is that we need to practise patience, particularly the patience that willingly endures hardship and suffering.

As the teachings clearly explain, one of the main requirements for practising love and compassion is patience. Conversely, without developing patience it would be quite impossible to develop a true sense of love and compassion. If we have been nice and kind to someone, we know from experience that as soon as they start to become unappreciative, or if we feel they are taking advantage of us, we become less enthusiastic about helping them. In fact we may become upset and annoyed with that person. That is because without patience, it is very easy for us to become upset with the very person we intended to help!

3.2.1.1.2.3. Rightness of making effort for the sake of great bliss; wrongness of being attached to small pleasures

With this heading alone Gyaltsab Je, the author of the commentary, actually highlights two essential points:

- It is right and reasonable to make an effort to create a cause that brings about great personal bliss.
- It is wrong to become attached to small pleasures.

The rightness of making effort for the sake of great bliss relates to the bliss of liberation, or, best of all, the bliss of enlightenment. Whereas the *wrongness of being attached to small pleasures* refers to the fleeting pleasures of samsara, otherwise called the contaminated pleasures, which we experience with our five senses. In our normal mundane life, we place so much importance on these pleasures, and we put all our time and energy into striving to experience them, while totally neglecting the causes for greater pleasure in the future.

In fact, the very pursuit of the samsaric or worldly pleasures is merely a means to create negative karma. It is right for us to contemplate this, as we all have faith in karma. As explained in the teachings on karma, as well as by the Buddha himself in the sutras, we must be very cautious about not creating even the smallest negative karmas, while endeavouring to create even the smallest of virtues. The Buddha used the analogy of an ember thrown into a haystack to explain why we must be careful to avoid even the smallest negative karma, as it can bring about tremendous suffering and negative results in the future. If thrown into a huge haystack even a spark can cause a great fire. Likewise, creating even a small amount of merit can result in creating great positive results in the future. Here the analogy used is collecting small drops of water. Even though it is only one small drop at a time, the ultimate result is a big container full of water.

The essential point to derive from this explanation is that we definitely need to train our minds to embrace hardships and difficulties and not become too attached to fleeting worldly pleasures. Allowing ourselves to be influenced by the pursuit of worldly pleasures will be a cause for us to create tremendous negative karma, the results of which we do not wish to experience. On the other hand, willingly enduring hardships and difficulties is a cause for the experience of great bliss in the future. We need to remember that there are no accounts of masters who obtained great realisations through enjoying sensual pleasures, but there are many accounts of masters who have gained realisations through enduring hardships and difficulties.

We need to be really careful that our interest in the Dharma really does bear fruit. We may assume that we are Dharma students or practitioners, but if we shun any practice that involves hardship and difficulty, while willingly embracing the fleeting samsaric pleasures, we are distancing ourselves from the ultimate goals of liberation and enlightenment. Just considering ourselves or others as Dharma practitioners, doesn't mean that we automatically move closer to liberation and enlightenment, especially if we don't actually engage in the practices. Very simply, the advice here is not to give up something big for the sake of something small. Anyone can relate to that! In a worldly context, if you advise someone to be cautious, saying, 'If you do this, you might lose something really big for the sake of something small' then everyone would agree with this reasonable advice. Basically, the point here is not to give up on the end result, which is the bliss of liberation and enlightenment, for the sake of small fleeting worldly pleasures.

The first verse under this heading reads:

*375. If through relinquishing small pleasures
There is extensive happiness later,*

*Seeing the greater happiness
The resolute should relinquish small pleasures.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

If through relinquishing small pleasures now, one can see that there is extensive happiness later, seeing greater happiness of liberation for oneself and others, the resolute bodhisattvas should relinquish small pleasures.

It is through *relinquishing small pleasures now*, that *one can see greater extensive happiness* in the future. The practice of *resolute bodhisattvas* is for the *greater happiness of liberation for oneself and others*. So the advice to those who wish to practise as a bodhisattva is to willingly relinquish small pleasures now. This implies that we need to endure the small hardships experienced in every day life. For example, we may feel 'Oh don't think I can do my commitments and prayers today, because I have a headache'. If we find it easy to give up our practice because of a small difficulty, then we need to question the integrity of our Dharma practice.

The next verse reads:

**376. *If such things cannot be borne,
Then doctors giving distasteful medicines
Would disappear. It is not [reasonable]
To forsake [great pleasure for the small].***

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

If such, relinquishing small pleasures now cannot be borne for the sake of greater happiness, then doctors giving distasteful medicines would disappear. Thus, it is not reasonable to dislike and forsake great pleasure for the small.

If one holds onto an attitude of not *relinquishing small pleasures* for the *sake of greater happiness* in the future, then in a worldly context *doctors* would be out of business, because they would not be asked to prescribe any treatment or *medicine*. For those of you who have not experienced it, some Tibetan medicine tastes very bitter, some is very sour and others seem to be very astringent. Despite being so *distasteful*, these *medicines* are willingly taken when prescribed, in the knowledge that they will help to relieve greater suffering from a more severe illness. We need to understand that this is also true with the practice of Dharma.

The next verse related to this heading reads:

**377. *Sometimes what is thought harmful
Is regarded as helpful by the wise.
General rules and their exceptions
Are commended in all treatises.***

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Furthermore, *sometimes what is thought harmful* by inferior beings, *is regarded by the wise as helpful* when engaging in bodhisattva deeds. Thus, don't forsake great pleasure for the sake of minor sufferings.

If you say: This goes against the quote from the sutras, 'because it is the nature of suffering, one must completely abandon it'.

[Response] In general this is true but with the exception of bodhisattvas whose reason for remaining in samsara is because it is the sole cause for the happiness of self and others. *General rules and their exceptions are commended in all treatises*, thus you must be wise in understanding the distinction between the two.

This explanation is quite clear, so we don't need to elaborate on it too much. One of the main points is that in many *treatises*, there are explanations of *general rules, and exceptions* when it is for a greater purpose. We need to understand that

we shouldn't take everything too literally, as there are times when something that is otherwise not permitted, will, under the proper conditions, serve a greater purpose.

3.2.1.1.2.4. Suitability of liking the Great Vehicle

Having earlier explained that it is not suitable to despise the Great Vehicle, the text now explains the suitability of actually liking the Great Vehicle.

The relevant verse reads:

**378. *Who with intelligence would deride
The explanation in the Great Vehicle
Of deeds motivated by compassion
And of stainless wisdom!***

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je further elaborates on the meaning of this verse:

The Great Vehicle's scriptures present the complete *deeds* of bodhisattvas, who are *motivated by compassion* wishing all living beings to be free from suffering, and the complete presentation of *the stainless wisdom* realising emptiness. Thus, *who with intelligence would deride the explanation in the Great Vehicle?* It is not appropriate to do so, for the complete method for obtaining unsurpassable enlightenment is presented in the Great Vehicle while it is not presented in the Lower Vehicle.

These points are elaborated later on, however as clearly explained here, *the Great Vehicle's scriptures* (the Mahayana teachings) *present the complete deeds* of the *bodhisattvas* who are *motivated by compassion* wishing *all living beings to be free from suffering*. Furthermore, the Great Vehicle is *the complete presentation of the stainless wisdom*, which is the wisdom *realising emptiness*. Thus, as explained here, how could someone who is wise and intelligent possibly *deride the explanation of the Great Vehicle?* *It is not appropriate to do so.*

3.2.1.1.2.5. Summation

The summary verse referring:

**379. *Feeling inadequate about its great extent and
profound depth
Untrained beings—foes of themselves and others—
Nowadays deride the Great Vehicle
Because of bewilderment.***

Gyaltsab Je's explanation reads:

Feeling inadequate or disheartened about the *great extent* of the bodhisattva deeds, and generating fear when merely hearing about the *profound depth* of emptiness, *beings* have, in the past, deprecated the Great Vehicle because they were *untrained*. This deprecation is the *greatest foe of themselves and others* who, even *nowadays, deride the Great Vehicle due to the bewilderment* of this foe.

As clearly explained here, it is definitely inappropriate to deride the bodhisattvas' deeds. Those who do so, do it out of feeling disheartened, and unable to imagine engaging in such deeds themselves. Deriding the Great Vehicle comes about as a result of feeling disheartened, because of the great extent of the bodhisattvas' deeds.

The bodhisattvas' deeds are all motivated by great compassion, wishing all beings to be free from suffering, so one can easily feel disheartened about the great extent of the bodhisattvas' deeds. Also, rather than being able to appreciate and understand the view of emptiness, some people feel fearful just hearing about the profound depth of emptiness, or even just hearing the word 'emptiness'. In the past, beings like this have despised or deprecated the Great

Vehicle, because of their untrained minds. So *this deprecation is the greatest foe of themselves and others.*

Those with an untrained mind, who deride the unimaginable and incredible qualities of the scriptures of the Great Vehicle as well as those who practise the Great Vehicle, create very heavy negative karma for themselves. So that deprecation, which is a cause for such negative karma to be created, is their ultimate foe or enemy. One may habitually retain that mind of deriding the Great Vehicle, *due to the bewilderment of this foe.* Thus, due to the foe of bewilderment or ignorance, one deprecates the Great Vehicle.

As I emphasised in our last session, it is extremely dangerous for us to assume that others have faults when we cannot see their inner qualities. As mentioned here, deprecation, whether it is part of the doctrine of others or enacted by individual beings, is the greatest and worst enemy of all. So we should be cautious about seeing faults in someone.

3.2.1.2. PROVING THAT THE GREAT VEHICLE SCRIPTURES ARE THE WORD OF BUDDHA

This has three sub-divisions:

3.2.1.2.1. Deeds of the six perfections

3.2.1.2.2. Necessity of knowing the complete path of great enlightenment from the Great Vehicle scriptures

3.2.1.2.3. Necessity of knowing the great nature of a Buddha from the Great Vehicle which therefore is the word of Buddha

3.2.1.2.1. Deeds of the six perfections

This section is further sub-divided into three:

3.2.1.2.1.1. Not the slightest bad explanation in the scriptures of the Great Vehicle

3.2.1.2.1.2. The aims of the Great Vehicle are taught in the Great Vehicle scriptures

3.2.1.2.1.3. Therefore, those scriptures are proved to be the word of Buddha

3.2.1.2.1.1. Not the slightest bad explanation in the scriptures of the Great Vehicle

This heading is directly derived from the root text, the words of Nagarjuna, an unequalled great master, who wrote with so much depth and wisdom. As we accept Nagarjuna's own words as the truth, we cannot doubt his proof of the validity of the Great Vehicle scriptures. It is hard for us to fathom the great practice and depth of wisdom of such great masters as Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti.

At this point it is good to note that another commentary on the Great Vehicle describes Nagarjuna as a trail-blazer, because he revived the teachings of the Great Vehicle. His teachings are clearly revisiting and proving the validity of the Great Vehicle teachings. In this text Nagarjuna is presenting the Great Vehicle to counter the hearers and others of the Lower Vehicle of that time, who denounced the Great Vehicle doctrine as a valid expression of the Buddha's teaching.

So in this text, Nagarjuna clearly establishes the Great Vehicle or the Mahayana teachings as being the Buddha's word. Masters of later generations revere Nagarjuna as having been extremely kind, because he so clearly presented the Buddha's ultimate intentions, as expressed in the Great Vehicle. Because they are so clearly presented, they are very accessible to us and easy to understand. So all later masters unanimously agree that Nagarjuna was not only a learned

and great master himself, but also extremely kind in working so hard to present these teachings so clearly.

The relevant verse is:

*380. The Great Vehicle has a nature
Of giving, ethics, patience, effort,
Concentration, wisdom, and compassion.
Hence how could there be any bad explanations
in it?*

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

If asked: *How could there be any bad explanation in the Great Vehicle's scriptures?*

[Response] There are none whatsoever, because *the Great Vehicle has a nature of giving, ethics, patience, effort, concentration, wisdom*, which are the six perfections; and the basis of these great deeds, the awakening mind whose cause is *compassion*. These were fully explained by the Buddha in the scriptures of the Great Vehicle.

The six perfections, listed here as *giving, ethics, patience, effort, concentration and wisdom* are the deeds of a bodhisattva, and *the basis of these great deeds is the awakening mind or bodhicitta*. As you will recall, *compassion* is the substantial cause of the awakening mind.

The deeds and the state of mind that prompts those deeds, which is the awakening mind, are *fully explained by the Buddha in the scriptures of the Great Vehicle*. Thus, as explained here there can be no *bad explanations* at all and so the explanations are perfectly acceptable. Again and again the teachings explain a bodhisattva as a noble being whose state of mind is that of an awakening mind, and whose deeds to benefit others are carried out in the form of the six perfections. So the deeds are the six perfections, and the attitude that motivates those deeds is the awakening mind or bodhicitta.

The results of those practices are presented in the following verses.

Geshe-la: Now, can you give a definition of the perfection of generosity?

Student: *A mind wishing to give, motivated by bodhicitta combined with the Mahayana dedication.*

That is correct. So the basis of these practices of the six perfections is bodhicitta. An intention to give is not necessarily the perfection of giving, because it is not necessarily based upon the awakening mind or bodhicitta attitude. So, for giving or generosity to be a perfection, it has to be complemented with the bodhicitta motivation and dedication.

The six perfections are presented as causes for enlightenment, and in order for a deed to become a cause for enlightenment, it has to be based upon the awakening mind. Without the basis of an awakening mind, the aspiration for enlightenment will be missing. And if the aspiration for enlightenment is missing the deed cannot become a cause for enlightenment. That is how we need to understand it.

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