
Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷན་པའི་བུ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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We can spend some time doing the usual meditation.
[meditation]

We need to engage in this practice wholeheartedly, rather than just casually imagining taking in some negatives and giving out good virtues. If our practice is limited to a mere thought based on a good idea, then we will not derive the true essence of the practice, and it will not contribute to transforming our mind. Rather, we need to generate a true sense of compassion from the depths of our heart, which is based on an altruistic intention of thinking about the plight of suffering sentient beings, and then generate a genuine wish to take in their suffering. We need to take the time to really feel we have taken their suffering upon ourselves and given them our own happiness and merit. In this way, slowly and gradually, the real essence of the practice will take root in our mind.

If we do this practice in a superficial way when things are going well in our life, then it might seem as a nice practice. But the real measure of this practice taking root in our heart is found when we are experiencing difficulties and problems in life. If our practice has only been done superficially, then when real problems arise we might feel lost, scared and anxious. But if we make every effort to do the practice from the depths of our heart now, then at times of difficulty, we will be able to rejoice thinking, 'The time has now come for me to actually experience difficulties and problems on behalf of other sentient beings. May this suffering that I am experiencing now become a means to exhaust the suffering and negative karmas of other sentient beings'. Implementing the practice in this way will ensure that rather than feeling daunted, we will be able to utilise any adversity as a means to further enhance our practice.

Then we can consider difficulties and problems in life as a wish being fulfilled and as an opportunity to practise *tong len* in a manner that goes beyond just mere imagination or words. This practice is also a way to equalise worldly concerns. Where we previously had the natural wish to experience well-being and happiness and not experience any kind of suffering, that attitude is exchanged and equalised so that we feel joy when experiencing suffering and are wary when experiencing well-being and goodness.

As I said earlier, the measure of having practised *tong len* successfully is being able to naturally implement it during times of adversity. Then when problems and difficulties arise, in relation to ourselves, we will be able to regard that as an opportunity to purify negative karma created in previous lifetimes, as well as a means to take the suffering of other sentient beings upon oneself. One can then be further encouraged by thinking: 'May I experience even more difficulties and problems as a

means to exhaust my own negative karma and allow me to take upon the suffering of other sentient beings. Henceforth, may I be able to withstand any negativities and problems that are presented in life'.

As I have also mentioned previously, all the great masters of the past have confirmed suffering to be an impetus to create virtue and merit and purify negative karma. We never hear about any suggestion that having an enjoyable and pleasurable life serves as a means to purify negative karma and accumulate extensive merit. This profound advice from the great masters comes from their own practice and experience, thus we need to pay heed to their advice.

I have mentioned to you in the past, that when I feel joyful and happy, I start to become wary and wonder why I am feeling like this. Could it be related to merely good external conditions? Is that why I am experiencing this sense of ease and happiness? If that is the case, then I start to become very wary and cautious. If one is experiencing well-being merely based on the good external conditions, then that is not a good sign for one's Dharma practice.

When the *tong len* practice is done sincerely, it will enable a true inner transformation take place. We need to really work on transforming our mind because that is what ultimately accompanies us. At death we have to leave everything behind, including our physical body and all other good conditions relating to physical comfort. What we do take with us is our own mind with the good imprints and qualities that we have developed from our practice. Thus it is really worthwhile to pay attention to our internal transformation rather than merely focusing on the external well-being and comfort.

The *Thirty-seven Practices of a Bodhisattva* mentions that the mind is analogous to a guest and the body is analogous to a guest-house. That analogy vividly indicates that when a guest moves on, they leave the guest-house behind and don't take it with them. No matter how beautiful and comfortable a guest-house may be the very fact that it is a guest-house means that the guest moves on and does not remain there. When applied to our body and mind the analogy shows us that our body is like the guest-house, and our mind is like the guest. This advice is to remind us of the impermanent nature of our worldly existence. Thus, it is very profound advice.

Becoming familiar with this advice and implementing it in our daily life will be of real benefit, particularly at the crucial time when we are approaching death, which is when we have to discard our body and move on to the next life. It is at that time that we really need the assistance of the Dharma, thus we need to practice now for it to work at that time. We really need to familiarise ourselves with these points and further meditate on them. If we leave it as just good advice and don't really take it to heart and put it into practice, then at the crucial time of death, if anxieties, fears and so forth arise we will not be fully prepared to deal with them.

Whereas if we familiarise ourselves with these points now, then we can be fully prepared and there will be no hesitation in facing death. For with the knowledge that

the body is nothing more than a guest-house, it is natural to leave it behind. Knowing that it is a natural course of events, we will have no hesitation in discarding our body and thus no anxiety and fears at the time of death. But if we leave this understanding merely on the surface, it will not have much effect. When we take it to heart and put it into practice, then it will definitely be of great benefit.

When we contemplate these points about impermanence again and again, familiarising our mind with it, and then it will really start to move our mind. This is how we derive the essence of the practice. In the lam rim teachings impermanence is summarised into four main points:

- The end result of all meeting is parting;
- The end result of all accumulation is exhaustion;
- The end result of all high status is falling to low status;
- The end result of all birth is to perish and die.

These are really essential points for us to take to heart. When one contemplates the impermanence of meeting with companions and friends, which will inevitably end up in separation, then strong attachment will be minimised and one will experience less pain. Knowing that all accumulation will end in exhaustion, helps the mind to be less attached to accumulating wealth and possessions. It is the same with attachment to high status and to one's own life. Contemplating that, by nature, all that is born will end in death is really sound advice about not being attached to the existence of merely this life.

This practical advice encourages us to implement Dharma practice into our life and really take it to heart. For example, there are many who are very attached to high status, and when they lose that high status they become distraught. We see many examples of people completely falling apart and in tears, unable to deal with losing their high status. They feel there is no longer any reason to live — all because they never considered that high status is impermanent state that will naturally phase out. Whereas if we have already acquainted our mind with the reality that all high status, no matter how high or how worthy, will be lost, then we will not experience great shock or unbearable suffering when that inevitable event happens.

Likewise the acquisition of wealth and, more particularly, our own life are also impermanent. Many are very fearful about the prospect of having to die. Even the thought of dying can be daunting and very difficult to handle if there is strong attachment to one's life, and one does not accept the reality of its impermanence. Whereas acquainting our mind with this reality will help us to face death bravely and courageously, knowing that there is nothing to really be afraid or shocked about, and that it is part of reality. This is very practical advice for our Dharma practice.

Even though I didn't have any particular intention to side-track in this way, I find these points of immense benefit in my own life and practice, and therefore I feel compelled to share them with you. My approach to Dharma practice is to exert myself in making meagre attempts to do small practices with small expectations about the benefits of those practices. Then, when I experience some moderate benefit from those meagre

practices, I feel quite content and happy with that. [*Geshe-la laughs*] Expecting great results from meagre attempts is beyond the bounds of reality! Even thinking, 'I am making great attempts so I should expect great results' can lead to disappointment. I feel that the practical and realistic approach is to make some attempt to practise with the least expectation. Then, even if one experiences moderate benefit from the practice, one can feel quite joyful and happy, because one hasn't set up high expectations for oneself.

Let us now turn to the text.

3.2.1.3.2. *Buddhahood cannot be achieved through practising just the four noble truths and the auxiliaries to enlightenment*

The verse relating to this heading reads:

*392. How could the fruit of Buddhahood be superior
[If achieved] through the path common to Hearers
Which has the foundations [of the Hearer enlightenment,
The meanings of the four noble truths, and
the harmonies with enlightenment?]*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary on this verse begins with an assertion:

If you say: By meditating on the four noble truths and the thirty-seven limbs to enlightenment for three countless eons, one will obtain buddhahood.

in response the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

[Response] *How could the fruit of buddhahood be superior to the foe destroyer of a Lesser Vehicle if achieved through the path common to hearers?* Buddhahood would not be superior, as it shares the common path *which has the foundation of the hearer enlightenment through contemplating the Buddha's blessed word on the meanings of the four noble truths* such as the sixteen attributes of impermanence and so forth¹, *and the thirty-seven harmonies with enlightenment*. From a common cause, it is impossible to achieve an uncommon result!

The *thirty-seven limbs or harmonies to enlightenment* are presented in seven categories and it would be good to become familiar with them. The seven categories are:

1. Four perfect abandonments
2. Four limbs of miracles
3. Four close contemplations
4. Five sense powers
5. Five forces
6. Seven limbs of enlightenment
7. Eight limbs of the noble path

We have covered these in detail in the past.²

They are also presented in the *Bodhisattva's Way of Life* and other teachings. These are primary points of practice that are specifically mentioned in the Theravada or

¹ See the addendum to the teachings of 30 July 2002. All transcripts referred to in these footnotes are included in the CD of teachings.

² See the teachings of 5 October 2004.

Hinayana sutras. You will, of course, recall that these practices are common to the Mahayana tradition as well.

Both traditions place emphasis on the four close contemplations on the different aspects of one's body and mind. It is really worthwhile to understand what these practices of the four close contemplations and others entail.

3.2.1.3.3. *The Great Vehicle scriptures are suitable to be considered by the wise as the word of Buddha*

The connotation of 'the wise' can relate either to those who have the sharp faculty and thorough understanding of the entire range of the Buddha's words, or it can relate to bodhisattvas.

The relevant verse reads:

393. The subjects concerned with the bodhisattva deeds were not mentioned in the [Hearers' Vehicle] sutras but were explained in the Great Vehicle. Hence the wise should accept it [as Buddha's word].

In explanation of this verse, Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

The subjects concerned with the bodhisattva exhaustive deeds were not mentioned in the Hearers' Vehicle sutras, but were explained in the Great Vehicle. Hence the wise should accept or hold the Great Vehicle, as Buddha's word.

In the Hearer's Vehicle the practices to achieve liberation are explained in detail, while the bodhisattvas' deeds are only mentioned, but not explained to any great degree. When the wise, or those with a sharp faculty, investigate the Buddha's words, they can see that practices that are mentioned briefly in the Hearers' Vehicle, such as the bodhisattva deeds, are in fact explained more extensively in the Great Vehicle.

The Buddha's words present practices leading a Hearer to the state of liberation. When these are further elaborated in the Great Vehicle, along with more extensive explanations of the bodhisattva deeds, how could those of sharp faculty not accept that? This rhetorical question implies that the wise would indeed have to accept the Great Vehicle scriptures as the Buddha's words.

From these points we can also derive an understanding of the significance of making particular dedications at the end of a Dharma practice. As many of you would know, one of the optimum ways to dedicate one's merits is to aspire to always meet with the perfect Mahayana teacher in all one's future lives. Making such strong dedication prayers to meet and be guided by such exemplary teachers as Maitreya and Manjushri is really essential.

We must have made those dedications in the past because we have in fact met Mahayana teachers in this life. Had we have not really paid attention to this significant dedication, then even if we had made contact with the Buddhadharmas, if we had met with a teacher of the Lower Vehicle such as the Hearers' Vehicle, we might very well be in a situation where we don't readily accept the Mahayana teachings. That would then deprive us of the opportunity to create the causes to achieve

enlightenment. So the dedication to meet with perfect Mahayana teachers is really essential, and we need to ensure that we include this dedication as a significant part of our practice.

3.2.1.4. PURPOSE OF TEACHING THREE VEHICLES

It is said that the Buddha taught with the ultimate intention of leading beings to the final goal of enlightenment. So why did he teach the three vehicles, of the hearer, solitary realiser and bodhisattva? This section of the text is a response to that question.

The first verse reads:

394. Just as a grammarian [first] has students read a model of the alphabet, So Buddha taught trainees the doctrines that they could bear.

The opening words of Gyaltsab Je's commentary are:

It is in order to guide the disciples, ...

Through knowing the mental disposition of his disciples, the Buddha teaches according to the capacities of his trainees or disciples. This definitely indicates the omniscience of the Buddha and the skilful means with which he taught beginners, with the intention of slowly guiding them along the path to higher grounds.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

... just as a grammarian first has students read a model of the alphabet, so Buddha taught trainees, not topics which are difficult to understand, but a doctrine that they could hear or comprehend according to their mental capacity.

In the Tibetan tradition there is a very clear method of firstly teaching the consonants followed by the vowels and then putting the consonants and the vowels together to form words, leading to the actual process of reading. It is much the same here where children are first taught the alphabet before they learn how to identify words and so forth. This is the way teachers introduce reading. The Buddha taught in a similar way; he taught beginners with moderate mental capacity at a level that they could comprehend and understand, and then he gradually guided them towards more comprehensive teachings.

The commentary next states:

This order is prevalent because...

This is an introduction to the next verse, which reads:

395. To some he taught doctrines to turn them away from ill-deeds; To some, for the sake of achieving merit; To some, doctrines based on duality;

Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of the verse:

To some he taught doctrines to turn them away from ill-deeds such as killing as a way to lead those with the disposition of the small scope for the sake of achieving the god or human realm which are the results of merit; ...

There are trainees or disciples who are incapable, or who not ready to seek liberation from cyclic existence or samsara, but who are still inclined to achieve a good rebirth in the next lifetime. To help them to create the causes and merit to achieve the high status of either a god or a human rebirth in the next lifetime the Buddha taught

about turning away from ill-deeds such as killing and so forth i.e. refraining from the ten non-virtuous deeds, and engaging in the ten virtues.

This is called the path of the small scope. For those with that sort of inclination, the Buddha presented teachings to turn them away from ill-deeds, because engaging in non-virtue or ill-deeds is a cause to be reborn in the lower and more unfortunate births. The cause to be reborn in fortunate realms, such as the god and human realms, is to create virtue and merit. Thus the Buddha presented teachings that will allow the trainees to turn away from misdeeds and engage in virtuous deeds. This is the correct technique and method for those who seek that goal of the small scope.

Gyaltsab Je' commentary continues:

... to some with the mental disposition of the medium scope, the Buddha taught doctrines based on the duality of subject and object, such as the extreme of samsara as something definitely to be abandoned and nirvana to be adopted.

For those trainees and disciples with a mental disposition that wish to be free from samsara and achieve nirvana, the Buddha taught that samsara is definitely to be abandoned and nirvana definitely to be adopted. Thus for those who hold the views of the two lower schools, the Vaibhashika and Sautrantika, the Buddha presented teachings on duality, indicating that the subject and object are substantially different. The Buddha taught this to trainees and disciples who didn't yet have the right mental disposition to receive a presentation on the emptiness of the subject and object. Even the term 'emptiness' is not presented to them, because they are not yet ready to accept that. So the Buddha presented them with the *doctrines based on the duality of subject and object*.

It is good to really understand the progressive way in which selflessness and emptiness were presented. To those of the lower schools, in relation to the person, the Buddha presented the lack of an independent and self-sufficient person, but subject and object were presented as being substantially different. The term 'emptiness' was not used in the lower Buddhist schools. Progressively, the Buddha introduced the term 'emptiness of duality' to the Mind-only school. For this school, the lack of an independent, permanent and self-sufficient person is asserted as the selflessness of a person; and the lack of difference between object and object-perceiver such as the lack of substantial difference between form and the awareness perceiving form, is presented as the emptiness of duality. The presentation of emptiness in the Mind-only school is then progressively refined into more subtle levels in the higher schools.

All of this is presented more clearly in the teachings on tenets.³ It is really good to have a sound understanding of progressive differences of the presentations on selflessness and emptiness.

In the root text, *to some, doctrines based on duality* refers to the fact that the duality of subject and object is explained first because some trainees are not yet ready to accept the non-duality of subject and object. Thus non-duality is

introduced progressively, for in the very next verse, *doctrines based on non-duality* refers to the presentation of emptiness of duality for the Mind-only school.

It is good for you to refer back to previous teachings on the topics presented in the tenets, to understand the distinction between object and object-perceiver being substantially different, and the lack of substantial difference between object and object-perceiver, as well as the difference between the lower and higher schools' presentation of gross selflessness and subtle selflessness of person. Basically the lack of a substantially independent and self-sufficient person is presented as the subtle selflessness of a person in the Vaibhashika, Sautrantika, Mind-only and Svatantrika schools, while according to the Prasangika this is actually gross selflessness. The Prasangika assert that the subtle selflessness of person and phenomena and emptiness of person and phenomena are essentially the same, in the sense of the lack of inherent existence of both persons and phenomena. It is important for us to get a good understanding of those differences.

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Edited Version*

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³ The text *A Presentation of Tenets* was taught in 2001.