

Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇིག་རྗེ་ཆེན་པོའི་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

25 September 2012

In a relaxed posture, along with the motivation we have generated with the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer*, we can now engage in the practice of meditation. [Meditation]

It is also good to remember to generate the motivation for receiving the teaching along these lines, 'For the sake of all mother sentient beings, to liberate them from all suffering and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well'.

Ensuring that we spend some time generating a positive motivation, specifically the bodhicitta motivation, is a very significant practice in itself. Generating a bodhicitta motivation is a means to purify negative karma and to accumulate extensive merit. As a practice, the bodhicitta motivation encompasses these two essential elements.

You will have heard in the teachings about the necessity for accumulating a great amount of merit. The commentary on bodhicitta indicates that the merit from generating the bodhicitta mind, just for a moment, cannot be expressed even by all the buddhas. This is an indication of the vast amount of merit that is accumulated by generating the bodhicitta motivation. So we need to understand the great significance of this practice.

Although we may not yet be able to generate actual bodhicitta right now, even a similitude of it, such as generating the contrived bodhicitta attitude, is highly meaningful, as it serves as the basis for further developing the altruistic mind. We are all familiar with the bodhicitta attitude, as we know what it encompasses and how to generate it. However if we neglect that and then wonder how we should practice to accumulate merit and purify negative karma, then we have really missed the point!

I have often encountered those who have spent many years receiving teachings, but when it comes to practice they ask 'What should I meditate on?' or 'What practice do I need to do?' That just goes to show that they have missed the point about what 'practice' actually means. In fact, practice entails contemplating, and meditating on the teachings one has heard, i.e. whatever understanding one has gained from those teachings is to be used as the substance for one's practice.

We have been incredibly fortunate to have received numerous teachings and explanations on what bodhicitta means, and so forth, from our great gurus. Thus, the seed of bodhicitta has already been implanted in our mental continuum, and that needs to be nourished and further developed. Just as the seed of a flower requires moisture, warmth, soil and so forth in order to germinate, the seed of bodhicitta in our mental continuum needs the

conditions of further practice and contemplation if it is to develop and flourish. It is through the kindness of the gurus that we have received the seed, but it is our responsibility to actually apply the right conditions to nourish that seed, and further develop it.

As you would recall from the teachings on bodhicitta, the basis for the bodhicitta mind to be cultivated is that one's mind has to be pure and free from negative imprints of misdeeds. That is to say, a mind filled with negativities is not a suitable basis on which to develop bodhicitta. That is the reason why prior to taking the bodhisattva vows, as means to accumulate merit and purify misdeeds, the lama asks us to repeat these lines:

I take refuge in the three jewels.
I confess all misdeeds individually,
And rejoice in the virtuous deeds of all beings.
I hold in my mind, the intention to achieve
enlightenment, the perfect state of buddhahood.

We need to engage in the meaning of these lines wholeheartedly, and try to contemplate the point of each line, as a way to be moved from the depth of our heart.

One takes refuge in the Three Jewels from the depth of one's heart with complete and total reliance on the three objects of refuge, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Confessing all individual misdeeds, requires a very strong mind of regret and a keen determination to purify them. We also need to rejoice in the virtuous deeds of all living beings. Thus these lines encompass the essential elements required for developing bodhicitta, which is the accumulation of merit and purifying misdeeds. The accumulation of merit is practiced by taking refuge and rejoicing, while purifying misdeeds is achieved through confession. So, it is in this way that we acquire the proper conditions for developing the bodhicitta mind.

2.1. Temporary good qualities

2.1.2. Good qualities of the ten grounds

2.1.2.2. BRANCH MEANING

2.1.2.2.2. Entities and good qualities of the ten grounds

10. Following on from our last session we are up to the tenth ground, which is the **Cloud of Doctrine**.

The relevant verse reads:

459 *The tenth is the Cloud of Doctrine
Because the rain of holy doctrine falls.
The bodhisattva is bestowed empowerment
With light rays by the buddhas.*

The reason for the name Cloud of Doctrine is presented in the first two lines, while the next two lines of the verse refer to the qualities bestowed on a bodhisattva on this ground, which surpass the qualities on the ninth ground.

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary (as presented last week) indicated that bodhisattvas on the tenth ground receive this direct empowerment from the buddhas in all the ten directions through light radiated from the spiral hair curl on the foreheads of the buddhas. Receiving that empowerment enables the bodhisattvas on that ground to have an incredibly profound and high level of concentration. The words *the empowerment of the rays of light* indicate that a direct realisation of primordial wisdom is bestowed upon the bodhisattvas.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary then continues:

As explained, when this state is actualised the ground is adorned with jewelled lotuses equalling ten times a hundred thousand-fold of the three thousand world systems, and as many atoms as there are in ten times a hundred thousand-fold of the three thousand world systems. The bodhisattva's body also conforms with that many world systems. As soon as they obtain this concentration they sit on top of the lotuses, at which time the Conqueror and all buddhas radiate light from their hair curl and bestow on the bodhisattva the so-called 'empowerment of great rays of light'.

Lama Tsong Khapa's commentary, *Illumination of the Thought, an Extensive Explanation of the Madhyamakavatara* contains an explanation of the qualities of the ten grounds, which were explained in the *Madhyamakavatara* teachings. So if you want a clear explanation of this then refer to that text.¹

In brief, the qualities on the tenth ground are that bodhisattvas on this ground surpass the perfection of primordial wisdom, and having been bestowed with the empowerment of great rays of light, they obtain innumerable levels of concentration.

The next verse relates to the maturation qualities of this ground:

*460 Through the maturation of those [good qualities]
They become master of the gods of Pure Abode.
They are supreme great lords,
Master of the sphere of infinite wisdom.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Through the maturation of those good qualities they become master of the gods of Pure Abode.

There is said to be seventeen different abodes of arya beings, and the Pure Abode is one of the abodes within the god realms. Bodhisattvas on this level *become master of the Pure Abode*. Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

They are supreme great lords, and because they are bestowed with the empowerment of infinite wisdom which is the wisdom of the Buddhas, they are master of the sphere of infinite wisdom.

Because of the *empowerment bestowed* on them on this level, bodhisattvas achieve *infinite wisdom* and thus called *the masters of the sphere of infinite wisdom*. The rays of light emanating from the hair curl of the buddhas are symbolic of the fact that bodhisattvas on this ground are empowered to receive infinite wisdom, which is equal to that of the omniscient mind. Thus they are referred to as the *masters of the sphere of infinite wisdom*.

As I regularly indicate during initiations, when visualising receiving light and nectar from the enlightened beings in the aspect of deities, we must understand that in essence we are receiving the primordial wisdom of the enlightened beings. Contemplating in this way is a means to receive the blessings of the enlightened beings, which is very

powerful for purifying negativities and removing obscurations within our mind. What is explained in this commentary is that when the bodhisattvas receive this empowerment, it is in the aspect of light radiated from the spiral hair of the buddhas, which in actual fact is the omniscient wisdom of the buddhas.

It is important to incorporate and implement that understanding in our practice when we do visualisations. For example during an initiation, when we receive the water from the vase, we need to think of it as actual nectar, and that, in itself, is definitely a great blessing. Even though the water from the vase is consecrated and is representative of the nectar, if we don't really understand the deeper significance, it may not have a strong effect on our mind. But when we understand its significance and what it symbolises, there is no doubt that it is highly beneficial.

We need to familiarise ourselves with the significance of all this and then implement it in our daily practice as well. If we discipline ourselves and make the effort, then our practice will naturally become spontaneous. Then, whatever practice we do, will be meaningful, due to our acquaintance with the practice and the correct way of thinking.

2.1.2.2.3. Summation

The first two lines of the next verse are a summary of the temporary good qualities of the ten grounds:

*461ab Thus those ten grounds are renowned
As the ten bodhisattva grounds.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary basically reiterates these lines:

Thus, those ten grounds are renowned in the sutras as the ten bodhisattva grounds.

The commentary specifically explains that the ten grounds are renowned in the sutras, i.e. in the Buddha's own teachings.

2.2. Final good qualities

The good qualities of the ten grounds can also be referred as temporary good qualities. Here, the final good qualities are explained. This explanation is sub-divided into two:

2.2.1. Each of a buddha's good qualities is limitless

2.2.2. Causes for generating belief and faith in the limitless good qualities of buddhas

Again it is good to see how the outline itself extracts the meaning of the text itself.

2.2.1. Each of a buddha's good qualities is limitless

The following verses indicate how each and every one of the good qualities of the Buddha are limitless. One may wonder, what are the causes that enable one to generate belief and faith in the limitless good qualities of the buddhas? The answer to that question is then presented very meticulously.

This heading is sub-divided into two:

2.2.1.1. The buddhas' limitless good qualities depend on the ten powers

2.2.1.2. Examples of the limitlessness of buddhas' good qualities

¹ See teaching of 9 November 2004.

2.2.1.1. THE BUDDHAS' LIMITLESS GOOD QUALITIES DEPEND ON THE TEN POWERS

I explained the ten powers in detail when we did the *Madhyamakavatara* teachings. So it would be good for you to refer to that again.²

As mentioned in the heading itself, the Buddha's good qualities are dependent on the ten powers.

The relevant lines of the root text read:

*461cd The ground of buddhahood is different.
Being in all ways inconceivable,*

*462ab Its great extent is merely said
To be endowed with the ten powers.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the meaning of these lines:

The ground of buddhahood is different from the previously explained ten grounds, being in all ways inconceivable. Even though the universe's great extent is infinite but condensed into the ten directions, similarly the buddha ground is merely said to be endowed with the ten powers.

The Buddha's qualities are limitless, however as way to understand some of the main qualities, they are condensed into the *ten powers*. The analogy used here is that the *extent of the universe is infinite* thus we are unable to determine its limits. However we can condense it into the *ten directions* (the four main directions, the four cardinal directions, above and below). The main point here is that the Buddha's qualities are limitless and infinite; however for the sake of convention and in order to understand them, they are condensed into the ten powers.

The *qualities* referred to here includes all of the qualities of the ten grounds, plus the qualities of buddhahood, which are infinite.

The ten powers of a buddha are translated as³:

- Power of knowing right from wrong
- Power of knowing the consequences of actions
- Power of knowing various mental inclinations
- Power of knowing various mental faculties
- Power of knowing various degrees of intelligence
- Power of knowing the path to all goals
- Power of knowing the ever-afflicted and purified phenomena
- Power of knowing past lives
- Power of knowing death and birth
- Power of knowing the exhaustion of contamination.

The last two lines of verse 462 refer to the limitlessness of the Buddha's good qualities:

*462cd Each power is immeasurable too
Like [the limitless number of] all
transmigrators.*

Here, Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the meaning of this verse, it reads:

Each power, such as the power of knowing right from wrong is immeasurable too, like the limitless number of all transmigrators.

Thus each of the powers are in themselves immeasurable or limitless. A more accurate translation of the first power would be the power of knowing locations as well as non-locations. This power, for example, refers to the Buddha's ability to know exactly specific virtuous actions leading to specific positive results and specific misdeeds leading to specific negative results. In this way when related to the infinite objects of knowledge that are known by the omniscient mind, the limitless qualities of the buddhas can be understood.

The analogy here is that just as transmigrators or living beings are limitless, likewise each of the powers are also limitless.

The limitless qualities of the buddhas are explained with further analogies:

*463 The limitlessness of a buddha's [good qualities]
Is said to be like the limitlessness
Of space, earth, water, fire,
And wind in all directions.*

The Buddha's qualities are as limitless as space, which pervades limitlessly. There is a limitless quantity of water on this planet and it is the same with fire. In brief, just as the five elements are limitless, so too are the Buddha's qualities limitless.

2.2.2. Causes for generating belief and faith in the limitless good qualities of buddhas

As mentioned previously, having presented the Buddha's qualities as limitless, then one may wonder what are the causes for one to generate belief or faith in that?

This section is very meticulously presented in four subdivisions:

2.2.2.1. The reason why buddhas' good qualities are

limitless is that the causal merits are limitless

2.2.2.2. Limitlessness of the causes because of aspiring to help limitless beings

2.2.2.3. Immeasurability of the merit of those virtues

2.2.2.4. The sources

2.2.2.1. THE REASON WHY BUDDHAS' GOOD QUALITIES ARE LIMITLESS IS THAT THE CAUSAL MERITS ARE LIMITLESS

Just as the qualities of the buddhas are limitless, the merit required to obtain those qualities is also limitless. It is important to understand that connection.

We can see the logical presentation here. As the causes are limitless, the inference is that the results are also limitless. Conversely if the causes themselves can be defined and have some limitation, then one can assume that the effects will also have limits. But if the very causes are understood to be limitless then the results must also be limitless. These are good points to understand. Then we can recall how even one good deed such as a prostration, can have limitless benefits.

This logical presentation helps us to gain a clear insight into the logic of this syllogism: the effects—are limitless—because the causes are limitless.

² See teachings 23 November 2004. The powers relating to ordinary beings are explained on the ninth ground, where bodhisattvas surpass the perfection of power or might.

³ From Tsepa Rigzin, *Tibetan-English Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology*.

This sub-heading is further divided into three:

2.2.2.1.1. Source for the limitlessness of the buddhas' good qualities

2.2.2.1.2. Way to amass limitless merit

2.2.2.1.3. Brief presentation of the seven branches

2.2.2.1.1. Source for the limitlessness of the buddhas' good qualities

The relevant verse reads:

*464 If the causes are [reduced] to a mere
[measure]
And not seen to be limitless,
One will not believe the limitlessness
[Of the good qualities] of the buddhas.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

It is not possible to measure the limit of the Buddha's qualities because, *if the causes of the Buddha are reduced to a mere measure and not seen to be limitless, one will not believe the limitlessness of the effects, which are the good qualities of the buddhas.* Thus, the qualities of the buddhas are limitless because their causes are infinite and limitless.

As explained in the commentary the causes for the Buddha's qualities are limitless and therefore the results, the Buddha's qualities, are also inferred as being limitless. What is being posed here is a rhetorical question: If the causes themselves are shown to have limits, then how could one possibly believe that the effects are limitless? It would not be logical or reasonable. So the conclusion is that because the causes of the qualities of the Buddha are limitless, the effects (which are the Buddha's qualities themselves) are to be inferred as being limitless as well.

With respect to the meaning of these words, *if the causes of the Buddha are reduced to a mere measure*, if one could say 'this is the measure of the causes', then this would mean there is a limit to the causes. Thus, if the causes themselves had a limit, how could one possibly explain the effects to be limitlessness? However when the causes themselves are understood to be limitless, then it can be understood that the effects are also limitless. One can see how meticulously this reasoning is presented.

2.2.2.1.2. Way to amass limitless merit

When the ways of amassing limitless merit are understood, then one can also understand the effect, which is that the Buddha's qualities are also limitless.

The relevant verse is:

*465 Therefore in the presence of an image
Or monument or something else
Say these twenty stanzas
Three times every day:*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Because the cause requires limitless amount of merit, *therefore in the presence of images of buddhas or monuments or something else* such as the extraordinary assembly of the sangha, *say these following twenty stanzas three times every day.* As the merit accumulated from reciting these prayers is limitless, the result will be limitless qualities of the buddhas.

Here one can recall the amount of merit required to obtain each of the Buddha's thirty-two major marks and the eighty minor signs. Obtaining each of those marks and signs requires the accumulation of vast merit. This is another way for us to understand the extent of the merit that needs to be accumulated in order to obtain the qualities of the buddhas. If one recites these prayers and does the following practices in the presence of images of buddhas or stupas, or any kind of holy object, or in the presence of the sangha and so forth, then one accumulates an extensive amount of merit, which is a cause to obtain those limitless qualities. It is very significant for us to understand how beneficial these practices are when we do them in the correct way, and with the proper understanding.

As I have indicated in the past, if we take the time to offer whatever we eat or drink to the Three Jewels, and in particular to the gurus and the buddhas, then that can be a way to accumulate a vast amount of merit from our daily activities. Following from the explanations about limitlessness, if we make an offering of an object whose very existence comes about as a result of accumulating extensive limitless merit, then we can imagine the merit we receive must also be limitless, because we are offering it to an object endowed with limitless qualities. Thus the merit we accumulate can be limitless when we do it in the appropriate way.

So it is highly significant to have a strong relationship with a particular deity as the manifestation of one's guru, and then offer whatever one consumes to the enlightened beings in that aspect. When incorporated into our daily lives, this becomes a very significant practice.

The buddhas who are endowed with limitless qualities come about as the result of having first obtained the qualities of the arya beings. Thus if we make offerings and engage in practices in relation to the aryas, then the result of making offerings and practices to the arya beings will also be limitless.

If the result is limitless qualities, then the cause of that requires the accumulation of limitless merit. Arya beings on the ten grounds are engaged in accumulating limitless merit in order to obtain the result of being endowed with limitless qualities. Thus through making offerings, veneration, prostrations and so forth to the arya beings, we too can obtain limitless merit.

It is highly significant that the causes of the limitless qualities of the Buddha are the accumulation of limitless merit, along with obtaining the qualities of the tenth ground. Those qualities are related to the merit that is accumulated on the ninth ground. We can back-track in this way to the bodhisattva on the first ground, and even prior to that, to the practices and merits which are accumulated at the level of an ordinary bodhisattva (who is not yet an arya bodhisattva). The causes for obtaining the next level lie in the previous level. So as we progress down to the practices of the practitioners at ordinary levels, we can see how, from the very beginning, the accumulation of the merit and so forth is worthy of veneration and respect, because it serves as the cause to obtain the ultimate resultant good qualities of a buddha.

The way to incorporate this significant understanding is to relate it to the resultant qualities and the causal merits to be accumulated within the mental continuum of one individual being, such as Buddha Shakyamuni. The Buddha Shakyamuni's qualities were dependent on a bodhisattva of the same mental continuum on the tenth ground, which was dependent on a bodhisattva within the same mental continuum on the ninth ground, right back to the individual being of the same mental continuum accumulating merit at the beginner's level. In this way, the Buddha moved through the different bodhisattva grounds, ultimately achieving the state of enlightenment.

By applying that sequence to the mental continuum of one individual being, we can relate it to ourselves, at a personal level. Then it will actually dawn upon us, that it is possible for us to obtain those qualities ourselves too. If we wish to achieve those qualities, we need to also engage in the practices of accumulating merit, just as an enlightened being such as Buddha Shakyamuni did. At the same time, we need to realise that it is our own responsibility to engage in such practices. No-one else can provide these qualities and we ourselves need to take the initiative to acquire the causes to obtain them.

We enjoy incredibly good conditions now. We have been born as a human being with all of the good conditions intact, enabling us to engage in the practice of Dharma. All of this is possible as a direct result of the incredible causes that were created in our previous life. It was an individual of the same mental continuum as ourselves who, in our previous lives created the causes for what we enjoy now. So we can feel great gratitude for that.

However, just as the individual in the past took the responsibility for accumulating the appropriate causes for obtaining the result we are enjoying now, we have to take the initiative to accumulate those same causes ourselves if we wish to enjoy the same conditions in the future. No-one else can create those causes for us; if we wish to have good results in our future lives, we are the ones who have to create the causes now.

If we secure a good future life then, and in the life after that and so forth, the causes will be continually accumulated in each subsequent life, leading all the way to enlightenment. That is how we need to understand our individual personal journey of transformation and progress towards enlightenment.

More specifically, we need to really contemplate how, to a great extent the causes we enjoy and take for granted were accumulated by the individual being of our own previous existence. If we don't take the initiative to use these great, incredible conditions that we have now—being born as a human being, having all internal and external conditions, such as having met with perfect Mahayana teachers, being born in an area where the Dharma is prevalent, where we are able to access and have the inclination to practise the Dharma, to actually engage in the practice of Dharma now—we might be wasting the great work that our previous being has done for us, and we will not secure a good rebirth for ourselves.

If we have an unfortunate rebirth, such as not being born as a human, we will be deprived of the practice of Dharma. Even if we are re-born as a human, we could be deprived of meeting with the perfect Mahayana teacher or spiritual guide. We could be re-born into a condition where we have neither the faith nor the inclination to practise Dharma. Just imagine what kind of unfortunate situations one could be in. If we are not mindful and we don't apply good conditions now, there could be great misfortune waiting for us in the future. We need to consider this carefully.

So take the initiative to engage in practice now, otherwise it will be as Geshe Potawa said, 'I don't fear death itself, but I fear the next rebirth'. As I mentioned in the last session, before Caryn Clarke passed away, she confided in me that she didn't have much fear of death, but did she fear that she might not meet with teachers like myself in her future life. In essence, she was saying the same thing as Geshe Potawa, and these are highly significant points for us to consider. Caryn's fear is a reminder to us of what we really need to be concerned about.

If one doesn't think in this way, then it will be really difficult for us to be confident that our practice of Dharma is a pure Dharma practice. Actually, it is quite impossible for it to become a pure Dharma practice if we don't have that inclination to think of our future life.

As you will be aware, the next session is the discussion and following that is the exam, so please take the initiative to engage in that well.

The remaining verses in the text are, on one hand, easy to comprehend, but they are also very meaningful with respect to the great depth of the instructions for practice. Nagarjuna has presented us with incredibly profound ways to engage in practice. This is really significant and meaningful.

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version*

© **Tara Institute**