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# Nagarjuna's Precious Garland

འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷན་པའི་བཀའ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

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Based on the motivation we generated through the Refuge and Bodhicitta prayer, we can now engage in the practice of meditation. *[meditation]*

It would be good to generate a positive motivation for receiving the teaching—one which is based on overcoming all self-interest—and dedicate the purpose of the teaching to the sole benefit of other sentient beings: In order to liberate all beings from suffering and lead them to ultimate happiness, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well.

## 2.2.2. Causes for generating belief and faith in the limitless good qualities of buddhas (cont.)

### 2.2.2.4. SOURCES

The relevant verse reads:

487 *The Supramundane Victor said so,  
And the reasoning is this:  
[The limitlessness of the merit of] wishing to  
help limitless realms  
Of sentient beings is like [the limitlessness of  
those beings].*

What is being established here is the limitless merit that one accumulates when one develops the intention to benefit all sentient beings. This is in line with the earlier explanations that the limitless qualities of the Buddha, as an enlightened being, are established through the causes being limitless. So if the cause for obtaining enlightenment is the limitless amount of merit that one has to accumulate, then the result will be limitless qualities.

We can see the very logical nature of the reasoning presented here. In order to develop the understanding that there are limitless qualities of the Buddha, we can refer to the limitless merit that has to be accumulated in order to achieve that enlightened state. From this we can derive the personal instruction that if one wishes to achieve the limitless qualities of a buddha, one has to accumulate a limitless amount of merit. Without establishing the cause, one cannot experience the result. So, if we wish to experience the result of limitless qualities of an enlightened being then we need to establish the causes by accumulating limitless merit. We need to see how this logical reasoning applies to our practice. As I regularly mention, the logic that is presented in the teachings is very profound, and we need to apply it to every circumstance in order to understand its deeper meaning in relation to our own practice.

While theistic traditions (those that believe that everything is created by God) have their own explanation of how to achieve salvation, we can safely assume that the earlier logical explanation is a unique Buddhist presentation. From the Buddhist perspective, the Buddha, who is a supreme enlightened being, did not just manifest out of nothing. Rather, at one time, the supreme enlightened being was just an ordinary person who, through engaging in various

practices and having entered the path, accumulated extensive merit, and gradually become an enlightened being. There is a very clear cause and effect sequence that leads to the ultimate state of enlightenment, which clearly shows that we too have the potential and opportunity to also achieve that state.

The understanding that we need to derive here is that, as mentioned previously, that in order to achieve the limitless qualities of a buddha one needs to accumulate limitless amount of merit. This will then give us the impetus to engage in the ways and means to accumulate such extensive merit. It can also remind us that whatever meagre practice we have done (perhaps some prostrations or making a few offerings) is very small in comparison to the limitless amount of merit one has to accumulate. Acquiring a limitless amount of merit implies hundreds of thousands of prostrations, hundreds of thousands of offerings, and practices of generosity and so forth. Through having engaged in these practices hundreds of thousands of times, one gradually accumulates a vast amount of merit over a long period of time, along with the realisations leading to enlightenment. Contemplating in this way will help us to overcome any sense of pride that we might develop as a result of doing some level of practice. We might feel, 'Oh, I've done quite a bit of practice' and a sense of pride may stem from that, which would be a hindrance to our practice. These are points we need to keep in mind.

On this note I recall an incident when, some years ago, I was staying overnight in Geelong. During dinner there was a man who kept glancing at me. Eventually he approached me and after greeting me he said, 'I personally don't follow any religion, but if I were to do so, it would definitely be Buddhism'. He went on to explain his reasons. 'From what I understand', he said, 'the Buddha was once a human being just like ourselves, who then achieved the great state he is in now, and I find that very appealing'. Actually, this man approached me three times—twice during dinner, and at breakfast on the following day. I felt that his fondness for Buddhism was based on really profound logic. I was astonished with his insight, based on the Buddha having once been an ordinary human being, which is exactly how it is explained in the teachings.

Buddha Shakyamuni was born a human being in a particular place, at a particular time, to a particular family and lineage. The history of the Buddha depicts him a human being just like us. He engaged in practices such as prolonged meditation and so forth as a human being which lead him to enlightenment.

I personally wonder if there other religions that base their teachings on an ordinary human being becoming a supreme being. In monotheistic traditions, it seems that there has always been the one and only predominant Supreme Being. Religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism agree that there is only one ultimate creator. I'm not too sure how Jesus Christ is regarded though. When I queried whether or not Jesus was God, I was told that Jesus is not considered to be God himself, but rather the son of God, in the form of a human. It seems that if Jesus was to be accepted as God, then there would have to be two Gods! Of course Jesus is a unique teacher in the Christian tradition, but there does seem to be this predicament about his divinity. Of course the Hindu tradition accepts of many manifestations of different gods, but most of the main religions believe in one ultimate creator.

Gyaltsab Je begins his commentary on verse 487 thus:

There are citations and reasons to prove the limitless merit accumulated, for *the Supramundane Victor said so* in the Sutra Requested by the Householder Pechen, the King of Concentration Sutra and AkSayamati (Inexhaustible Intellect) Sutra and so forth....

Here Gyaltsab Je is citing sutras where the *Supramundane Victor*, i.e. the Buddha, mentioned that the limitless qualities possessed by the Buddha are a result of having accumulated limitless merit in the past. Essentially, the Buddha said, 'The qualities I possess now are not qualities I have always possessed from time immemorial. Rather they are results of having accumulated limitless amounts of merit in the past'.

Then Gyaltsab Je presents the reasoning:

*...The reasoning is this: The limitless of the merit of wishing to help limitless realms of sentient beings is like the limitlessness of those beings...*

This is a meticulously reasoned presentation. When we benefit sentient beings that are limitless in number, then because of the limitlessness of the object, one can logically assume that one will accumulate limitless amounts of merit. As I presented in earlier teachings, when meditating on extending love and compassion towards an infinite number of sentient beings, the merit one accumulates is also limitless and infinite. That is how we need to understand the value of focussing our practice on limitless sentient beings.

Again, we can reflect on how, as mentioned in the teachings, all sentient beings are unimaginably kind to us, because it is through these sentient beings that we are able to accumulate the vast amount of merit that becomes the cause for our own enlightenment. When we think about it in this way, we can see how all sentient beings are so extremely kind. As the teachings explain, we have to rely on sentient beings to accumulate merit in order to achieve our ultimate goals. So, we have no choice—whether we want to or not we have to depend and rely upon other sentient beings. As the Buddha himself mentioned, 'If you harm sentient beings, you are harming me, and if you benefit sentient beings, you are benefiting me'.

Then Gyaltsab Je concludes his commentary on this verse thus:

*...Otherwise, one would have to assert that there is no merit gained in benefiting one sentient being. But if there is, then it is logically proven that one accumulates limitless merit by benefiting limitless sentient beings.*

These are very profound reasons which establish the source of the limitless amount of merit that one accumulates.

With these presentations, we can also develop a keen admiration for the author of the commentary as well. Using the profound explanations in the root text, Gyaltsab Rinpoche does not use too many more words to explain the meaning of the verses. Yet you can see how he has derived the essence of Nagarjuna's meaning with very systematic and logical reasoning. So we can really appreciate Gyaltsab Rinpoche's high level of knowledge and skill.

### III. DEEDS UNDERTAKEN IN ORDER TO COMPLETE THE EXPOSITION<sup>1</sup>

- The third and final section of the text has five sub-divisions:
- A. Advice to generate inspiration for the practices and to observe the four practices
  - B. Faults of not relying on a teacher and qualifications of a teacher
  - C. The supreme fruit is achieved through excellent behaviour
  - D. These doctrines are not just for monarchs but also for all others
  - E. Exhorting the king to heed the advice

#### A. ADVICE TO GENERATE INSPIRATION FOR THE PRACTICES AND TO OBSERVE THE FOUR PRACTICES

This is sub-divided into two<sup>2</sup>:

- 1. Advice to generate aspiration
- 2. Advice to observe the following four practices

##### 1. ADVICE TO GENERATE ASPIRATION

There are two verses relating to this heading, the first of which reads:

*488 These practices that I have explained  
Briefly to you in this way  
Should be as dear to you  
As your body always is.*

As this is quite clear, Gyaltsab Je's commentary basically reiterates the verse:

*The essence of these jewel-like practices derived from the oceans of teachings that I, Nagarjuna, have explained briefly to you, O King, in this way should be as dear to you as your body always is.*

Nagarjuna is presenting the essence of the Buddha's teachings, which are the *jewel-like practices derived from the oceans of teachings*. Thus, Nagarjuna says, 'I have explained briefly to you, O King, that you should always hold this as dear to you as your own body or life'.

The next verse reads:

*489 Those who feel a dearness for the practices  
Have in fact a dearness for their body.  
If dearness [for the body] helps it,  
The practices will do just that.*

Here Gyaltsab Je begins his commentary by posing a hypothetical question:

*While it is reasonable to feel dearness for one's body, if one wonders why feel dearness for the Dharma to that extent? Those who feel dearness for the practices, out of necessity, have in fact dearness for their body...*

Feeling dear about one's body should be for no other purpose than the purpose of the Dharma.

The commentary continues:

*...That is because if one didn't feel dearness for the Dharma, there wouldn't be the slightest purpose in holding one's body dear....*

If we don't hold the Dharma dear, then there would be no point in holding our body dear. The implication here is that we should hold our body dear for the purpose of practising the Dharma. We need to understand how our body in this present life is in fact extremely precious. The unique conditions we have with our present body are very rare and difficult to obtain, in particular the conditions that are

<sup>1</sup> The translation in the text is 'Conclusion' but this is a more accurate rendition of the Tibetan.

<sup>2</sup> These sub-divisions are not included in the text.

conductive for practising the Dharma. So, as explained extensively in other teachings, we have the potential to derive so much benefit if we utilise our human body in the right way i.e. for the Dharma. It would be an utter waste if we didn't utilise these unique conditions that we are experiencing now. Thus it is very reasonable to hold our body and life dear for the purpose of Dharma. However, one needs to be careful not to hold one's body dear out of attachment, which would be quite wrong.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

*...If dearness for the body is a way to help it over many continuous lifetimes, then that which helps the body is Dharma, and the Dharma practices will do just that.*

One needs to be very clear that holding the body dear is only in relation to a body being conducive to practising Dharma. This means that all the faculties are intact and that one has clear intelligence; in brief having all the qualities that are presented in the teachings. Since we have achieved the condition of having a precious human body, we need to hold our body dear in order to continually practise the Dharma in our future lives. So because the Dharma itself helps us to secure a precious human rebirth, it is logically presented here that we need to hold the Dharma dear.

As the commentary continues:

*...Thus, it is reasonable to feel dearness for the Dharma if one feels dearness for the body, as you would want it to experience temporary and ultimate happiness, and the causes for obtaining that is the previously mentioned sixteen practices and listening to the profound.*

The sixteen practices presented earlier in the text are based on ethics and so forth.<sup>3</sup> Practising in this way, and listening to the profound teachings, is the way to secure a precious human rebirth over successive lives. So we need to really pay attention to this sound advice.

Other teachings explain the uniqueness of our precious human body, with its eight liberties and ten endowments, as being such a rare and precious condition. When we realise how precious our present conditions are, it becomes reasonable for us to hold this life dear. More importantly, we need to create the causes to obtain such good conditions again in the future. In accordance with the law of cause and effect we cannot expect to obtain these conditions in the future without acquiring the causes. It doesn't happen spontaneously or miraculously, so we have to create the causes. As explained here, the practice of Dharma is the ultimate cause to obtain a precious human life again.

To derive a broader understanding, we need to reflect upon the Lam Rim teachings. As you will recall, they explain the reasons for the rarity of our precious human rebirth in relation to the difficulty of creating the causes for obtaining that precious human rebirth, which comes down to the sixteen practices.

It takes so much effort and determination to engage in these practices, which don't come about naturally for us. We engage in these practices very rarely, let alone devoting all our time and energy to any of them. So this is a way to encourage us to actually engage in the practices and take them more seriously. When we hear these teachings, we might think 'Oh yeah. OK. The teachings make sense' and we are able to list the various causes and conditions in relation to our precious human life. But to what extent do

they actually move our mind so that we take them seriously and engage in the practice of Dharma? If we find that we are not very enthusiastic about the practice of Dharma, then we need to take what has been presented here to heart, as a way to encourage ourselves to practise Dharma. Ultimately, though, all of these explanations are ways to encourage us to engage in the practice of Dharma.

## **2. ADVICE TO OBSERVE THE FOLLOWING FOUR PRACTICES**

As a way to encourage the king to engage in these practices, the next verse reads:

*490 Therefore pay heed to the [Dharma] practices as you do to yourself.*

*Pay heed to achievement as you do to the [Dharma] practices.*

*Pay heed to wisdom as you do to achievement.*

*Pay heed to the wise as you do to wisdom.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary adds this further explanation:

Because the feelings of dearness for one's body and the Dharma are similar, *therefore pay heed to and cherish the [Dharma] practices as you do to yourself.* As that is dependent on achieving the Dharma, *pay heed to achievement as you do to the [Dharma] practices.* As achievement is dependent on acquiring the wisdom, *pay heed to wisdom as you do to achievement.* As acquiring wisdom is dependent on relying on a virtuous friend, *pay heed to the wise as you do to wisdom.* In this way train in the four Dharmas.

This is a meticulously explanation of how each practice is dependent on the previous one.

- We need to *pay heed to the Dharma practices*, just as we pay heed to ourselves.
- The Dharma practices are dependent on achieving the Dharma and therefore you need to pay heed to *achieving the Dharma as you do with Dharma practices.*
- Achieving the Dharma is dependent on *acquiring wisdom.* This implies that without having wisdom, we cannot acquire any achievements.
- Acquiring wisdom is dependent on relying on *a virtuous friend*, so we need to pay heed to that as well. Just as we pay heed to wisdom, we need to pay heed to a virtuous friend.

These are really significant points! If we wish to sincerely achieve results from our practice of Dharma we need to apply these four practices. Without paying heed to these practices, how could we possibly claim to be Dharma practitioners? If we spend our time and energy paying heed to the objects of attachment instead, then how could we possibly be paying heed to the Dharma? This is how we need to derive the essence of these instructions. We need to see how each practice is dependent on the other, so we must pay heed to all of them equally.

This is a meticulously explanation of how each of the practices is dependent on an earlier one. So having concluded that holding one's body dear is similar to holding the Dharma dear, then just as one cherishes oneself, one needs to cherish the Dharma practices. Because the Dharma practices are dependent on achieving the Dharma, one needs to pay heed to that achievement; as achieving the Dharma is dependent on acquiring wisdom, we need to pay heed to wisdom; as acquiring wisdom is dependent on relying on a spiritual friend, we need to pay heed to one's spiritual friend.

<sup>3</sup> Beginning on the 9 March 2010  
Chapter 5

## B. FAULTS OF NOT RELYING ON A TEACHER AND QUALIFICATIONS OF A TEACHER

The commentary breaks this down into two sub-headings:

1. The faults of not relying on a teacher
2. The qualities of a teacher

### 1. THE FAULTS OF NOT RELYING ON A TEACHER

As the next verse reads:

491 *Those who have qualms that it would be bad for themselves  
[If they relied] on one who has purity, love, and intelligence  
As well as helpful and appropriate speech,  
Cause their own interests to be destroyed.*

We need to understand that there is a difference between the fault of not relying on a teacher, and the faults of disparaging a teacher, after having relied on one, which are clearly presented in the Lam Rim teachings.

The fault of not relying on a teacher refers to not understanding and not paying heed to the practices at all! If we do not receive the proper explanations and are not exhorted in the correct way to engage in the Dharma, we will not be motivated to engage in practice.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary begins:

*Those who have qualms that it would be bad for themselves...*

What is missing in the use of the word 'qualms' is the connotation of fear. The commentary specifically uses the word 'fear', so in this context, the fear of relying on such a teacher is similar to the fear generated by those who are not qualified recipients for hearing, for example, the teachings on emptiness. It would be incorrect to impart teachings on emptiness to listeners who are not proper recipients, because it could generate fear, which could result in having wrong views. A suitable recipient of the teachings on emptiness would be someone whose mind is amenable to receiving that level of teaching. Similarly, there might be those who fear relying on a spiritual teacher, and who are uncertain about whether it will be beneficial, because they do not really understand the significance of relying on a teacher. This is also why I remind the Monday evening meditation leaders to be mindful and careful in how they present the Dharma to new students.

Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the qualities of such teachers:

*...if they relied on one who has: purity free from the concerns of gain and respect or from wrongdoings; love for the disciples and the intelligence of being learned; as well as having non-obstructive knowledge of the Dharma...*

Here, *purity* refers to being free from concerns of gain and respect or from wrongdoings, and *non-obstructive knowledge of the Dharma* refers to imparting the Dharma with the subtlest meanings, with no obstructions.

The commentary continues:

*...and being courageously helpful with appropriate speech that instructs disciples with what is right and wrong; cause their own interests to be destroyed....*

*Appropriate speech* refers to having the ability to impart specific instructions to the disciples, pointing out what is right and what is wrong; what is to be adopted and what is to be discarded.

In conclusion, Gyaltsab Je says:

*...Thus, you must respectfully rely on a qualified virtuous friend [spiritual guide].*

If you were to have qualms or fears about having to rely on a spiritual friend, then, as it mentions here, that *will destroy one's own interests* or goodness. So we need to rely on a teacher, otherwise certain faults will occur.

### 2. THE QUALITIES OF A TEACHER

The verse relating to this reads as follows:

492 *You should know in brief  
The qualifications of spiritual guides.  
If you are taught by those knowing contentment  
And having compassion and ethics,*

493ab *As well as wisdom that can drive out your afflictive emotions,  
You should realise [what they teach] and respect them.*

In explaining the meaning of the verse Gyaltsab Je begins his commentary with a rhetorical question:

If asked what kind of a virtuous friend does one need to rely upon? *You should know in brief* the five qualifications of spiritual guides. *If you are taught by those* 1) *knowing contentment*, 2) *not having desire for gain and respect* and 3) *having compassion* and 4) *ethics, as well as* 5) *wisdom, that can drive out your afflictive emotions*; thus when they give you instructions, *you should realise* what they teach *and respect them*.

A spiritual guide should have these five qualities:

1. Knowing contentment
2. Not having desire for gain and respect
3. Having compassion
4. Ethics
5. Having the wisdom of being able to dispel the afflictions in the disciple's mind

We can conclude this evening by reciting Lama Tsong Khapa's *Praise to Dependent Arising*, because today is an auspicious day on the Buddha's life. When the Buddha's mother passed away, she was reborn in the god-realm called the Gods of the Thirty-Three. This day celebrates the occasion when the Buddha ascended to that god-realm to give teachings to his mother. Having given the teachings, the Buddha then descended back to earth near Lucknow in eastern India.

The *White Umbrella Deity Sutra* lists the teachings that were given in the realm of the Gods of the Thirty-Three, and the sutra called *Pinnacle of the Victory Banner*, which is said to be the other teaching the Buddha gave in that realm. I have given these explanations in the past.

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*Edited Version*

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