

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
San Antonio, Texas

Nagarjuna's Precious Garland of Advice to a King

Chapter I. Higher Rebirth and Highest Good
Session 9: Changing the Direction of Our Life

Sunday, March 31, 2024

The following is based on on “*Practical Ethics and Profound Emptiness: A Commentary on Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland*” by Khensur Jampa Tegchok, from the commentary of Gyaltsap Je, a principal disciple of Tsongkhapa; “*Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland, Buddhist Advice for Living and Liberation*”, analyzed, translated, and edited by Jeffrey Hopkins; and teachings by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Geshe Drakpa Gelek, Geshe Lobsang Nima, Gen Lamrimpa, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Geshe Lhakdor, Ven. Passang Gelek, Ven. Robina Courtin, Ven. Thubten Chodron, Bhikshu Steve Carlier, B. Alan Wallace, and Alexander Berzin, with the guidance of Geshe Lobsang Nima.

**Links to mantras, Buddha-figures, and texts used in this series are at the end of this study guide.*

Refuge visualization practice

1. We opened this session by practicing the Refuge Visualization.

Shakpa: a change of direction

1. In the last session we discussed Nagarjuna’s presentation of ten destructive actions and afflictions of body, speech, and mind that the Buddha has advised us to abandon if we want to experience happiness and fulfillment. A skillful means of doing this is through a Buddhist practice the Tibetans call *shakpa*, which essentially means to change direction. If we’ve been experiencing frustration, anger, disappointment and confusion, it doesn’t make sense to continue with the same ways we’ve been thinking and behaving and expect that things will turn around for us.

2. The Buddha’s very first public teaching began with an acknowledgment that suffering is a feature of our life. It’s definitely a problem. All of us are born into physical, social, and emotional environments that vary in their levels of being less-than-perfect, and all of us struggle with the ways in which those environments affect us. We mobilize our energies to get what we think we need to make us happy—all kinds of activities, stuff, and substances that seem to comfort and satisfy us: the great job, the perfect kinds of relationships, the perfect place to live, attaining social and material stability—only to eventually find that most of these things turn out to be not so satisfying, not so great, not so perfect, not stable in the way we thought they would be, and don’t actually bring about lasting happiness. Things invariably change. When we look at the world around us we can readily observe the pervasive and persistent problems of imbalance, discord, violence, and confusion that have recurred in cycles throughout the known history of our planet. And yet we keep chugging away, trying to find happiness as we continually get older, prone to disease, and finally die. These are the levels of suffering the Buddha recognized in his first teaching.

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3. The word the Buddha uses for suffering is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is derived from a Sanskrit prefix and suffix that together refer to a badly fitting axle-hole of a cart or chariot which causes a very bumpy ride. In other words, it refers to something that is out of alignment. What the Buddha is saying is that the “bumpy ride” of suffering is a state in which something is out of alignment. The question is: what is it that’s *out* of alignment, and what is it not aligned *with*? This points to the second part of the Buddha’s first public teaching: suffering has a cause—it’s not some kind of self-existent thing that just “is” and there’s nothing that can be done about it. Like any good mechanic, we need to find out exactly where the alignment problem is that’s causing suffering to occur, and fix it.

The functionality of interdependence

1. So where, then, *does* the problem lie? According to the Buddha, all of existence consists of mutually dependent phenomena. All of space-time, all forms of energy and matter, all dimensions, all mental activities and conscious awarenesses, function interdependently. This is evident even through the most casual observation of our planet, its inhabitants, and the universe in which everything appears to exist. In order for any of it to function, mutual interactions and relationships have to occur.

2. These observable, functioning relationships can be expressed through the principles of mathematics. Starting with zero, we have the symbol of a circle. The circle doesn’t merely indicate the absence of all numbers or units; it equally indicates the infinite potential and possibility of all numbers and units. This is because zero, in combination with the number 1, is capable of producing all positive and negative numbers, sets and subsets of integers, rational numbers, real numbers, and complex numbers extending to values that are boundless, limitless, and incalculable. This is only possible because mathematics is a functional science. And the way it functions is through the mutual interactions and relationships of the variable expressions of numbers—or units—whose values can be determined and labeled.

The subjective mind and objective existence

1. The same is true for us. Each one of us is a unit of embodied consciousness called a person, or sentient being. We are able to function through mutually interactive relationships with everything we are aware of via our sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and mental conceptions, which we use to determine the value of everything we’re aware of and how we label it. In Buddhism, consciousness is a term that is synonymous with mind and awareness. Here mind is not referring to the brain, although the mind and brain are intimately connected. In Buddhism, the mind or consciousness is always subjective. By definition, subjective means taking place or arising in one’s awareness or mind. Our subjective consciousness or mind is personal, based on our own experience, and the feelings, opinions, biases, and values that arise out of our own experience.

2. One could say that consciousness is “that which experiences”. If there was no consciousness at all—whatsoever—there would be no experience of any kind. The neuroscience pioneer Christof Koch puts it this way:

“Without consciousness there is nothing. The only way you experience your body and the world of mountains and people, trees and dogs, stars and music is through your

subjective experiences, thoughts, and memories. You act and move, see and hear, love and hate, remember the past and imagine the future. But ultimately, you only encounter the world in all of its manifestations via consciousness. And when consciousness ceases, this world ceases as well.”

Our subjective consciousness always has an object. Subject and object go together. We experience our body as an object of our subjective consciousness. We experience trees, dogs, stars and music as objects of our subjective consciousness. The world and all of its manifestations are experienced by us as objects of our subjective consciousness.

The root of suffering

1. This brings us back to *dukkha* and our out-of-alignment problem the Buddha spoke of. Our subjective consciousness views the objects of our awareness as being external to it. This creates a split in the mind—a dualistic view where the world of external “objective reality” appears to us as if it exists independently of our internal “subjective reality”. We consequently view our subjective mind as if it is a separate self-existent entity that is independent of objective reality. We label this amorphous, formless, separate entity, “me”. Rather than thinking of “me” merely as a label for subjective consciousness, we completely identify with it and think that an independent self-existent “me” is who we truly are.

2. According to the Buddha, this is false; a delusion—a mistaken view that is at the root of ego self-grasping ignorance, cyclic existence, and all suffering. In reality subject and object are non-dual, but this is impossible for us to fully understand without a direct realization of the emptiness of independent self-existence and the removal of our afflictive and cognitive obscurations.

3. The third and fourth parts of the Buddha’s first public teaching stated that suffering can be ceased and there is a pathway of consciousness that will lead to the cessation of suffering. The Buddhist practice of *shakpa*, or changing our direction, is a method for us to begin to turn around our mistaken views and the harmful karmic actions and afflictions of body, speech, and mind that arise because of them. The reason these destructive actions are labeled “non-virtuous” and “negative” is because they are out of alignment with interdependence, which is the true nature of existence according to the Buddha.

4. Destructive actions such as killing, stealing, manipulative lying and divisive speech are in direct opposition to interdependence. They are pathological attempts of delusional self-grasping consciousness to seize power and assert its autonomy. When a deluded consciousness believes it is independent and autonomous and acts in destructive ways it will experience repercussive blowback called “negative karma” or “suffering”. Far from being some kind of punishment from on high, it is the ultimate definition of ‘knocking one’s head against the wall’. Such a consciousness continuously and fruitlessly attempts to accomplish its goal of self-existent independence, which is ultimately hopeless in an interdependent reality.

5. The practice of *shakpa* also includes changing our direction by habituating ourselves to constructive, helpful actions. Actions such as protecting and saving life, generosity, being of

benefit, and supportive encouragement are labeled “virtuous” and “positive” because they are actions and views that are aligned with healthy interdependence.

Compiled and edited by Tenzin Dhondup Sherab/Christopher Moroney

*Links to mantras and Buddha-figures used in this series:

[Chenrezig mantra](#)

[Chenrezig-figure](#)

[His Holiness the Dalai Lama](#)

[Manjushri mantra](#)

[Manjushri-figure](#)

[Manjushri prayer & mantra](#)

[Manjushri Heart Lotus](#)

[Shakyamuni Buddha mantra](#)

[Shakyamuni Buddha-figure](#)

[Vajrasattva mantra](#)

[Vajrasattva-figure](#)

[Vajradhara-figure](#)

[Precious Garland text](#)