

TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE
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Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland of Advice to a King*

Chapter I. Higher Rebirth and Highest Good
Session 2: The Path to Happiness

Sunday, February 4, 2024

The following is based on on “*Practical Ethics and Profound Emptiness: A Commentary on Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland*” by Khensur Jampa Tegchok, based on 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 images, and texts used in this series are at the end of this study guide.*

Introduction

1. The Buddha’s spiritual journey to enlightenment began in the way that all spiritual journeys to full awakening begin—as an ordinary sentient being caught up in *dukkah*—the suffering and dissatisfaction that arises within cyclic existence. In the beginning of his journey, the Buddha generated bodhichitta, the aspiration to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings; in the middle he practiced the path that leads to enlightenment; and at the end he achieved complete enlightenment, giving many teachings to others in order to help them reach enlightenment themselves. All the teachings were given according to the capacity and interest of the trainees. Thus, for those disciples who were primarily interested in freedom from cyclic existence he taught the Hearer and Solitary Realizer vehicles of spiritual practice that lead to liberation and nirvana, and for those who were primarily interested in attaining full enlightenment he taught the Mahayana vehicle of spiritual practice that leads to Buddhahood.

2. The Mahayana (‘Great Vehicle’) has two methods or vehicles (Skt. *yana*) for attaining enlightenment: 1) the Bodhisattva method of perfecting six to ten levels of compassion and wisdom, called the *Paramitayana* or Perfection Vehicle; and 2) the tantric method of skillfully imagining and meditating on one’s own enlightenment as a means to ultimately achieving it, called the *Vajrayana* or Diamond Vehicle. The text of Nagarjuna’s *Precious Garland* contains teachings of the Perfection Vehicle of the Bodhisattva. The most profound teachings of the Buddha are the Perfection of Wisdom sutras that contain all the teachings of the Perfection Vehicle. These teachings clearly explain the profound meaning of the nature of reality—the emptiness of inherent existence of all phenomena.

3. The realization of emptiness is key to attaining the full awakening of enlightenment because the wisdom that directly realizes emptiness is the only antidote capable of completely uprooting the ego self-grasping ignorance that is not only the source of cyclic existence but the engine that

drives it. In addition, the elimination of cognitive obscurations that prevent the omniscience of full enlightenment also depends on a direct perception of emptiness.

4. The Buddha said that sentient beings are trapped wandering in cyclic existence because they do not understand the three gateways or doors of liberation—emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness. In brief, emptiness is characterized as the absence of the inherent or independent self-existence of all phenomena, signlessness is the absence of generic mental images through which we conceptually identify all phenomena, and wishlessness is the absence of any wishes, desires, or aspirations directed toward any and all phenomena, even those directed toward Buddhahood. To be free of cyclic existence and the entirety of suffering and dissatisfaction that it involves, we must realize the nature of the three doors of liberation, which essentially comes down to realizing the emptiness of inherent existence—realizing that self-existent things do not truly exist at all. The Buddha taught many methods and reasons to help us understand this.

5. Someone once asked the Buddha, “After you pass away, who will explain the meaning of emptiness clearly and without error?” The Buddha replied that four hundred years after his passing, Nagarjuna would be the one who would do this. The *Manjushri Root Tantra* says:

When four hundred years have passed after I, the One Gone Thus [the Buddha], have passed away, a monk called Naga will arise. Faithful in and helpful to the teaching, he will attain the Very Joyful ground [the first bhumi, or ground, of a Bodhisattva]. He will know the meaning of various treatises and the meaning of noninherent existence. When he leaves that body, he will be born in the Pure Land of Bliss. Finally he will just definitely attain thoroughly the state of Buddhahood.

Meaning of the title

1. The Sanskrit title of this text is *Rajaparikatha-ratnamala*. *Raja* means “king”, *parikatha* means “advice” or “instruction”, *ratna* means “precious”, and *mala* means “garland”. In English, then, the full title is *Precious Garland of Advice to a King*. Some say the advice is for kings in general who lived in India during the first or second centuries C.E. at the time of Nagarjuna. Others say this advice was for a specific king who was Nagarjuna’s benefactor. There are differing opinions among scholars as to who that king may have been.

2. Nagarjuna’s *Precious Garland of Advice* has been included among his *Collections of Advice* since it advises how to conduct one’s life and how to construct social policies that reflect Buddhist ideals. It is also included among his *Six Collections of Middle Way Reasoning* since it contains many logical arguments and conclusions that establish the emptiness of inherent existence.

Praise and homage

Homage to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

1. The text begins with an homage written in the latter half of the eighth century C.E. by the Indian and Tibetan translators who worked on the text. The Tibetan translation was first printed at the great publishing house below the Potala in Lhasa. At the beginning of the treatise, the

translators pay homage to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This humbles their minds and reminds them that they will translate Nagarjuna's words as accurately as possible. Following the translators' homage, Nagarjuna's text begins:

[1]

*I bow down to the Omniscient, Freed from all defects,
Adorned with all good qualities, The sole friend of all beings.*

2. Nagarjuna begins by paying homage to the Omniscient Buddha. This fulfills Nagarjuna's immediate intention because offering praise to the Buddha with faith pacifies obstacles to composing the text. It fulfills his ultimate intention because composing the text contributes to Nagarjuna's accumulation of merit that will allow him to attain liberation. Nagarjuna also fulfills the immediate intention of those of us who read and study this text because we will be able to use it to learn and practice the instructions; and he fulfills our ultimate intention because our own liberation and enlightenment are attained on the basis of such study and practice.

3. Next, Nagarjuna tells us the Buddha is freed from all defects—free from the disturbing emotions, attitudes, and ego self-grasping which form the afflictive obscurations that prevent one's liberation from cyclic existence. He is also completely free from the misconception of independent identities existing within the three spheres of phenomena—subject, object, and action. These misconceptions form the cognitive obscurations which prevent the omniscience of enlightenment. The Buddha has abandoned all faults and defects of cyclic existence. In addition, he has abandoned the solitary peace of nirvana.

4. The Buddha is also “adorned with all good qualities”, meaning he has all the wonderful realizations and qualities of a fully awakened being's body, speech, and mind and perceives all phenomena directly with unmistakable wisdom. Motivated by love and compassion, the Buddha manifests in various ways to help sentient beings. He appears to highly realized Bodhisattvas in the form of enjoyment bodies made of light that teach in Buddha pure lands. To ordinary sentient beings he appears as physical emanation bodies who guide and teach them. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama is considered by many to be a physical emanation of Chenrezig, the Buddha of Compassion.

5. “The sole friend of all beings” indicates that the Buddha helps others without any bias whatsoever. He doesn't favor those who revere him and believe in him and discriminate against those who don't. Out of compassion the Buddha helps all beings equally, using methods that benefit them in ways that are appropriate to their particular situations, propensities, and mental convictions. His purpose is to free each and every sentient being from all suffering forever and to bring about their happiness in any way possible. Being omniscient, he knows the disposition and aptitude of each being, teaching and helping them accordingly, without leading them on erroneous, faulty, or meaningless paths. In this way the Buddha is the sole friend of all beings.

Purpose of the treatise

1. Nagarjuna's reason for composing this text is to fully explain the subject matter of what he calls “higher rebirth” or “high status”—meaning a fortunate rebirth, and what he calls “highest good” or “definite goodness”—meaning liberation and enlightenment. He teaches us how to improve our minds in the present so we will attain a higher rebirth in the future, either in the

realm of humans or the realm of god-like beings, which is our immediate goal. Rebirth as a human or god-like being is considered higher rebirth because these beings enjoy more happiness and experience less pain than others in cyclic existence. On the basis of that higher rebirth, we can continue to improve our minds over a series of good rebirths until we attain our ultimate goal, Buddhahood, which is the highest good, or definite goodness. By studying and understanding the methods Nagarjuna teaches for attaining higher rebirth and highest good we'll have the knowledge we need to practice and to attain liberation and enlightenment. Without teachings that explain how to achieve higher rebirth and highest good, we wouldn't be able to effectively create their causes, and we would be unable to attain their effects—liberation from cyclic existence and complete enlightenment. Therefore, Nagarjuna's text is precious and most meaningful.

[2]

*O King, I will explain practices solely virtuous to generate in you the doctrine,
For the practices will be established in a vessel of the excellent doctrine.*

2. Nagarjuna here is addressing a king who has dominion over his realm. He will explain the Dharma practices that are virtuous throughout the path so the king can accomplish them and fulfill his own and others' aims. Dharma is the "excellent doctrine" which holds us back from harm—in this case, the harm of falling into the lower realms or any other rebirth in cyclic existence.

3. Nagarjuna will go on to explain that in the beginning of one's spiritual journey, practicing the ten virtuous paths of action will lead to rebirth as a human being or a god-like being. Then, cultivating the wisdom that realizes emptiness will lead to liberation from cyclic existence and the complete cessation of suffering for those practitioners who follow the Hearer, Solitary Realizer, or Bodhisattva paths. Finally, when the wisdom realizing emptiness is united with bodhichitta and the deeds of a Bodhisattva, the full enlightenment of Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings is achieved. This is the final objective of the Mahayana path.

Explaining the Dharma to a suitable vessel

1. Nagarjuna says "the practices will be established in a vessel of the excellent doctrine," meaning that Dharma practices will take root in someone who is a suitable vessel to receive the Dharma teachings. When those who are suitable vessels hear the Dharma, they will practice it and attain magnificent results. Aryadeva, who was a disciple of Nagarjuna, writes in his *Four Hundred Stanzas* that those who are suitable vessels possess three qualities: 1) they are unbiased and open-minded, being neither opinionated nor held back by preconceptions; 2) they are intelligent and can discern what is correct and incorrect; and 3) they are eager and interested in the Dharma, seeking out teachings and enthusiastically practicing them.

2. Given that the king is such a person, Nagarjuna knows that great benefit will come from teaching him the Dharma. Khensur Jampa Tegchok says studying the Dharma through reading and hearing it is like a lamp that clears away the darkness of confusion in our minds. It is like a best friend who will never leave us; a treasure that can never be stolen from us. Studying the Dharma is the best path because it leads to freedom from suffering, and awakening to complete happiness that is firmly grounded in reality.

3. Nagarjuna gives a series of instructions on the causes of attaining a higher rebirth and the highest good of liberation and enlightenment in both our meditation sessions and how we live our daily life. When he applies this to the king's life, he advises him how to treat citizens and travelers in the kingdom, to help monasteries, and to offer honor, respect, and service to the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Overview of the causes and effects of higher rebirth and highest good

1. Now Nagarjuna begins the actual explanation of the subject matter. He identifies higher rebirth and highest good as the outcomes to work toward and gives a brief overview of the causes for each one.

[3]

In one who first practices high status [higher rebirth] definite goodness [highest good] arises later, For having attained high status, One comes gradually to definite goodness.

2. Higher rebirth ('high status') and highest good ('definite goodness') are taught in this order because it is very difficult to attain the highest good of liberation and enlightenment without first gaining a higher rebirth in cyclic existence. A series of higher rebirths are needed in order to purify one's karma, accrue merit, and to study, contemplate, and thoroughly familiarize oneself with the teachings and practices that are necessary for attaining liberation from cyclic existence and complete enlightenment. If we practice virtuous Dharma activities to the best of our ability in this life we will be able to secure a higher rebirth again in our next life.

3. We take the long view in order to continue like this over a series of lives as we improve and grow in intelligence, compassion, enthusiasm, loving kindness, profound wisdom, and great altruism. First we learn the basics which will serve as the foundation of our practice—topics like refuge, ethics, impermanence, and cause and effect. As we develop in the Dharma, we learn and practice more difficult topics such as emptiness, great compassion, selflessness, and interdependent co-arising. In this way we gradually generate the causes for attaining the highest good of liberation and enlightenment.

4. Another reason why higher rebirth and highest good are presented in this order is to allow us to be properly prepared for the instructions in more advanced practices. For example, if emptiness is taught to someone who is not yet a suitable vessel to hear it, that person could mistake emptiness for total nonexistence, causing them to disregard the law of cause and effect. If we live our life believing that our actions have no consequences, we'll come to the conclusion that nothing matters. We'll think that human values are baseless, life is meaningless, and knowledge is impossible. This nihilistic view creates destructive karma that is certain to result in rebirth in the lower realms.

5. We'll never attain the highest good of enlightenment by meditating on an incorrect understanding of emptiness. Likewise, we won't attain liberation or higher rebirth by ignoring the laws of karma and behaving any way we like. Karma and emptiness must be correctly understood and meditated upon for us to realize that they do not contradict each other but complement each other. In this way we will progress on the path to liberation and enlightenment.

How can we be certain of a higher rebirth, liberation, and enlightenment?

1. How do we gain the confidence and certainty that higher rebirth and the highest good of liberation and enlightenment are possible if we generate the causes for them? In this case higher rebirth and its causes are more difficult to become sure of than highest good and its causes. Why is this?

2. There are three types of phenomena: 1) evident phenomena—such as a cup or the sound of a bird chirping—that can be realized by our senses; 2) slightly obscure phenomena—such as subtle impermanence and emptiness—that must initially be realized through inference; and 3) very obscure phenomena that are understood by relying on an authoritative, reliable scripture.

3. To understand liberation and enlightenment, and their causes, we must realize emptiness and understand the way in which the wisdom realizing emptiness completely cuts through ignorance and delusions. All phenomena exist dependently, but self-grasping ignorance apprehends those phenomena as being independent and self-existent. Because our self-grasping ignorance apprehends things in a way that is opposite to how they actually exist, it is a wrong consciousness. Through logical reasoning and careful analysis we can infer that everything is empty of any kind of independent self-existence by observing the fact that everything arises due to causes and conditions.

4. This correct understanding—the wisdom realizing emptiness—knows that everything exists in the exact *opposite* way to how ignorance grasps everything to exist. Wisdom realizing emptiness is free from all the false projections we superimpose onto everything which results in all the distorted ways we perceive everything. In addition, wisdom realizing emptiness is accompanied by well-grounded support from factors on the compassion wing of the path. Things such as loving kindness, compassion, and bodhichitta all support wisdom that realizes the emptiness of independent self-existence *because* love, compassion, and the wish to be of benefit are completely logical and appropriate expressions of interconnectedness, interdependence, and dependent arising. This is why the compassion wing and the wisdom wing of the path complement one another in a perfectly balanced way. Once we truly comprehend this, our practice on the path will take flight because we will have no doubt about its validity.

5. As our wisdom realizing emptiness grows in strength, it will completely uproot more and more subtle levels of anxiety, fear, anger, jealousy, desire, depression and so on, until all self-grasping ignorance and afflictions have been completely eradicated so that they can never reappear. This is what nirvana is. This is what liberation is referring to. In this way, liberation—which is a slightly obscure phenomenon—can be ascertained through sound reasoning. Relying on scriptural authority to ascertain it is not necessary. The amazing, wonderful thing about the Buddha's teaching on wisdom is that it enables us to open our minds to the real possibility of freeing ourselves of all our afflictive emotions and wrong ways of thinking about everything. Yes, we have to squeeze our brains and put persistent effort into realizing these teachings and yes, perhaps it could take a very long time to do so, but honestly, what could be more worth our effort and time?

Compiled and edited by Tenzin Dhondup Sherab/Christopher Moroney

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

[Chenrezig mantra](#)

[Chenrezig-figure](#)

[Manjushri mantra](#)

[Manjushri-figure](#)

[Manjushri prayer & mantra](#)

[Manjushri Heart Lotus](#)

[Shakyamuni Buddha mantra](#)

[Shakyamuni Buddha-figure](#)

[Vajrasattva mantra](#)

[Vajrasattva-figure](#)

[Precious Garland text translated by Jeffrey Hopkins](#)