

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 3: Faith, Wisdom, & Karma

Sunday, February 11, 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.*

Review of the last session

1. We closed the last session by briefly discussing how we can have the confidence and certainty that a higher state of future rebirth and the highest good of liberation and enlightenment are possible if we generate the causes for them. Nagarjuna says it is more difficult for us to be certain of attaining a higher rebirth than attaining liberation and enlightenment. This is because the process of gaining a higher rebirth is a very obscure phenomenon whereas the process of gaining liberation and enlightenment are slightly obscure phenomena.

2. To review, there are three types of phenomena: 1) evident or obvious phenomena that can be explicitly realized through our senses; 2) slightly obscure phenomena that must initially be realized through inference and reasoning; and 3) very obscure phenomena that are only understood by relying on highly reliable scriptural sources.

3. Khensur Tegchok’s commentary on Nagarjuna’s text states that to understand liberation and enlightenment and what causes them, we must realize emptiness. We have to understand the way in which the wisdom realizing emptiness completely cuts through our ignorance and delusions. Everything exists dependently, but we mentally and emotionally grasp at everything as if it was independent and self-existent. That consciousness is mistaken and wrong, because we are mentally and emotionally grasping at things in a way that is actually *opposite* to how they exist. However, through logical reasoning and careful analysis we can infer that everything is empty of any kind of independent self-existence by observing the clearly obvious fact that everything arises due to causes and conditions.

4. The wisdom wing of the path is strongly supported by factors on the compassion wing such as loving kindness and the wish to be of benefit. These states of mind harmonize perfectly with the wisdom that realizes the emptiness of independent existence because love and compassion are completely logical and appropriate expressions of interconnectedness, interdependence, and

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dependent arising. The compassion wing and the wisdom wing of the path complement one another in a thoroughly balanced way. Once we fully comprehend this, our practice on the path will take flight because we will have no doubt of its validity.

5. As our wisdom realizing emptiness grows in strength, it will uproot more and more subtle levels of anxiety, fear, anger, jealousy, desire, depression and so on, until all self-grasping ignorance and afflictive emotions have been completely eradicated so they can never reappear. This is what nirvana and liberation are 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.

Understanding higher rebirth and its causes

1. To understand higher rebirth and its causes involves understanding the law of karma and its effects. Karma is a very obscure phenomenon which is difficult to realize. Higher rebirths are considered higher not just because the beings born in them experience less pain than those in the lower realms, but also because the causes for higher rebirths have higher levels of moral strength and integrity than the causes for lower rebirths. Because the causes are higher, the effects are higher. Our practice of ethics accompanied by generosity, patience, effort, and wise actions of body, speech, and mind accrued over many, many lifetimes have led us to attain a higher rebirth in this life.

2. To be born as a human being is to have a higher rebirth in cyclic existence. But simply being human doesn't mean we understand or appreciate the rarity and value of our higher rebirth. Understanding higher rebirth requires a lot of thought. As an analogy, for example, we can be looking at a text message on our phone that is empty of inherent existence without realizing that it is empty of inherent existence. We do it all the time. We can be driving a car, or eating potato chips that are empty of inherent existence without realizing that they are empty of inherent existence. Similarly, we can be a human who, by definition, has a higher rebirth in cyclic existence—without ever realizing that being a human is a higher rebirth in cyclic existence that holds precious opportunity and potential for us. In order to realize that precious opportunity and potential, it's necessary to study the virtuous actions that are its causes. And that only comes from depending on a reliable scriptural source that explains what those actions are. Of course, that depends on being sure that the scriptural source is reliable and can be accepted as authoritative. We'll discuss the three factors for discerning that a little later.

3. To summarize, realizing that liberation and enlightenment are the highest good is easier and is done first. This is because the causes of liberation and enlightenment are slightly obscure phenomena that can be realized through inference and reasoning. Understanding how and why rebirth as a human or celestial type of being is a higher rebirth is more difficult and is done later, because the causes of higher rebirth are extremely obscure phenomena that can only be understood by depending on authoritative scripture.

4. Of course, the order in which we attain these states is the other way around. First we practice the causes for higher rebirth and attain higher rebirth. Then we practice the causes for liberation and enlightenment and attain them, which is the highest good.

Identifying the causes and effects of higher rebirth

[4]

*High status is considered to be happiness,
Definite goodness is liberation.
The quintessence of their means
Is briefly faith and wisdom.*

1. All sentient beings exist within three main realms of cyclic existence: the desire, form, and formless realms. Beings in the desire realm are preoccupied with objects of the five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Within the desire realm there are three lower states of existence, so-called because the beings there primarily experience suffering. These beings are temporarily born as hell beings, hungry ghosts (Skt. *pretas*), or animals. The three fortunate states of existence within the desire realm are those of human beings and two types of celestial beings called gods and demi-gods (Skt. *Devas* and *Asuras*). These beings experience more happiness and joy than hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals. The two other main realms within cyclic existence are called the form and formless realms (aka material and immaterial realms). In the form and formless realms, beings enjoy the bliss and equanimity of deep meditative concentration. In the form realm they have bodies made of very refined matter; in the formless realm, they have no gross bodies at all.

2. In the first line of stanza four Nagarjuna writes, “*High status is considered to be happiness.*” This refers to the happiness that humans and god-like celestial beings experience in the higher rebirths of cyclic existence. The word ‘equanimity’ is also implied here as an alternative to the word ‘happiness’, because beings in the form realm who have achieved what is called the fourth level of meditative concentration, and beings in the formless realm who have achieved what are called the four meditative absorptions do not experience feelings of happiness; they feel only equanimity. Those who attain the status of higher rebirths as humans or celestial beings experience more happiness and equanimity than beings in the lower states of existence.

3. “*Definite goodness is liberation*” in this stanza is referring to the highest good of liberation from cyclic existence—which is the cessation of ignorance, afflictive emotions, and harmful or undesirable karma. The Sanskrit term *karma* literally means ‘deed, work, action, or act’, and it specifically refers to actions of our body, speech, and mind. Karma could refer to destructive physical actions such as killing, or destructive verbal actions such as intentionally speaking in divisive ways that turn beings against one another. It could also refer to destructive mental actions such as having the intention in your mind to harm another being or beings. Karma refers to constructive actions as well, which include both refraining from destructive actions and acting in the opposite ways of those destructive actions. For example, abandoning killing is refraining from killing, and saving and protecting life is doing the opposite of killing.

4. To be successful on the Buddhist path we must clearly understand that karma refers to our own actions of body, speech, and mind. There is a law of physics that states ‘for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction’; this is how matter and energy maintain balance and equilibrium in their interactions. In terms of our subjective consciousnesses that are embodied within matter and energy, for each of our karmic actions of body, speech, and mind there is a

kind of equal and opposite karmic reaction or result—equal in the sense that the karmic result is similar in its nature to our initial karmic action, and opposite in the sense that the karmic result seems to happen *to* us rather than being generated *by* us in the manner of the initial karmic action. In other words, “what goes around comes around.”

5. Of course, karma is an extremely obscure phenomenon that we, in our current state of ignorance, cannot fully ascertain. Due to a primordial ignorance regarding the nature of the self and phenomena, we have collectively made a fundamental mistake concerning the way in which we perceive our existence. We perceive a personal identity—a self, an ‘I’, a ‘me’—that we mentally and emotionally grasp onto as being independent and truly self-existent, despite the evidence all around us indicating that existence is interdependent and interconnected. As a consequence of this wrong view—wrong because it is the exact opposite of how everything actually exists—we perceive all persons and phenomena as if they were independent and truly existent. This ignorant grasping at so-called true existence is at the root of all our problems.

6. Both the destructive and constructive actions or karmas that cause rebirth in cyclic existence are contaminated because they are generated under the influence of self-grasping ignorance. Destructive actions obviously are triggered by self-grasping, but so are constructive actions that ordinary beings engage in. For example, under the influence of self-grasping ignorance we’ll behave in a generous manner and keep good ethical conduct mainly because we’re hoping to attain what we think will be happiness within cyclic existence. Even though constructive karmas bring happiness, when they are created under the influence of self-grasping ignorance they are considered polluted and lead to continued rebirth in a seemingly endless cycle of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

7. In verses seven and eight of Lama Tsongkhapa’s “Three Principal Aspects of the Path” he writes about the suffering of cyclic existence and the supreme altruistic intention of Bodhicitta:

“Swept by the current of the four powerful rivers,
Tied by the strong bonds of karma that are so hard to undo,
Caught in the iron net of self-grasping egoism,
Completely enveloped in the darkness of ignorance.

Born and reborn in boundless cyclic existence,
Unceasingly tormented by the three sufferings.
By thinking of all mother sentient beings in this condition,
Generate the supreme altruistic intention.”

8. Tsongkhapa is saying that being born in cyclic existence is like being tied up and bound, hand and foot, ensnared in an iron net, and thrown into a powerfully flowing river in the dark of night. It’s already hard enough to escape when your hands and feet are bound, but it is even harder when you’re caught up in a net made of iron. If we were bound this way and thrown into the river during the day, we might have some hope of escaping—we could at least see the shore. But being thrown into such a river in the dark of night would seem to make escape hopeless.

9. Being bound hand and foot denotes being bound by our previous karma; being captured in an iron net represents grasping at true existence; darkness symbolizes ignorance. The river represents the four powerful currents of sensory desires, craving for existence, self-grasping ignorance, and wrong views. As a result, we are born and reborn in an endless cyclic of existence where we continually experience the physical, mental, and emotional pain of the three sufferings. Liberation is freedom from all of this.

10. Regarding the three sufferings, the Buddha advised us to contemplate three basic patterns of suffering in our lives. 1) The *suffering of suffering* is the one we're all familiar with: the pain of birth, aging, sickness, and death as the Buddha described it. 2) The *suffering of change* refers to getting what we want, and not being able to hold onto it because it changes. Even if things are going great now, it's just a matter of time. The richest, most successful person in the world will eventually lose it all when they die. 3) *All-pervasive suffering* is the type of suffering we're most likely not to recognize at first, yet the most instructive when we do. It's the general backdrop of anxiety and insecurity that colors even our happiest moments. Deep down, we have the sense that this life doesn't offer us solid ground and that our very existence is questionable. From a Buddhist point of view, these doubts are well-founded as long as we remain ignorantly trapped in cyclic existence because the aggregates that form our body and mind are contaminated by ego self-grasping and negative karma.

11. In the second half of stanza four Nagarjuna says, "*The quintessence of their means is briefly faith and wisdom.*" Here he answers the question, "What are the causes for the high status of higher rebirth and the definite goodness of liberation? In brief, they are faith and wisdom. Although there are many causes for the high status of a higher rebirth, faith is the fundamental one. Similarly, while there are many causes for the definite goodness of liberation, wisdom is the principal one.

12. "Faith" refers to confidence in the law of karma and its effects, the Four Noble Truths, the Three Jewels, and so on. As we learn more about these things, our confidence in them increases, and we'll start to engage in the practices that relate to them. "Wisdom" refers to the wisdom realizing the emptiness of inherent, independent existence, which is the ultimate mode of existence for all persons and phenomena. The more we cultivate this wisdom, the less confusion we'll have about existence.

[5]

*Due to having faith one relies on the practices,
Due to having wisdom one truly knows.
Of these two wisdom is the chief,
Faith is its prerequisite.*

The four principal aspects of karma

1. Faith in the law of karma and its effects begins with understanding the four principal aspects of karma: 1) happiness always comes from virtue, never non-virtue, and suffering always comes from non-virtue, never virtue; 2) a small action can bring large results in the same way that a tiny seed can grow into a huge tree; 3) if we don't create the cause, we won't experience the

result; 4) karmic seeds do not get lost, and unless we stop their ability to take root and grow or destroy them, they will eventually ripen into their effects. These four principal aspects of karma apply to both virtuous and non-virtuous actions. When we have faith in the law of karma and its effects, we will engage in the practice of the ten virtuous paths of action, which are the cause of higher rebirth.

2. To generate this faith, we must rely on authoritative scriptures. But first we have to investigate whether a scripture is reliable or not. There are three factors we should examine: 1) Does the scripture correctly present evident or obvious phenomena—those we can explicitly know through our senses? 2) Is its presentation of slightly obscure (or implicit) phenomena, such as emptiness, correct? 3) Is its presentation of explicit and implicit meanings free from contradiction and are its former and latter passages that discuss very obscure phenomena, such as karma, free from contradiction?

3. We can understand the distinctions between these three types of phenomena if we use a simple example: *evident or obvious phenomenon*—a house on a far mountain with smoke rising from its chimney—we can see it explicitly with our eyes; *slightly obscure (or implicit) phenomenon*: a fire in the fireplace of that house—we can infer its presence by depending on a line of reasoning, e.g. where there is smoke there is fire; *extremely obscure phenomenon*: the name of the person living in the house—we need to rely on someone who knows the person's name in order for us to know it.

4. Moreover, if a reliable person such as the Buddha taught the scripture, we can trust what is said in it. The Buddha is a reliable person because he has completely eliminated every negative quality and developed every good quality to its perfection; he has no reason to deceive us and is motivated only by great compassion. In addition, we can verify other teachings that he gave—such as those on the disadvantages of cyclic existence and the problematic nature of afflictive emotions—so we can trust what he says about very obscure topics such as karma and its effects.

The principal and secondary causes of liberation

1. Of the two causes for higher rebirth and liberation—faith and wisdom—the wisdom realizing emptiness is the chief or principal cause. It is what actually liberates us from cyclic existence. It uproots self-grasping ignorance so that it can never reappear in the future. While faith, compassion, and bodhichitta can limit our afflictive emotions, they cannot eliminate them from the root.

2. People with sharp faculties are stable vessels for realizing emptiness. They will hear teachings on emptiness, reflect on them deeply, and discuss them with others in order to gain a correct understanding. Then, through meditation and becoming very familiar with emptiness, the wisdom that leads to liberation and enlightenment will grow in them.

3. Faith in karma and its effects is a prerequisite to generating the wisdom realizing emptiness. Faith is the cause for ethical conduct, which leads to higher rebirth such as a human. Higher rebirth is the basis for generating the wisdom realizing emptiness, which, in turn, is the direct cause for the definite goodness of liberation and enlightenment. So, even though faith in karma and its effects is a secondary cause, it is essential and cannot be overlooked.

4. In short, to attain liberation from cyclic existence, we must directly realize the ultimate nature of phenomena by cultivating the wisdom realizing emptiness. To generate this wisdom, we must have a series of special higher rebirths in cyclic existence that provide the freedom and good fortune to learn about this wisdom and cultivate it. The principal cause for these higher rebirths is abandoning non-virtue and practicing virtue. Faith in the instructions on karma and its effects is essential for this.

A person with faith and wisdom

[6]

*One who does not neglect the practices
Through desire, hatred, fear, or bewilderment
Is known as one of faith,
A superior vessel for definite goodness.*

1. A person with faith is someone who has confidence in the law of karma and its effects, and because of that confidence, doesn't neglect the practice of virtue by engaging in non-virtuous actions motivated by four afflictive emotions. These four emotions are attachment (desire), anger (hatred), fear, and ignorance (bewilderment). For example, people who neglect the virtuous action of refraining from killing may kill because of attachment to the thrill of hunting and killing, kill due to anger or hatred, kill out of fear of punishment from some authority that has ordered them to kill, or engage in the ritual sacrifice of a living being out of ignorance and confusion, believing it will bring some kind of benefit. These are just a few of the many ways we disregard virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind because of our attachment, anger, fear, and ignorance.

2. Someone who does not neglect or disregard virtuous practices due to these four emotions is a superior vessel for definite goodness. They are the best kind of person to be led on the path to liberation by a spiritual mentor.

[7]

*Having analyzed well
All deeds of body speech, and mind,
Those who realize what benefit self and others
And always perform these are wise.*

1. A wise person continually examines their physical and verbal actions to determine if they are virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral. They make an effort to abandon non-virtuous and neutral activities and to engage in virtuous ones. They enthusiastically develop their bodhichitta, the intention to attain complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, and dedicate their virtuous actions for this purpose. By doing so, they benefit both themselves and others. A person who knows what to abandon and what to practice on the path and does so with a bodhichitta motivation is a wise person who is capable of engaging in the path to liberation and full enlightenment.

2. Someone who doesn't have faith in karma and its effects and doesn't know what to practice and what to abandon doesn't have wisdom. They're not suitable to be led to liberation at this time. Generally speaking, all sentient beings can be led to the definite goodness of liberation and enlightenment, but they cannot actually attain it until they let go of their wrong views about the law of karma and its effects.

3. In the world of cyclic existence, someone is considered wise or intelligent if they are able to learn quickly, surpass others at speaking or writing, or have knowledge about topics that society respects or deems important. But in the context of the path to happiness and liberation, that is not what it means to be a wise person. From the Buddhist perspective a wise person has faith in karma and its effects and understands the points of the path of the three beings—those of initial capacity who correctly practice the causes for higher rebirth, of intermediate capacity who correctly practice the causes for liberation, and of advanced capacity who correctly practice the causes for enlightenment. Everything concerning the entire path to awakening is included in this simple idea.

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*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](#)