

**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 4: Mantras & Spiritual Practice**

**Sunday, February 18, 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 Gyalsap 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. In the last session we identified that having a higher rebirth in cyclic existence is considered very fortunate for our spiritual growth provided we recognize its value and make wise use of it. If we can continue to achieve higher rebirths going forward we’ll be able to continue our Dharma studies and practices, enabling us to eventually attain the definite goodness of liberation and enlightenment. We must know the virtuous karmic causes for higher rebirth as well as the non-virtuous karmic causes for lower rebirth to be successful in this. Because karma is a very obscure phenomenon that we cannot in our current state of ignorance fully understand, we must rely on someone who, with absolute certainty, can distinguish between virtuous karma and non-virtuous karma.

2. The only kind of person who has the omniscience to fully understand karma and know how to help us is a spiritually awakened being, a Buddha. A Buddha has completely eliminated every negative quality and developed every good quality to perfection. We can have faith in what a fully enlightened being tells us about karma because of the great love and compassion they have for us. A Buddha’s sole purpose is to be of benefit to all living beings. As we learn more about karma through the Buddha’s teachings, our confidence in those teachings will increase, and we’ll start to engage in the practices that the Buddha gives us.

[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.*

2. “Faith” refers to confidence in the law of karma and its effects, the Four Noble Truths, the Three Jewels, and so on. “Wisdom” refers to the wisdom realizing the emptiness of inherent,

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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.

### **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. 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. 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. Even though faith in karma and its effects is a secondary cause, it is essential and cannot be overlooked.

[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 superior vessel for achieving liberation and enlightenment is a person with faith who has confidence in the law of karma and its effects, and because of that confidence, doesn't neglect the practice of virtue. They are the best kind of person to be led on the path to liberation by a spiritual mentor because they refrain from engaging in non-virtuous actions motivated by four afflictive emotions: attachment (desire), anger (hatred), fear, and ignorance (bewilderment). For example, people who neglect and disregard the virtuous action of saving and protecting life may kill because of *attachment* to the thrill of hunting and killing, or they may kill due to *anger* or hatred, or 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 to them. These examples are just in relation to killing, but there are many other ways we disregard different virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind because of our attachment, anger, fear, and ignorance.

[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.*

2. 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 of their awakened heart and mind to attain complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, and dedicate all 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.

3. 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. 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 liberation and enlightenment is included in this simple idea.

### **The use of mantras in spiritual practice**

1. Before we move on to the first set of practices Nagarjuna gives us in his text, I would like to discuss the use of mantras in spiritual practice. In Mahayana Buddhism, the chanting of mantras combined with mental visualizations is considered to be a powerfully effective meditational practice. According to the Mahayana sutra *Manjushri-mula-kalpa*, mantras are manifestations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas which they represent. When we recite a mantra with pure intention our consciousness energetically connects with the mantra, and thus, we make a connection with the energy and meditative power of the Buddha or Bodhisattva associated with that mantra.

2. There are a number of mantras and their corresponding images that we will be using as part of our study and practice in relation to Nagarjuna's text. They include the Shakyamuni Buddha mantra and the Shakyamuni Buddha-figure; the Chenrezig mantra and the Chenrezig-figure; the Manjushri mantra and the Manjushri-figure; and the Vajrasattva mantra and the Vajrasattva-

figure. These images and mantras can be easily downloaded to your mobile device or computer for quick access and reference.

3. A correct intellectual understanding of emptiness is crucial to our successful practice of these mantras and visualizations. We have to avoid the conclusion that the view of emptiness means that nothing exists, which promotes a nihilistic view. In addition, we have to let go of the idea that because all phenomena are completely empty of having any kind of independent self-existence, there can be no beneficial consequences from virtuous actions and no harmful consequences from non-virtuous actions. If we can avoid drawing these kinds of conclusions then our practice will be beneficial.

4. If something has emptiness as its ultimate nature, it is capable of functioning in various ways *because* it is empty of independent self-existence. If something truly had an independent existence unto itself, it would be incapable of performing any function because it would be incapable of connecting or interacting with anything. We should understand that the fact that phenomena have emptiness as their ultimate nature is the *very* quality that makes their interaction possible; in fact emptiness is necessary for phenomena to be able to enter into action and perform any number of functions.

5. All Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are empty of inherent, independent self-existence. They have relied upon many causes and conditions to achieve liberation and enlightenment and continue to benefit sentient beings because they are capable of functioning and interacting with us in various ways that are appropriate to us. Similarly, we are able to receive the benefit and blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas because we are empty of inherent, independent self-existence, and can therefore connect and interact with them, purify our negativities, grow our good qualities, and continue to develop on the path of Dharma. Our unhelpful habits may be very strong and ingrained, but because they are impermanent they can be changed and transformed.

6. It's important to keep this in mind when we engage in the practice of mantras and mental visualizations. It would be a mistake to think we're saying words that have some kind of inherent meaning and power from their own side, and a mistake to think we're mentally visualizing wonderful beings existing somewhere out there, independent and separate from us, who have all the power to make things better for us. We have to put aside our old paradigms of blind faith and magical thinking to be successful in this.

7. A more apt analogy for this process is that of a professional coach and a capable trainee who are working together to build up the trainee's strength and stamina, or an expert doctor and an informed patient who are working together to bring the patient to a functioning state of health. We need to bring our intelligence, energy, and determination to the process just as much as the coach or doctor does. In other words, it is a dependently co-arising, interactive process.

8. Finally, when visualizing the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are associated with these particular mantras, mentally imagine that their form is not physical and coarse, but is in the aspect of powerful and beneficial light energy, clean and clear, similar to the transparent light of a rainbow but brilliant in color and strength. Feel that their light energy is connecting and

interacting with your light energy—which consists of a system of channels and multiple energy centers through which the universal life force called *prana*, or energetic “wind” flows in, out, and throughout your entire body.

### **Shakyamuni Buddha image and mantra**

1. The Shakyamuni Buddha-figure represents the enlightened qualities in which we take refuge—a safe direction in our life. When we say, “I go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha” we can imagine this figure of Shakyamuni Buddha in our mind. The first thing to notice is the expression of the Buddha’s face, which is loving, kind, wise, compassionate, and spiritually powerful. His cranial protuberance, known as an ushnisha, represents the supreme Buddha-Consciousness and is related to the pure consciousness located at the crown chakra. At the top of the ushnisha is what looks like an illuminated jewel or flame. This represents the development one’s Buddha nature to its full potential of perfection with the opening of the crown chakra and complete enlightenment. The color of the ushnisha and hair are both a deep indigo color, symbolizing the Buddha’s vast wisdom and spiritual insight.

2. He has a small, tightly wound spiral of white hair between his serenely arched eyebrows, known as an urna, symbolizing supreme vision which sees the truth of all things. His elongated ears serve as a reminder that Shakyamuni Buddha was once a prince who wore heavy earrings which stretched his earlobes. He gave up the wearing of any jewelry when he gave up his life of privilege and luxury to pursue the path to enlightenment. It refers to foregoing worldly pleasures and pursuits that distract us from pursuing the spiritual path.

3. He is seated with his legs and feet in the lotus position, with his right hand touching the ground and his left hand resting in his lap holding a bowl of white nectar. This posture is known as the earth-touching mudra, and represents the moment when the Buddha called upon the earth to witness his enlightenment and the eradication of all his afflictive and cognitive obscurations. The lotus position itself symbolizes the infinite purity of the Buddhist path with its perfect balance of wisdom and compassion. On the bottom of each of the Buddha’s feet and the palms of his hands is the impression of an eight-spoked Dharma wheel. This represents the Dharma teachings and spiritual paths the Buddha has manifested to help sentient beings of varying capacities attain liberation and enlightenment.

2. His body is golden in color and he wears saffron colored robes, both of which symbolize the emergence of great spiritual awakening in a world that is spiritually bereft and obscured by distraction. The begging bowl that the Buddha holds represents his simplicity and humility. It is a reminder that the Buddha lived a simple life, free from material possessions. The nectar in the bowl represents the Dharma which removes all ignorance and delusion. The indigo color of the bowl symbolizes the vastness of the Dharma and the spiritual insights contained in its realizations.

3. The mantra is as follows:

TA YA THA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNIYE SVAHA

Tayatha (sometimes transliterated tayadtha) is a Sanskrit word that means “it is like this” or “thus it is”. *Om* is composed of the three pure sounds ‘ah’, ‘oo’ and ‘mm’, which signify one’s ordinary body, speech and mind that are transformed into a Buddha’s omniscient body, speech and mind. *Muni* is a Sanskrit term for a sage or saint who knows the truth of existence not on the basis of scientific or religious texts but through their own realization. In Buddhism the term Muni is used as a title of Gautama Buddha, who being born among the tribe of the Shakyas, is called Shakyamuni Buddha. *Maha* is a Sanskrit word meaning “great”, thus *maha muniye* means “great sage”. *Svaha* (pronounced swoha by Tibetans) means “may a blessing rest on it”.

### **Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s interpretation of the Shakyamuni Buddha mantra**

TA YA THA – it is like this

OM – The omniscience of the Buddha and the multidimensional nature of the *Trikaya*, which refers to the three bodies or aspects of a Buddha—the *Nirmanakaya* (emanation or material form body), the *Sambhogakaya* (enjoyment or spiritual light body), and the *Dharmakaya* (truth body—the emptiness, or dependently arising nature, of a Buddha’s clear light continuum of consciousness, which is beyond material and spiritual forms). The syllable OM also represents the Buddha’s complete knowledge of the two paths to enlightenment (method and wisdom), and of the two truths (ultimate and conventional, aka absolute and relative)—that contain all existence within them.

MUNI – Control over the suffering of the three lower realms and over the wrong conception of the self-existent I.

MUNI – Control over the suffering of all samsara and over self-cherishing thoughts.

MAHA MUNIYE – Great control over the suffering of subtle illusions and over the dualistic conceptions of the mind.

SVAHA – “May my mind receive, absorb and keep the blessings of the mantra, and may they take root.”

### **An intention and visualization that can be used with the mantra**

From your heart, generate the request to the Buddha that you be inspired to follow the path to full enlightenment; make this request on behalf of all living beings who are trapped in samsara. Rays of light stream from the figure of the Buddha before you. This light enters your body and quickly removes all negativities, obscurations and hindrances, freeing you to progress quickly on the path. Imagine that this light flows not only to you, but to all living beings situated in space around you. Imagine that they all receive such inspiration and blessings as you recite the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha as many times as possible.

*tayatha om muni muni maha muniye svaha*

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](#)