

Letter to a Friend

by Acharya Nagarjuna

A Compilation of the Synopses

Weekly Virtual Teachings II

28 April., 2021 – 29 October, 2021

Led by VEN. GESHE LHAKDOR

Organized by
The Foundation for Universal Responsibility of His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Synopsis, Session 1

Nagarjuna wrote *A Letter to a Friend* for a lay king who was “busy”, and it includes advice on dharma practices for people with different levels of capabilities – small, middling and advanced. Geshe la explained that he chose this particular text because the instructions it carries are more suited to the needs of the people who lead “very busy” lives. In the current conditions most people lead such a life.

The first three verses of the text encourage people to listen to the teaching.

In the first verse, Nagarjuna extols the listener(s) as “...worthy of virtuous nature of good qualities” and encourages them to “Hear these few Arya verses” so that they can “...aspire to the merit / Which comes from the Sugatas’s teachings.” *Sugata* is an epithet of the Buddha, meaning the one who travels (*gata*) from peace (*sukha/suga*) to peace. Geshe la elaborated that we each have a combination of all the favorable conditions to fulfill this aspiration: we have the inclination, the capacity and the opportunity to hear and learn.

The second verse: “Just an image of the *Sugata* / Be it made of wood or whatever, it is worshipped by wise men. / Likewise though my poetry is poor,^{[[SEP]]} / Do not despise it since it is based upon a discussion of the holy dharma”, underlines the Four Reliances. The Four Reliances are:

1. Rely on the teachings, not on the name and the fame of the teacher.
2. Rely on the meaning, not the beauty of the words.
3. Rely on the ultimate meaning of the teachings, not the provisional.
4. Rely on the wisdom of the teachings, not the conceptual mind.

The third verse illustrates the significance of repeated listening to the teachings to affect a real transformation. Comparing the familiar teachings to a white-painted house, Nagarjuna asks, “...Still is not a white-painted (mansion) made more white^{[[SEP]]} / By the midnight moon?” Geshe la explained that we get different understanding each time we approach a text, depending on our varying conditions.



Synopsis, Session 2

Geshe la began the session with a line from Shantideva's *A Guide to Bodhisattva Way of Life* wherein he says that if, even after having found a life of leisure and endowment, one doesn't habituate one's mind with virtuous practices, then there's no greater deception, no greater folly.

In the Verse 4 of the Text, Nagarjuna delineates the Six Recollections. He counsels both the ordained and lay followers to seek refuge in the Triple Gems and remember the qualities of Giving, Morality and Gods.

Geshe la explained that just as it is human nature to take refuge in others – man and material – when in need, for our biggest problem of being stuck in Samsara under the bondage of fragile psychophysical aggregates that expose us to all kinds of sufferings, we need to rely on the Buddha, the enlightened one who is endowed with all the virtuous qualities and the compassion to help everyone like the indiscriminating sun; the Dharma, his teachings which show us the path to cessation, and; the Sangha, the company of spiritually inclined friends who encourage us on the path.

Giving is a virtue especially recommended for the lay people. In order to be able to give greater gifts such as teachings and knowledge, lay people need to get habituated with the practice of giving, beginning with material gifts. Morality basically means not harming others and leading a proper way of life. A proper way of life, Geshe la added, means treating others like one would like to be treated oneself. And, we must remember the Celestial beings/Gods for the many positive qualities they have attained through great effort.

At the beginning of the session, Geshe la shared a story from the Buddha's life. Once a man asked the Buddha four questions. How will one know the Dharma? How to stop the negative deeds? How to give up meaninglessness? How to transcend suffering? To all his questions, the Buddha offered one answer: *by listening!* Geshe la advised to listen more and practice; avoid leading a distracted life. Life is short, there's no time to waste.

Synopsis, Session 3

Every week the teaching session begins with mantra recitation. Geshe la explained that besides the immediate benefits of relaxation and calm, chanting is scientifically found to have lasting benefits for practitioners as it leads to inner peace and mental stabilization.

In the Verse 5 of the Text, Nagarjuna counsels to abandon the 10 non-virtuous deeds. They are: **Physical:** Killing, Stealing (includes even the objects you found and didn't return) and Sexual Misconduct; **Verbal:** Lying, Divisive Talk (that leads to conflict, disharmony and disunity), Harsh Speech and Idle Gossip (that takes away one's opportunities to practice what is beneficial), and; **Mental:** Covetousness, Harmful Intention and Wrong View (means denying the law of causality – the very foundation of one's practice). He also advises to refrain from drinking alcohol, and to “delight in right livelihood”. Alcohol and other intoxicants lead to losing one's sense of judgement and discriminative awareness. “It's enough that we are already intoxicated by sensual objects”, Geshe la observed.

Emphasizing on the ephemerality and impermanence of the sensual and material objects, in the Verse 6 of the Text, Nagarjuna calls them devoid of any essence. Instead, he encourages the practice of giving and upholds it as a friend for the present and for the future lives as well. Geshe la pointed out that attachment to material objects is the one main reason for getting trapped in the samsara. Material greed is insatiable; contentment is the real wealth. What is of essence is training of the mind, Geshe la said.

In short, Geshe la summarized, these verses encourage the followers to look after their body, speech and mind; abandon the non-virtuous deeds and pursue the virtuous ones. When one has health and wealth, one must put effort to be prepared for the days when one is devoid of them. Most importantly, one must practice them constantly – just as Nagarjuna counsels in the beginning of Verse 5.

Synopsis, Session 4

Geshe la began the session by reminding everyone of the preciousness of this human life; the rare opportunity to choose to benefit oneself and others. Make a choice to avoid distraction and go within; the real homecoming is coming back to oneself, he said.

Recapitulating the Verse 6 of the Text, Geshe la elaborated on the practice of generosity towards the three main recipients: the higher beings who have higher qualities, the friends and family whose kindness we receive, and the needy beings deprived of health and wealth. Practice of giving is an unfailing friend; the positive imprints follow one in to future lives. Nagarjuna calls the material objects devoid of essence, Geshe la explained, because none of these can provide lasting peace and satisfaction. Genuine satisfaction can only come from practice of love and compassion.

In the Verse 7 of the Text, Nagarjuna advises the practice of morality which is **unbroken**: without violation of any vows; **not debased**: with most of the vows intact; **undefiled**: not mixed with wrong intentions of worldly concerns; **untainted**: with pure motivation to seek liberation for oneself and others, and; **uncorrupted**. Morality is “*the foundation of all virtues / Just as the earth is for all things moving and unmoving*”.

Verse 8 of the text outlines the practice of six immeasurable perfections of the Bodhisattvas; the twin practices of Method and Wisdom. Giving, Morality, Patience, Effort and Concentration represent the method aspect of the twin practices of Method and the last of the six perfections, wisdom, represents Wisdom. Through these practices, the two bodies of the Buddha are realized: *Rupa Kaya* (the form body) through method and *Dharma Kaya* (the wisdom body) through wisdom.

In the following verses, Nagarjuna prescribes 16 practices for the lay followers. Verse 9 of the text focuses on respecting one’s parents and its benefits. Those who respect their parents will gain name and fame in this life and higher statuses (of rebirth in human and godly realms) in the future lives.

Synopsis, Session 5

Since each session of the teachings begins with recitation of the Tara mantra, Geshe la shared that Tara, while on her path of spiritual practice, had vowed to be enlightened in the form of a woman, as there were already many enlightened beings in the male form.

Nagarjuna, in Verse 10 of the Text, counsels the lay people to observe the eight precepts of Upasika Vows occasionally. The four Root Practices are forsaking: harming others, theft and robbery, sexual misconduct and lying, and the four Branch Practices are forsaking: consumption of intoxicants, attachment to food at improper times, enjoyment of high seats and beds, and fondness of songs, dances and garlands. Geshe la elaborated on some of the precepts. Improper meals, untimely food and overeating, are the sources of various illnesses. Those concerned about the wellbeing of others must take care of themselves first, he said. Enjoyment of high seats and thrones leads to greed and arrogance. Fondness for songs, dances and use of cosmetics distracts us from Dharma practices. In the Verse 11, Nagarjuna explains that those who observe these vows will be born in the celestial realms, and therefore counsels the king to encourage other men and women to follow the same.

In Verse 12 of the Text, Nagarjuna advises the lay followers to see the faults of negative emotions and treat them as the main enemies. He recounts the 13 main negative emotions that arise repeatedly. These are: Miserliness, Cunningness, Deceit, Greed, Laziness, Manifest Pride (by being under the illusion of having superior external qualities), Lust, Hatred and Arrogance/Conceit of: Caste, Form, Knowledge, Youth, and Power. Geshe la remarked that while the external enemies may be fought with, run away from, deceived and so forth, the internal enemies of negative emotions shadow our existence. Therefore, we must see their destructiveness, and transform our mental perspectives accordingly.

Citing from a poem of the 7th Dalai Lama, Geshe la said that despite our different appearances, we all share the “sameness of fate” of facing sufferings. Therefore, we must make effort to help each other, no matter how insignificant it may seem. Strive for Bodhicitta, the Buddha mind: the butter that comes out of churning of Dharma.

Synopsis, Session 7

Verses 13 & 14 of the Text emphasise the significance of practicing heedfulness which is upheld as the source of nectar that leads to a life beyond suffering -- the state of liberation. Heedlessness, on the other hand, leads to repeated birth in the samsara. Due to the heavy negative imprints from our many past lives, Geshe la explained, we are easily drawn to negative emotions and deeds. Therefore, as Shantideva mentions in his *Bodhicaryavatara*, one should be as heedful as a person guarding one’s open wound amidst a crowd. Citing examples of Nanda (who was lustful and obsessive about his wife), Angulimala (who had adopted a false approach to liberation under the misguidance of a wrong teacher), Ajaatsatru (who had killed his father under the influence of a wrong friend) and Udayana (who killed his mother who was opposed to his fondness for women), who all later rectified their mistakes through the practice of Dharma, Nagarjuna posits that even those who had previously been heedless can become heedful and “*be resplendent like the moon free from clouds*”. He encourages everyone to start practicing heedfulness.

Verses 15 & 16 focus on the practice of patience. Since one’s reactions to external situations cause most of the unpleasant experiences, one must “*give anger no opportunity to arise*”. He advises to give up resentment towards one’s so-called enemies, at whose hands one may have been abused, tortured, defeated and so forth. Only a person of patience can have a peaceful sleep. However, this does not mean that one should remain silent in the face of injustice, Geshe

la elaborated. Nagarjuna merely advocates maintenance of calmness and inculcating fortitude in the face of challenges.

Verses 17, 18 and 19 outline proper conduct of the mind, speech and body, respectively. One's mind should bear strong and enduring positive imprints of Dharma practice like drawing on a stone, or at least like a drawing on earth which lasts momentarily. It should not be at all like an easily fading drawing on water. The reverse should be the case for negative mental imprints. One's speech should be pleasant to hear like honey, truthful like flowers, and never be wrong, meaning lying and so forth, like filth. Geshe la remarked that the speech here refers not only to the eloquence of the words but also its content. And, one should strive to become enlightened or at least be born in better realms each time one takes a rebirth. For example, a human should aspire to be born in the human realm or higher ones. This is the "*moving from light to ultimate light*" as recommended by Nagarjuna among the four categories of people. Others are those "*who move from dark to ultimate dark, light to ultimate dark and dark to ultimate light*".

Synopsis, Session 8

Geshe la quoted Shantideva who said, "even though we want happiness, due to ignorance, we destroy our own happiness as if it is one's enemy. / Even though we wish to shun suffering, we just run after suffering." Happiness is one's own choice! But how to proceed to pursue that? For the beginners, it is by staying away from being drawn into the whirlpool of influence of negative friends.

Nagarjuna advises to be cognizant of one's associates in the Verse 20 of the Text. He lays out four categories of people and compares them to mangoes: 1. ripe inside and appear ripe, 2. ripe inside but appear unripe, 3. unripe inside and appear unripe, and 4. unripe inside but appear ripe. One should associate with the first category of people as they are good, both in action and thought. This is especially for the lay people who are bound to associate with many other people, that too, mostly for material gains not spiritual enrichment. Gyalsay Thokmey Sangpo, in his *37 Bodhisattva Practices* wherein, says that "negative friends are those in whose association your three poisons (of Greed, Ignorance and Hatred) multiply, and positive friends are those in whose association your Dharma practices of hearing, thinking and meditation prosper like a waxing moon".

Sensual Desire grips one in control of all the five senses. Therefore, Nagarjuna instructs to abandon desire for others' wives through the twin methods of controlling: the sense organs and the mind. Geshe la clarified that in many of the teachings, by masters such as Nagarjuna and

Shantideva, faults of women are highlighted as these were given primarily to the monks. In today's context, if a female follower is studying these texts, she can reflect on the faults of men.

To control the sense organs, in the Verse 21 of the Text, he says, "*Do not look upon another's wife; / However, should you see her, / Think of her according to her age -- thus as mother, / daughter or sister. If attachment arises, / then meditate only on impurity*".

To control the mind, the Verse 22 urges to protect one's mind like one would one's dear son, treasure and life, and withdraw it from sensual pleasures like one would from poison, weapon, enemy or fire. Geshe la elaborated that the mind is constantly fluctuating, and is difficult to comprehend and pacify, just like a lightening. Therefore, the best way to control the mind is through understanding the true reality of nature. In the Verse 23, Nagarjuna condemns desire as the "iron chains" that bind one in the prison of samsara, and directs to renounce it. He emphasises that the Buddha had compared desire to a "kimba fruit" which Geshe la explained, is a beautiful looking fruit that is sweet to eat but full of poison.

Synopsis, Session 9

Geshe la began the session by reminding us that we are all looking for peace and happiness, but in the wrong direction. A clear indication of this mistake is the endless sufferings we are engulfed with. Even the natural disasters are exacerbated by wrongful human activities today. It's high time we changed our direction and lost craving and grasping to unhealthy relationships with others; people, objects and concepts. We need to cultivate right mental perspective.

Nagarjuna continues to advise against attachment to sensual objects in the Verse 24 of the Text wherein he says that the one who conquers one's senses from attachment towards sense objects is far greater a hero than the one who conquers a battlefield. Geshe la explained that the worst attachment is towards another human being because that obsession takes over all our five/six senses.

In Verse 25, Nagarjuna points out the faults of the objects of attachment with an example of a young maiden's body. Beneath the superficial external beauty made up of ornaments and garments, he says, it's nothing but a "totally impure vessel" which is covered with filthy layers of skin, and is "*difficult to satisfy, bad smelling, / And impurities issuing from the nine bodily doors*". Geshe la instructed the non-male Dharma practitioners to view the faults of men for their practice. This is to see the essencelessness of our objects of obsession.

Even for the one who develops attachment, Nagarjuna states that it is not only not helpful but actually harmful to be obsessive. In Verse 26, he compares a craving person to a person suffering from leprosy whose craving for momentary relief from sitting near fire leads to a worsened condition. Geshe la added that attachment only brings temporary pleasures, not

lasting happiness. Instead, it makes us slaves to fleeting pleasures. Therefore, the great teachers like the Buddha and Milarepa abandoned their worldly ties and material possessions.

However, all these solutions to control attachment as offered in the preceding verses are only temporary and can only help lessen it. To completely uproot the causes of attachment, Nagarjuna lays out several methods in the subsequent verses. In Verse 27, he instructs to perceive things rightly by understanding the ultimate truth. Geshe la explained that it means to cultivate the wisdom realizing emptiness. Ignorance arises out of our misconception of reality due to which we exaggerate and denigrate different people, events, etc. This leads to either strong attachment or aversion. Consider the fear caused by mistaking a coil of rope for a snake. We suffer due to projections of our own confused minds. We can overcome this only when we clearly understand that nothing has inherent independent existence and everything depends on name, designation, causes and conditions. Therefore, Nagarjuna upholds wisdom understanding reality as the ultimate quality to develop.

Synopsis, Session 10

At the beginning of the session, Geshe la urged everyone in the audience to remember the lessons from the Pandemic; we are dependent on each other, and that we must learn to live in harmony with one another and with nature.

In verse 28, Nagarjuna highlights the positive results of Wisdom and Morality. He maintains that no matter how high a caste one belongs to or how much beauty and learning one possesses, in the absence of wisdom and morality, one will not be respected. On the other hand, if one has these two qualities, one will be honoured regardless of lack of other superficial qualities. Wisdom leads to the deep knowledge of and conviction in what to adopt and what to discard as opposed to mere learning that is devoid of practical engagement and experiential value. Morality is the quality that will help one refrain from engaging in negative deeds.

In order to develop Morality and Wisdom, Nagarjuna, in Verse 29, emphasises on removing the hurdles arising out of the ‘Eight Worldly Concerns’. They are: Gain and loss, happiness and unhappiness, sweet words and harsh words, and praise and blame. He addresses the king as the ‘knower of the world’ and instructs him to treat them equally without getting distracted by them. These concerns are “not worthy of your mind”, he says. Geshe la elaborated that since we lead ordinary lives, we are bound to encounter these concerns; we suffer because we engage excessively in them. We must keep ourselves from getting too excited and too dejected, and learn to transcend these concerns.

In Verse 30, Nagarjuna warns against committing any deeds out of these concerns for one’s so-called beneficiaries, whether the “brahmans, bhikshus, gods, guests, parents, sons, queen, or attendants”. They may share the momentary benefits of one’s deeds but they will never bear their real karmic results. Therefore, be vigilant of your actions and watch if these concerns have crept into your deeds, Geshe la advised.

On the ‘manifestation of karma’, in Verse 31, Nagarjuna explains that although they may not be immediate, they are certain. Geshe la further added that in our daily lives we observe some

people who flourish despite engaging in negative deeds. They can never avoid the karmic results of their deeds; it is just a matter of time. A bird that flies high into the sky appears to lose its shadow, however, upon approaching the ground, the shadow becomes visible.

In Verse 32, Nagarjuna guides the king to acquire the Seven Arya Wealth. These are: faith (based on reason and knowledge), morality, giving, learning, sense of shame and concern for others, and wisdom. He asks to recognise these as the superior wealth and “other ordinary wealth to be meaningless”. Geshe la added that these are the only wealth that can accompany one even into the future lives.

Nagarjuna, in Verse 33, lays out six behaviours that obstruct the cultivation of the seven Arya Wealth, and leads to loss of fame in this life and birth in evil state in the future lives. He advises to abandon these six behaviours: gambling, watching gatherings, laziness, associating with negative friends, drinking alcohol and wandering at night.

Nagarjuna upholds ‘Contentment’ as the ultimate wealth in verse 34. Geshe la cited the example of Milarepa who was contented despite being dispossessed of all material wealth. Furthermore, he said that the more we have, the more we suffer because we tend to always count our miseries. Discontentment arises out of our lack of capacity to judge our needs. Our material pursuits are based on greed, not on need, therefore we suffer. This has led to all our troubles including the ecological destruction. Our material pursuits rely on the limited resources. We cannot make unlimited progress out of limited resources. Instead, focus on spiritual development which has the scope for limitless progress.

In addition, Nagarjuna, in verse 35, gives the example of the Naga king, a snake, whose suffering is aggravated by his possession of multiple heads. Geshe la explained that although it may make the Naga king look pompous and glorious, he is hardly at ease due to the need to attend to different conditions of the different heads. If one head is fine, other one may not be. On the other hand, a snake with one head has to take care of just one head. Similarly, more material wealth brings more trouble. One has to face the problem of earning the wealth, safekeeping the wealth and then dealing with being unable to use the earned wealth. Therefore, one is truly rich when one understands one’s needs and is content with what one has.

Synopsis, Session 11

As the session began, Geshe la stated that these teachings are basically education aimed at guiding one to recognize one’s own inner potential and to realize it. One is not a mere passive listener. Teachings must be used like a mirror to see one’s positive and negative qualities, and to enhance the positive qualities and reduce the negative ones.

In Verses 36 and 37, Nagarjuna lays out qualities of a prospective wife for the king. He advises the king to avoid three kinds of wives: one who indulges in extramarital affairs, especially with the enemy, one who disrespects her husband and one who steals. The king must look for a wife who is kind like a sister, dear like a friend, well wishing like a mother and serves like a servant. Such a wife, Nagarjuna instructs, must be revered like a family deity. Geshe la added that these are the same qualities one must look for in one’s life partner, whether a husband or a wife.

These verses emphasize that relationships must be based on genuine love and compassion and spiritual connection, not on superficial qualities.

In Verses 38 and 39 Nagarjuna points out the two main obstructive factors for meditation and explains how to overcome them.

The first factor is wrong intake of food. He instructs in Verse 38 to consider food as a medicine and take it solely for the purpose of survival. Food must never be taken for the purposes of: hatred, attachment and show of might, pride and beauty. Elaborating on this, Geshe la mentioned that we mostly eat food out of ignorance and that is why we fall sick very often. There are all kinds of diseases related to food like obesity and anorexia. We must eat the right amount – not too much that we become dull and not too less that we starve. Also, there are so many beautifully packaged foods in the market today to increase our attachment. Therefore, we must eat mindfully and make the right choice.

The other obstruction is excessive sleep. In Verse 38, Nagarjuna instructs that after a day well spent, one must do practices prior to sleeping, and then sleep at the right time with proper motivation to make one's sleep virtuous. Geshe la explained that sleep is generally considered a neutral activity; whether it becomes virtuous or non-virtuous depends on the motivation made prior to sleeping. Further, he added that too much sleep makes one dull and too little sleep makes one restless.

Only a body that is appropriately fed and well rested can undertake the meditations mentioned in the subsequent verses.

Verse 40 outlines the practice of meditation on the Four Immeasurables. They are immeasurable: love, compassion, joy and equanimity. It's called Immeasurable Meditation because both the quality and the focus (all sentient beings) of the meditation are "immeasurable". Through this practice, even if the supreme state of Nirvana is not gained, Nagarjuna assures, one will still attain the "happiness of the world of Brahma". This, Geshe la explained, is the small stage of Path of Accumulation. The other two stages are the middle and the great. Path of Accumulation is the first of the five paths of Nirvana.

In Verse 41 Nagarjuna maintains that if one meditates on the Four Concentrations, then one will attain the "fortunate levels of the gods -- Brahma, Abhasvara, Subhaktisna and Brhatphala" even while being in the samsara. These form the middle and great stages of the Path of Accumulation.

The four concentrations are First Concentration, Second Concentration, Third Concentration and Fourth Concentration. First concentration is the meditative stabilisation where one has abandoned attachment to the pleasures of the desire. Second concentration is the meditative stabilisation where one has abandoned gross analysis and subtle examination. Third concentration is the meditative stabilisation where one has abandoned mental joy which fluctuates like water. Fourth concentration is the meditative stabilisation where one has abandoned happy and unhappy livelihood.

Synopsis, Session 12

Geshe la began the session with an observation about time. Time flies! He advised everyone to think about what is most important for this human life and make one's life meaningful in the time one has.

Nagarjuna, in Verses 42 and 43, explains the law of causality in general, and how to adopt the virtuous deeds and avoid the negative deeds in particular.

In Verse 42, he mentions the five factors that determine the intensity of one's deeds -- virtuous and non-virtuous. The five factors are: 1. Persistence, 2. Intention 3. Inclusion of counterforce, and whether or not the deeds – either positive or negative -- are committed towards those who are 4. Endowed with qualities (such as teachers like H.H. and other worthy beings) and 5. One's beneficiaries (such as parents, loved ones, friends). In Verse 43, he encourages the king to persist in Dharma Practice even if he occasionally lapses. Just like a small amount of salt can only change the taste of a small amount of water but not that of the Ganges River, he assuages, “a small sinful deed will not spoil a vast root of virtue”. Minor negative deeds will not overwhelm our strong virtuous deeds and therefore we must not develop unnecessary fear and sense of hopelessness.

In Verse 44, Nagarjuna points out the five obscurations on the path of higher concentration and liberation and warns the king to treat them as thieves that “steal the wealth of virtue”. They are: 1. Excitement and Regret, 2. Harmful Intention or Thoughts, 3. Mental Torpor and Sleepiness, 4. Attachment, and 5. Doubt. Geshe la explained that these obscurations harm one's virtuous practices and therefore should never be allowed to enter the house of mind.

Verse 45 lays out the Five Excellent Practices to develop to cultivate the path of liberation when engaging in stage-by-stage practice. The Five Excellent Practices are: 1. Faith, 2. Effort, 3. Mindfulness, 4. Concentration, and 5. Wisdom. Geshe la elaborated on the importance of each of these practices. Faith means faith based on reason and logic that inspires effort. Without effort, forget higher spiritual realizations, even the mundane day-to-day activities cannot be completed. In the absence of mindfulness, no learning can be retained. Concentration means pulling one's energies together to focus on one's subject. Wisdom gives a clear understanding of everything. These become the direct cause for the Path of Seeing, the path of becoming a Superior Being or Arya. Here Nagarjuna talks about the attainment of the Second Path whose various levels are reached through these Five Excellent Practices. The Second Path is classified into four levels: 1. Heat, 2. Peak, 3. Forbearance, and 4. Supreme Dharma or Supreme Quality. At these varying levels of attainment, the opposing negative forces cannot trample the virtuous practices and the root of virtuous practices remains undisturbed.

Synopsis, Session 13

Geshe la explained Verses 46-48 in this session. He started by citing Master Shantideva who said that this life with leisure and endowments is more precious than precious gems; difficult to find but easy to perish. Geshe la urged to use it to create happiness for oneself and for others whatever be the span of one's life.

The Verse 46 highlights the importance of ‘repeated’ analytical meditation on the human beings’ non-exemption from any kind of sufferings to prevent and subdue conceit or arrogance.

Here, Nagarjuna establishes that everyone is bound to face the sufferings of sickness, aging, death and separation from the desirables, and the definiteness of one's subjection to one's karma. If one is learned and possesses good qualities, one must be happy but not get 'puffed up', Geshe la remarked. Think about one's karma from many lives and the imminent sufferings. To get rid of fruition of karma, stop accumulating further causes and conditions for these sufferings. This can be achieved only through a gradual systematic process of spiritual evolution.

Nagarjuna, in Verse 47, underlines the significance of meditating on right view to achieve higher realms. Here he focuses on the 'worldly view'. Higher realms mean rebirth in the realms of gods, demigods and human beings. Geshe la pointed out that since we have already attained birth in a higher realm, we must make the best of it. It is due to ignorance that human beings continue to do the wrong things. As such, there is a need to learn the 'right view' through these teachings. The right view means recognizing the impermanent and empty nature of all phenomenon. This can be developed if one properly exercises one's capacity to think, question and judge and not follow anything and anyone blindly, Geshe la remarked. Nagarjuna mentions that even the good deeds done by a person with wrong view will only lead to "dreadful fruition". Some of the Buddhist texts establish that degeneration of morality can be restored through right view, Geshe la added.

In Verse 48, Nagarjuna advises contemplation on the 'beyond worldly view' for those who wish to proceed further in terms of one's actualization of nirvana and liberation. He points out that we wrongly view: 1. misery for wellness, 2. impermanence for permanence, 3. selflessness for having a self and 4. our body's impurity for purity. These lead to delusions and cause all the ruination. Geshe la added that our strong grasping to these delusions prevent us from preparing for the longer journey. Therefore, while we are alive, healthy and able, we must meditate on the countless sufferings and adopt the 'beyond worldly view'. Geshe la explained that there are three types of sufferings: 1. Obvious Suffering, 2. Suffering of Change and 3. Conditioned Suffering.

Synopsis, Session 14

Geshe la began by stressing on the need to engage in Dharma practice to achieve long lasting peace and happiness. He quoted Kadampa master Potowa's three methods of contemplation, on impermanence (the definiteness of death), loving kindness and selflessness of all phenomena, to develop conviction in the benefits of Dharma practice. Geshe la covered Verses 49-52 in this session.

In Verse 49, Nagarjuna instructs to meditate on the ultimate truth that exceeds the conventional worldly view and establishes everything as being empty of an intrinsic independent 'self' or 'existence'. He elucidates this with the example of 'Form' and its relation with the so-called 'self': "...form is not the self, the self does not / Possess form, the self is not seated in form

and / Form is not seated in the self.” As such, “Remaining four aggregates are similarly empty (of inherent independent existence)”. They are: Feeling, Perception, Action and Consciousness.

Having demonstrated the emptiness of an independent ‘self’, Nagarjuna, in Verse 50, discusses the three main causes of coming together of our psychophysical aggregates: Ignorance, Karma and Desire. He refutes the other claims based on logic and due to philosophical contradictions in them and maintains that “the aggregates do not arise at random, not from time, / A primordial substance, their own essence, Isvara, / Nor without a cause.”

Geshe la further explained that emptiness is not equal to nothingness or non-existence. Emptiness simply means empty of inherent independent existence. We experience all the sufferings due to our distorted view of seeing things as having independent existence. Therefore, the understanding of emptiness is crucial to relax our tight grasp on the ‘self’ and to eliminate the root of all the negative emotions.

In Verse 51, Nagarjuna advises to remove the three bondages: solely following misleading/wrong ascetic practices, perverted view of taking oneself as having independent existence and having afflictive doubt in the Dharma. These “block the gate to the city of liberation”.

In Verse 52, he sets forth that liberation depends upon the individual effort. He emphasizes on the need to cultivate the three trainings: only oneself can remove one’s negative karmas and negative emotions through the practice of engaging in extensive listening, morality and concentration. With this one must do analytical meditation to understand the Four Noble Truths and so forth.

Synopsis, Session 15

Geshe la began the session by emphasizing on the preciousness of this healthy human life. He cited Shantideva who wrote that to have a day like this with a healthy body and material comfort is a real opportunity. There is no guarantee that one’s life can continue to go unhindered. Therefore, while one still has this opportunity, one must attempt to lead a good life. Geshe la also pointed out that we are so fortunate to have access to guidance and teachings by the Buddha and other great teachers; they are akin to ready-made food that we only need to eat. Geshe la explicated Verses 53-55 during the session.

In Verse 53, Nagarjuna guides the King to put effort in the three-fold training of “...highest morality, highest wisdom and highest meditative stabilization.” To stress on its importance, he states that this training contains more than one hundred and fifty disciplines. Elaborating on this, Geshe la explained that this training is called “superior” because it not only leads to liberation but also the attainment of Buddhahood.

Nagarjuna, in Verse 54, teaches ‘mindfulness of the body’ to the king and instructs him to practice analytical meditation focusing on his own body. Geshe la added that this is to stress on the significance of mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness makes one’s practice swifter; it purifies the mind and helps it transcend unhappiness and suffering, realize the Dharma and actualize Nirvana. As a precursor to mindfulness meditation, Geshe la advised to practice breathing meditation to settle the mind. For Mindfulness of the Body in particular, one should analyze different parts of the body. There are three other main mindfulness practices: Mindfulness of Feeling, Mindfulness of the Mind and Mindfulness of Phenomena.

Verse 55 comments on the fragility of impermanent human body and the need to renounce attachment to it. Here, Nagarjuna reminds the king that this impermanent life is “beset by many misfortunes”. He says, “That one inhales after exhaling / And awakes from sleep is wonderful.” Geshe la cited the many causes such as accidents, food poisoning and so forth that may cut life short. He further stated that our body is not worthy of obsession; it is composed of filth and despite our best care, it remains impermanent. Instead, like Shantideva advises, one’s body must be used as a boat to cross the ocean of samsara. Use the body properly. Dedicate the body to Dharma practice.

Synopsis, Session 16

As each session of the teachings begins with Tara mantra recitation and ends with Avalokiteshvara mantra recitation, Geshe la lauded the practice and remarked that we are very fortunate to be able to do so. Tara is the deity of energy and recitation of her mantra helps in calming our disturbed energies. Likewise, Avalokiteshvara mantra represents the essence of all the teachings of the Buddha. Both the prayers bring immense benefit.

Geshe la elaborated on verses 55-58 of the text in this session. In these verses, Nagarjuna makes a case for renouncing attachment towards one’s body, mainly based on its impermanence and its being devoid of any essence. Geshe la briefly recapitulated verse 55 wherein Nagarjuna explains how life is impermanent and unpredictable – “*beset by many misfortunes*”.

Following this, in verse 56, Nagarjuna contends that the human “*body’s end is to become dust, to dry up, rot, or / Finally become filth.*” Geshe la explained the necessity of reflection on death and impermanence to realize what is truly important in life. This is the main cause for achieving liberation. He said that our body arises out of the four elements (earth, water, fire and air) and dissolves into them at the end. Not only will one be separated from one’s loved ones; one will also be separated from one’s own body! Instead of the useless fear, Geshe la advised, to be fearful of negative karmas and therefore lead a better life and prepare for a better death (and life after).

Nagarjuna asserts the frailty of human body and certainty of death in verse 57. Here he cites examples of the greatest forms such as the earth, mount Meru and the oceans. Since these are surely going to disintegrate and dissolve, what is the need to even “speak of such a frail thing as the human body?” Geshe la said since death is certain and its time is uncertain, we must be prepared as if we are watching out for an attack by an enemy whose arrival is certain but the timing is not.

Then, in verse 58, Nagarjuna urges the king to develop aversion towards the samsara, which is multilayered yet essence-less “*like a plantain tree*”. He says, “*Everything is impermanent, devoid of self (inherent self), refuge-less (for Buddha can only show the path, one has to walk it oneself), protector-less (since nobody can help one unless one helps oneself), and homeless (since one cannot live in this body forever)*”.

Geshe la concluded that unless one sees the limitation of one’s life, one could not achieve liberation. Just like how unless one sees a problem in one’s house, one wouldn’t move to another place. Aryadeva in his *400 Verses* writes that the more you see the sufferings of the samsara, the more you would want to be free from it.

Synopsis, Session 17

The session opened with Geshela’s comments on the hollowness of samsara and cyclic existence. He recalled Nagarjuna’s advice to develop renunciation. Renunciation is not escapism; it’s essentially a tremendous responsibility. It’s only when one gives up meaningless worldly pursuits that one can engage in Dharma practice. Potowa, the great Kadampa master, often used to say he had no time. We also say we have no time; we are busy. However, the difference is, Potowa had no time for mundane activities and we have no time for virtuous ones.

Geshe la explained Verses 59-64 of the Text during the session.

In Verses 59 and 60, Nagarjuna highlights the preciousness of having obtained this life and encourages the king to follow the path of Dharma and make this human life meaningful while he still has the rare opportunity. He uses the anecdote of the blind turtle that is said to be able to put its neck through the aperture of a wooden yoke floating in the same ocean only once in a hundred years to illustrate the difficulty of obtaining a human life. He declares that a bigger fool who despite having obtained this ‘full of potential’ human life commits misdeeds out of negative emotions than the one who fills a jewel-adorned golden vessel with vomit. A precious human life has the potential to fulfill the purpose of this life and all the future ones. Geshe la reiterated brevity and uncertainty of human life and urged everyone to develop a sense of urgency.

Nagarjuna, in verse 61, gives the instruction of the Four Wheels wherein he reminds the King that he is already in possession of the four favorable conditions for Dharma practice. The king is “*Dwelling in a suitable place, relying upon the holy ones, / Having religiously applied yourself in former (lives), And collected merit*”. Geshe la explained that these are called ‘wheels’ as they enhance the speed of our Dharma practice.

Verse 62 is about instruction of Guru Yoga practice. Here, Nagarjuna counsels the king to rely upon a spiritual friend who can assist him on “*the path to holiness*”. Geshe la elaborated on the importance of reliable teachers and warned against the false ones. We can learn from everyone but not make everyone our root-guru. He also suggested taking advantage of the online teachings.

In Verses 63 and 64, Nagarjuna lists out the eight faulty and unfavorable states: of being born as a 1. heretic, 2. animal, 3. hungry ghost, 4. hell-being, 5. barbarian, 6. fool, 7. long-living god and 8. in a place without Dharma. Since the king is free from these, Nagarjuna counsels, he must devote himself to the Dharma practice to “*put an end to birth*” in the samsara that results from contaminated actions and negative emotions. Geshe la clarified that being born as a long-living god is also considered unfavorable as the gods enjoy every imaginable comfort and often forget the true nature of samsara and the need to strive for liberation wherefore they sometimes even end up with rebirth in the lower realms. They can be compared to the excessively wealthy people who are too pampered by material accumulation and do not find the time for Dharma practice. Ultimately, everyone is bound to face separation, death and so forth. In these events, one can only rely on inner resources. As such, we must make effort while there are facilitating conditions.

Synopsis, Session 18

As the session began, Geshe la drew our attention to the ultimate purpose of undertaking spiritual practice. It is to get rid of the samsara. He touched upon the three different types of sufferings and advised to make effort in Dharma practice to reduce and uproot them. Geshe la explained verses 65-76 of the Text during the session.

Having established that the king is endowed with a life of precious opportunity to pursue Dharma in the preceding verses, Nagarjuna, in verse 65, apprises him of the manifold sufferings of the samsara such as material deprivation, death, illness, aging and so forth, and advises him to meditate on the faults of the samsara and develop revulsion against it. He then goes onto highlight several faults of the samsara in the succeeding verses. Geshe la clarified that this is not to provoke unnecessary fear in us but to wake us up from our slumber in the state of ignorance.

In verse 66, Nagarjuna argues that there’s no certainty in samsara in terms of who are our loved ones and who are not, since in different life times we meet different beings in different forms. He says, “*Fathers become sons, mothers wives, enemies friends...*”. Elaborating on this, Geshe la said, even in this very life, there’s no guarantee as to who is your friend and who is your enemy. Brothers fight brothers, that too for property and money! Therefore, he urged to not develop extreme attachment and hatred. Stating that everyone has drunk more milk than the four oceans in different lifetimes and yet will drink more in the future ones, Nagarjuna

demonstrates the lack of satisfaction in samsara, in verse 67. He then discusses the countless births and deaths in the cyclic existence. In verse 68, in one of the examples, he contends that the heap of one's bones from several deaths would equal or even surpass the height of Mount Meru, and thereby implies the utter meaninglessness of such existence.

Following this, in verses 69-75, Nagarjuna elucidates the ascent and descent through the various realms of samsara. Even if one becomes Indra or a universal monarch and gains reverence of the world in this life, enjoys the sensual pleasures of beauties in the heavenly realms, dwells on the summit of Mount Meru, walks on comfortable surfaces, and takes pleasure of the beautiful gardens and rivers of the celestial realms, one may, due to the forces of negative deeds from the past, be born as a servant in the next life, encounter the terrible misery of walking on fire and filth, endure the pain of hell realms. Even those who attain the greater happiness of gods and bliss of non-attachment of the Brahma, may undergo the sufferings of Avici, the hell without respite in the next life. Geshe la explained that the Brahma's non-attachment here does not refer to complete non-attachment but a subdued direct manifestation of the afflictive emotions of the desire realm. As such, Geshe la explained that there is no reliable pleasure in the samsara, even in the celestial realms.

Therefore, in verse 76, Nagarjuna counsels to take the lamp of the Threefold Virtues for one has to enter the infinite darkness alone. Geshe la elaborated that they can refer to the three physical, mental and verbal lamps, or the three types of merits: practice of giving, morality and meditation. Since one has to face death and face it alone, the solution is to depend on these lamps/merits and transform oneself. One's strong positive imprints will become one's guiding light.

Synopsis, Session 19

At the beginning of the session, Geshe la said that there is no guarantee of a long and healthy life, however, everyone can lead a healthy and happy life as long as they live. Geshe la covered verses 77- 102 of the Text during the session.

Nagarjuna begins to convey the sufferings of five different samsaric realms in the following verses. Geshe la explained that there is a debate as to whether there are five or six realms.

In Verses 77 to 88, Nagarjuna recounts the unbearable sufferings in different hells. After warning about the terror and explaining the intensity and duration of the same, he points to the seeds of these being the non-virtues committed through body, speech and mind, and urges that they be avoided.

Next, in verses 89 and 90, he says that due to abandoning virtues, beings take rebirth in the animal realm. He also reflects on the sufferings in the animal realm; the different ways in which they suffer and the purposes they are exploited and put to pain for.

Then, he advises to consider the sufferings of the hungry ghosts in verses 91-97. He mentions the different kinds of hungry ghosts and their different miseries and that these agonies are

endless. Here, he quotes the Buddha and declares these sufferings to be the result of avarice, miserliness and ignobility.

Following this, he comments on the sufferings of the gods in verses 98-101. Although the celestial beings are said to have the greatest pleasures, he says, the greater is their pain of dying. Also, due to too much pleasure, they often end up taking rebirth in the realms of animals, *preta* and hell-beings. Therefore, the wise do not crave for rebirth as gods.

Finally, he touches on the sufferings of the Asuras, the demigods. In their uncontained jealousy of the gods, they go through torturous mental pain. Despite being endowed with great intelligence, they are unable to see the truth because of strong karmic obscurations.

Geshe la commented that we do not have to look for other realms to understand these sufferings, they are around us. He gave several examples. There are so many people who go through similar miseries. As such, we must make effort towards Dharma practice to get rid of the negative karmas that cause these rebirths.

Synopsis, Session 20

The session began with Geshe la's brief explanation of the Tibetan greeting, *Tashi Delek*. *Tashi* means auspiciousness and *Delek* means happiness and wellbeing. So it becomes a very profound greeting that says, “may you achieve the auspiciousness of enlightenment and nirvana”. He touched upon verses 103-107 of the Text during the session.

In verse 103, Nagarjuna establishes that samsara is full of suffering and owing to the conditioned susceptibility of all sentient beings to suffering, every kind of birth in it is unfortunate. Elaborating on this, Geshe la pointed out that although a birth in the human realm is considered precious and more fortunate, it is still not devoid of the conditioned suffering due to fragility of our psychophysical aggregates. We are subject to influence of our surroundings. Physically, we are exposed to all kinds of harm. Mentally, our emotions are uncontrolled, immature and volatile.

As such, in verse 104, Nagarjuna counsels to strive for Nirvana with a sense of urgency. He urges that “ *Even if one’s head or clothing should suddenly catch Fire/ one should forgo extinguishing it and Exert oneself rather in putting an end to Rebirth.*” Geshe explained that this means one must develop renunciation. Actual renunciation is to give up obsession for this life and the next lives based on the understanding of the true nature of samsara. Every birth in it is an obstruction.

Following this, Nagarjuna instructs on how to achieve Nirvana in Verse 105. He highlights the method of achieving nirvana through morality, wisdom and concentration. Here he explains the state of nirvana as being an immaculate state of peace and freedom. Geshe la explained the different understandings of this “immaculate state of peace and freedom” in terms of literal and metaphorical meaning, and tantric practices. In Verse 106, Nagarjuna highlights the practice

of seven limbs: Recollection, Discernment, Effort, Joy, Purification, Concentration and Equanimity, as the cause for Nirvana.

In Verse 107, he stresses on the unity of Concentration and Wisdom to attain Nirvana. He asserts that the one who combines these two can shrink the samsaric ocean into the size of water that a hoof-print can hold. Geshe la further explained that these two qualities depend on one another. Even in our studies, when we concentrate, we analyze better and vice versa.

Synopsis, Session 21

Geshe la explained Verses 108-111 of the Text during the session.

In Verse 108, Nagarjuna counsels to ignore the inconsequential questions that do not bring peace/nirvana to anyone. He particularly mentions the 14 questions that the Buddha left unanswered. Elaborating on this, Geshe la stated that the primary purpose of Buddha's teachings is to identify, reduce and remove sufferings. The "14 Unanswered Questions" are: whether the self and universe are eternal, not eternal, both or neither; whether they are finite, infinite, both or neither; whether self continues to exist after death, not, both or neither; and whether the body and life force are of same entity or different entities. These questions were rejected not only because they could not bring peace but also because the ones who asked these questions already believed in inherent independent existence and had no openness required for an honest debate. Instead, Geshe la advised, "contemplate on the questions of impermanence and interdependence and try to develop conviction. These will bring peace and nirvana."

In Verses 109-111, Nagarjuna introduces the chain of existence through 12 links of Dependent Origination. The 12 links of Dependent Origination that arise from each other and form an endless cycle until liberation are: 1. Ignorance, 2. Karma, 3. Consciousness, 4. Name and Form, 5. The Six Faculties, 6. Contact, 7. Sensation, 9. Craving, 10. Grasping, 11. Existence and 12. Samsaric sufferings of sickness, aging and destitution, death and so on.

Geshe la explained the 12 links with help of the wheel of life chart and pointed to how each link is represented. After birth, ignorance creates all the problems. Ignorance is of two types: 1. Mere lack of knowledge and 2. Misconception of reality. Here the emphasis is on the latter. Since all our activities arise out of our understanding of the reality, when we have a misconception of the reality, everything we do is bound to generate negative karmas and therefore lead to sufferings. The reality is that everything arises depending on causes and conditions.

As Nagarjuna establishes that the birth is main cause for all sufferings and only by ending birth will all sufferings be overcome, Geshe la advised to make a genuine effort to not take this ordinary birth propelled by negative emotions and contaminated actions. Even if avoiding birth altogether is a difficult task, one can at least try to attain rebirth in better realms such as the human realm, endowed with the gift of human intelligence and opportunity to engage in Dharma practice.

Synopsis, Session 22

Geshe la explained Verses 112-123 of the Text (the concluding part) during the session.

In Verse 112, Nagarjuna concludes his instructions on the 12 Links of Dependent Origination and asserts the significance of understanding it: *“Whoever is able to see this sees Buddha”*. Geshe la clarified that there is no particular sequencing and that each of the links are interdependent. There are several possibilities for the fruition of the causes in different lifetimes, depending on weight, duration and other factors of the accumulated karmas or mental imprints.

Nagarjuna, in Verse 113, counsels to follow the eight aspects of the Path or the Eightfold Path. They are: Right View, Right Conceptualization, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. This, Geshe la added, is among the most important of the Buddha’s teachings; it was given right after the Buddha’s Enlightenment.

In Verses 114 and 115, Nagarjuna counsels to always strive to realize the Four Noble Truths: all that arises is suffering, craving is the main cause of suffering, its cessation is liberation and the Eightfold Path is the path to cessation. Encouraging the so-called householders, like the King addressed in the text or lay people in general, to put effort and attain liberation, he points out in Verse 116 that all the Buddhas were previously ordinary beings subject to mental afflictions.

Summing up his teachings, Nagarjuna, in Verses 117 and 118, states that the most important practice is to subdue the mind since it is the root of Dharma. He accepts that even a monk would find it difficult to accomplish all the instructions given so far, as such, one must practice well whatever good qualities and instructions one chooses to work on. Geshe la explained the two interpretations of this line.

Verses 119 – 121 are devoted to Dedication. Nagarjuna counsels to dedicate one’s virtues and good deeds to the attainment of Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings just like Arya Avalokiteshvara and rejoice in those of the others. Geshe la explained that dedicating one’s positive virtues is the best way to ensure they are never lost.

Finally, in Verses 122 and 123, Nagarjuna makes an offering that ‘may the one who has attained Buddhahood through the practice of these instructions attain the transcendent state’: *“of name only, peace, fearlessness, unsullied, and perfect”*.

-----X-----

www.furhhdl.org

