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## Study Group – Aryadeva’s 400 Verses

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*Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga*

*Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak*

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I am very happy that we have come together again today.  
I thank you and welcome you.

You all know the importance of generating a good motivation at the beginning and at the end: initially a good motivation for the action, which is followed by a good dedication at the end.

One should base all one’s activities on love and compassion, which are the basis of bodhicitta. First one generates the motivation of bodhicitta based on love and compassion, and after the action one dedicates with bodhicitta based on love and compassion. By basing bodhicitta on love and compassion one can see how bodhicitta is the root of all qualities.

One should consider oneself very fortunate to be able to generate an understanding of bodhicitta. One has not been able to do so for many lifetimes, but now in this lifetime one has found the Dharma, a qualified virtuous friend and an understanding of bodhicitta. These come about very rarely, and having found them now shows that one has many merits. One should therefore rejoice in one’s good fortune.

Having found the Dharma in this life you then also train your mind in the Dharma and bodhicitta. In order for one’s Dharma to be effective it needs to be applied to unsuitable mental states. If one places the insight gained from listening and contemplating over here and one’s unsuitable mental states over there, then the Dharma will not help to improve one’s mind.

One is very fortunate to have some understanding of the Dharma. There are many, many people who wish to have mental happiness, but who are unable to achieve it because of a lack of Dharma knowledge. But with Dharma knowledge one has the method for achieving inner happiness. Because the majority of beings are not in that state one should feel very fortunate.

You should now generate the motivation of bodhicitta thinking, ‘I have to attain complete enlightenment for the welfare of all sentient beings, and in order to achieve this aim, I am going to listen to this profound teaching and then I am going to put it into practice as much as possible’.

I myself try to practice in this way, by generating the thought of bodhicitta - wanting to attain complete enlightenment for the welfare of all sentient beings, and wanting to liberate all sentient beings from their sufferings. I find that the more I am able to generate these thoughts the happier my mind becomes.

The text is called *The Treatise of Four Hundred Verses [on the practise of the Bodhisattva Yogas] put into Word and Chapter*.

It is divided into four major outlines

1. Meaning of the title
2. Translators prostration
3. Meaning of the text
4. Colophon or conclusion

### 1. Meaning of the title

The Sanskrit title of the text is *Tsadu-shadaka Shastra Karika Nama*. *Tsadu* means four, *shadaka* means hundred, *shastra* means treatise, *karika* means put into word and chapter, and *nama* means it is called. So the text is called *The Treatise of Four Hundred Verses put into Word and Chapter*.

The text has sixteen chapters, each of which has twenty-five verses, which gives us four hundred verses. The original root text was called *The Treatise of Hundreds*. Even though it is implicit, four was not explicitly stated by Aryadeva when he composed the root text. In fact the four was added by Chandrakirti, who wrote an extensive commentary to *The Four Hundred Verses*.

Aryadeva called the text the *Treatise of Hundreds* because of its function, which is to dispel misconceptions. *Hundreds* is meant only figuratively, and not as a definitive number. In actuality the number of misconceptions is limitless, and this text dispels them all.

The relevance of the title also becomes clearer when one looks at the definition of a *pure Buddhist treatise*, which is *pure speech endowed with the qualities of generation and refuge*. This text eliminates hundreds of misconceptions and categories of afflictions by generating the antidote, and rescues sentient beings from the suffering of lower realms in particular, and cyclic existence in general. It is a pure Buddhist treatise.

Because of its function it was originally called, as Chandrakirti explained, *The Treatise of Hundreds*. Once one knows the meaning of the title one can read the text with the appropriate motivation.

Other scholars mistakenly assigned a different meaning to the name but we won’t go into that right now.

### 2. Translator’s prostration

The translator’s prostration is to Youthful Manjushri, and the purpose is twofold.

a. To indicate that the text belongs to the Abhidharma basket of teachings the translator prostrates to the Youthful Manjushri, who is the deity of wisdom. Any teaching of the Buddha will fall into one of the three baskets of teachings - the Abhidharma basket, the Sutra basket or the Vinaya basket. One purpose of the translator’s prostration at the beginning of the text is for the translator to show what basket the teachings belong to. This text falls into the category of the Abhidharma basket, because it is a text that on an explicit level deals primarily with the higher training of wisdom. But that does not mean preclude dealing with other aspects of the path on an explicit level - it is just that they are not the primary focus.

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We explained this in great detail when we went through the translator's prostration to *Introduction to the Middle Way*, so you can refer to that explanation.<sup>1</sup>

b. The second purpose is to be able complete the translation of the text.

### 3. Meaning of the Text

This comes in two parts:

3.1. An overview of the text

3.2. Specific explanation of the different chapters

#### 3.1. An overview of the text

3.1.1. Showing the qualities of the author

3.1.2. Eliminating misconceptions of other texts

3.1.3. Summary of the essential thought of the text.

##### 3.1.1 Showing the qualities of the author

This is similar to showing the greatness of the author at the beginning of the *Lam rim*.

The author of the text is the sage Aryadeva, who was a direct disciple of Nagarjuna. For this reason one can say that this text does not divert from the thought of Nagarjuna. What this means is that the thought of this text does not contradict *The Collection of Six Texts*<sup>2</sup> by Nagarjuna. This becomes significant because later on, as we shall see, there are some scholars who question the purpose and validity of this text.

Aryadeva was born in Sri Lanka as a prince of a royal family. After some time he gave up the life of a prince, became ordained, went to South India and studied at the feet of Nagarjuna. This is really a very pure life story.

He studied both the systems of sutra and tantra extensively at the feet of Nagarjuna and through his practice attained the illusory body. He therefore attained enlightenment in that very lifetime, because if someone attains the illusory body they attain enlightenment in that

very lifetime. As there are sources showing he attained the illusory body, one knows that Aryadeva attained enlightenment within that very lifetime.

#### 3.1.2. Eliminating misconceptions of other texts

Then comes the refutation of some mistaken views in a commentary on *The Four-hundred Verses* by the Indian pandit Ven. Dharmapala. Two things are being refuted: Ven. Dharmapala's mistaken interpretation of the title and his mistaken interpretation of the essential meaning of the text.

##### a. Mistaken interpretation of the title

Ven. Dharmapala said that the text is called the *Treatise of Hundreds* because the first eight chapters are the hundred-fold explanation of the Dharma and the second eight chapters are a hundred-fold discussion of the Dharma. He gave a two-fold meaning to the title, relating it differently to the first eight chapters and the second eight chapters.

Chandrakirti said this is incorrect and that it shows that Ven. Dharmapala did not read the text very carefully. He says that Aryadeva composed the text solely for the purpose of giving a person with a Mahayana aspiration a complete explanation of the whole Mahayana path, and that the text does so in a continuous and complete manner.

##### b. Mistaken interpretation of the essential meaning of the text

Dharmapala assigned the refutation of the inherent existence of conceptually fabricated phenomena, i.e. the Mind Only point of view, as the essential meaning of the text. But there is no doubt Aryadeva is a person who does not accept any kind of true existence, since he establishes the lack of true existence of dependent arising. He is not a person who accepts other-powered phenomena or thoroughly-established phenomena as existing truly. In the mind of Aryadeva there is not the slightest assertion of any type of true existence.

Aryadeva establishes that in order to even just attain individual liberation one needs to realise subtle selflessness of phenomena, something that is not ascertained by the Realists.

#### 3.1.3. The Direction of the Text in Brief

Here an *objection* is posited: If both Aryadeva's text and Nagarjuna's text are of the same thought, then does that not make Aryadeva's text redundant?

The answer is that this is not the case. Even though Nagarjuna's texts refute misconceptions of both Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike they are not argumentative texts, but primarily concerned with establishing the pure Buddhist view for those wanting to attain liberation and enlightenment. Aryadeva, however, goes to great lengths to refute the different misconceptions and to engage with the different positions more. It is a more argumentative text.

Aryadeva's text establishes Nagarjuna's text as the text showing the yogi practices that have to be followed in order to attain complete enlightenment. By doing so it

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<sup>1</sup> 12 March 2002

<sup>2</sup> *Rig-tzog truk*

From Jetsun Cho gi Gyaltzen's *The General Explanation on the first Chapter of the Abhisamayalamkara*.

Four texts conveying the object: suchness of dependent arising; two texts showing the object possessor, the view realising emptiness, to be the root of the path leading to liberation.

The first set again has two: Two texts primarily eliminating the object of negation: true existence; two texts showing the validity of activity and action despite lacking true existence.

The first two: 1) The *Root Wisdom* eliminating 'true phenomena', the thesis of the self of person and phenomena mentally constructed by those propounding 'real existence'. 2) The *Grounding Fine* refuting the 'Sixteen Subjects of Intellectuals' used to prove 'real existence'.

The second two: 1) The *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness* showing in general the validity of activity and action despite lack of true existence, elaborating on *Root Wisdom*'s seventh chapter 'Analysis of Generation, Abiding and Disintegration'. 2) The *Elimination of Dispute* showing the validity of refutation and establishment despite lack of true existence, elaborating on the first chapter of *Root Wisdom*, 'Analysis of Conditions'.

The remaining two are the *Precious Garland* and the *Sixty Reasons*. They explain the realisation of the two truths that is indispensable for liberation from samsara. What need is there to talk about attaining Buddhahood? They also explain the need for a path abandoning the extreme views relating to the existence and non-existence of a path to liberation.

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implicitly shows that those wanting to attain lesser liberation also need to realise the suchness of phenomena.

*Opponent: The Four-hundred Verses are still redundant because this has been done already by Nagarjuna's Precious Garland of the Middle Way.*

The answer is that there is no fault because this text deals extensively with refuting the four misconceptions of grasping at purity, happiness, permanence and self as a preparation for the generation of bodhicitta; it is an extensive explanation of training in the path common to the medium capable being as preparation for bodhicitta. *The Four-hundred Verses* is also not redundant because it refutes misconceptions with regards to the two truths, also taught by Nagarjuna, in a broader manner.

Another point that is raised is the absence of a homage at the beginning of the text, which is a requirement that one finds in all ancient texts. Chandrakirti says that Aryadeva did not explicitly state a homage at the beginning of the text, in order to drive the point home that the thought of his text is no different from Nagarjuna's text, and to show his affinity with the thought of Nagarjuna. Implicitly, of course Aryadeva would pay homage to the buddhas, bodhisattvas and so forth.

#### **How does the text show the stages of the path?**

How does the text show the stages of the path? The answer is by showing the mode of abiding of illusory worldly phenomena, and then their ultimate nature. Initially the text explains the conventional illusory nature of phenomena, their nominal side, and then it explains their ultimate nature. From the point of view of the two truths one can say that first conventional truth is explained and after that ultimate truth is explained. The conventional illusory truth becomes the method through which ultimate truth is realised.

Next comes an overview of the chapters of the *Four Hundred Verses*, and then comes a specific explanation of the individual verses. You should read through the text in advance in order to prepare yourselves for the class. Then what you hear in the teaching will be clearer.

*Transcribed from tape by Adair Bunnett  
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Edited Version*

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