
Study Group – *Aryadeva's 400 Verses*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual we sit in a proper, comfortable position and set an appropriate motivation in our mind such as, 'In order to benefit all sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment, and so for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice'.

1.1. Why most ordinary people do not follow this teaching

1.1.1. Difficulty of finding a listener with the prerequisite qualities

1.1.1.3. ELIMINATING ARGUMENTS

1.1.1.3.1. PROVING THE SUBDUER'S OMNISCIENCE (CONT.)

1.1.1.3.1.3. Means to gain certainty regarding extremely hidden matters taught by the Teacher

This heading explains how to gain a certainty about extremely hidden phenomena. As explained last week, extremely hidden phenomena are phenomena or objects that cannot be seen directly with our senses or understood through inference. So, to establish their existence we have to rely upon the speech of valid beings such as an enlightened being, e.g. citations from the Buddha. Thus 'extremely hidden matters' refers to very subtle phenomena.

Question: If he is omniscient he must have super-knowledge of hidden things such as the size of Mount Meru and the continents, but how can one be sure of that?

Answer: One can ascertain it with the help of inference.

*Whoever doubts what the Buddha said
About that which is hidden
Should rely on emptiness
And gain conviction in him alone.* 280

The word 'omniscient' at the beginning of the question refers to the Buddha's omniscient mind. This means that the Buddha is able to see all existence even in its subtlest aspects. For example when we look at an object such as a vase, we see it as a concrete object, but our cognition fails to see the subtle atoms within the object. Whereas when the Buddha looks at any object, he sees it in its entirety, even to the subtlest level of the smallest atoms.

In order for an object to exist as a concrete object, it has to gather all the causes and conditions. Seeing things at their subtlest level refers not only to seeing the subtlest atoms, but also to seeing where each atom may have been gathered from, and at what time and from which place it was gathered. All of these subtleties are seen simultaneously when an object is viewed by an omniscient mind. That is because there are no obstructions whatsoever in the Buddha's mind. That is what 'omniscient mind' refers to. Whereas an ordinary sentient being's mind is filled with obstructions, either to liberation or to omniscience, and having those obstructions prevents ordinary beings from seeing the subtlest level of phenomena.

Establishing the validity of extremely hidden phenomena

In the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this heading, 'inference' refers to understanding hidden phenomena. We can see the physical aspect of a clock directly with our eyes, with our visual perception. However, we cannot see the impermanence of the clock directly with our eyes. For that we have to rely on another factor, which is inference. Inference refers to cognising an object by depending on logical reasoning. Therefore that which can be perceived through logical reasons is perceived through inference. Those students who have been coming to classes for some time will recall that we covered mind and cognition when we studied *lo rig*, which is basically about mind and awareness, while the explanations according to the Prasangika point of view of awareness and cognition were covered when we studied the Middle-Way text, the *Madhyamakavatara*.

As the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

One might wonder whether what the Buddha has said is true or not regarding the size of the abodes, bodies and lifespans of the six kinds of gods of the Desire Realm and so forth from whom one is separated by time and place, and regarding the size of the human physical world and so on, all of which are hidden to common beings.

We might doubt whether things that are not directly seen by human beings are true or not. Thus one may doubt whether the Buddha's explanations of different realms e.g. the god realms, the size of the world, the different universes and so forth are in fact actually true. So:

To dispel such doubts one should take as example the fact that the features of the two truths which are very subtle and difficult to understand—the teaching that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence together with the feasibility of all actions and agents—are actually as he explained.

One must try to really pay attention and get to the nitty-gritty of that explanation to understand it.

Understanding through this that the extremely hidden things he taught are just as he described, one should gain conviction that he alone is omniscient.

The Buddha explained the two truths, which are slightly hidden phenomena, comprehensively and with great clarity, and we can ascertain the validity of what he said with our own reasoning. As he taught about slightly hidden phenomena with such accuracy and clarity we can therefore accept what taught about extremely hidden phenomena.

As the commentary further explain:

Having ascertained dependent arising free from fabricated extremes through correct reasoning without relying on scriptural citations as proof, one should ascertain extremely hidden things relying on the Buddha's words as reason.

Dharmakirti said that one uses citations from the Buddha's teachings as a reasoning to understand other hidden phenomena. One can cite the Buddha's explanations of how all products are impermanent, and all phenomena are selfless as a means of gauging the validity of other parts of his teachings. One can assert the validity of all products being impermanent and all phenomena being selfless through one's own reasoning, e.g. we can give a valid reason why products are impermanent. Thus what Dharmakirti is explaining is that by establishing the validity of slightly hidden phenomena, one can validate extremely hidden phenomena. That is Dharmakirti's main point.

Establishing the validity of slightly hidden phenomena

How can we validate slightly hidden phenomena through our own reasoning?

Do you think that products being impermanent and phenomena being selfless can be validated through reasoning? What do you think? Why are products impermanent? What would the reason be?

Student: Because they are causes.

Being a cause and being impermanent are equally subtle, so how can you use having a cause as a reason to prove that products are impermanent? You have to give a reason such as, sounds are impermanent, because they are a functional phenomenon, for someone who has understood products to be something, but who has not yet realised that they are impermanent.

Why is it important to establish a reason?

One should be able to readily assert a logical reasoning as cited in the teachings to prove, for example, that products are impermanent. Without being able to establish those reasons, one could not then be able to understand emptiness, because emptiness itself is understood by establishing a reasoning.

When a logical reason is given to establish that products are impermanent, then the wrong conception of products being permanent is removed. Likewise when the reasons for phenomena being selfless are established, then the wrong conception of viewing phenomena as having a self is removed. In other words, when you prove that products are not permanent, and that phenomena do not have a self then you prove that such conceptions are wrong conceptions.

Thus when the correct reason for products being impermanent is established, the wrong conception of grasping at permanence is harmed. That grasping at permanence is harmed with the correct reasoning of products being impermanent. Likewise, when the correct reason for phenomena being selfless is established, then the wrong conception in relation to that grasping to a self is harmed. It is harmed by establishing the correct reasons for phenomena to be selfless, which by its very establishment contradicts the perception of grasping at a self. It is by removing that wrong conception that one gains the correct view establishing selflessness and emptiness.

What that further establishes is that if these wrong conceptions such as grasping at permanence and grasping at an inherently existent self, are harmed, then through the appropriate antidote such a wrong conception can be eradicated from one's mind.

Applying this logic to specific examples

When the possibility of abandoning the wrong conception of grasping at the self is seen, then it is possible to establish the possibility of obtaining liberation. This is said to be the sound reasoning that establishes liberation, or nirvana. In establishing that possibility one first has to see that it is possible to eradicate the wrong conception of grasping at the self, which obstructs the attainment of liberation or nirvana. In order for that to be established one must first establish that the conception of grasping at a self is a wrong conception.

The validity of nirvana or liberation is established through sound logical reasoning that eradicates the wrong conception of grasping at the self. Furthermore, when the two types of grasping at an inherent extent self, i.e. grasping

at the self of person and grasping at the self of phenomena, have been eradicated then what still remains is a residue of their imprints. These imprints cause the faulty appearance of phenomena appearing as inherently existent even though one doesn't believe that to be the case. Even though the two types of grasping at the self have already been eradicated, that faulty appearance of inherent existence is still there because of the imprints that have been left in the mind. That obstruction is the obstruction to omniscience, and the faulty appearance can be removed through further development of wisdom, together with perfecting the accumulation of merit. With those two combined, one can completely eradicate the faulty appearance, and obtain the state of omniscience. That is how the state of omniscience or enlightenment can be established through sound reasoning.

When one uses sound and logical reasoning to establish that products are impermanent and that phenomena are selfless, then the attainment of the realisation of impermanence and selflessness proves the validity or incontrovertibility of the Buddha's words. In other words, the Buddha's words are proven to be incontrovertible by gaining the realisations and understanding for oneself. When one gains that understanding for oneself then that automatically proves the Buddha's words to be incontrovertible.

When the Buddha's words in relation to the impermanence of products and the lack of an inherently existent self of phenomena are established well, then one can very easily establish the validity of obtaining a high status in future lives, such as obtaining rebirth as a god or a human. As far as our perception goes, those mundane attainments in cyclic existence are extremely hidden phenomena, because of the fact that it takes many causes and conditions to obtain the high status of being reborn in the god realms or the human realm. Many specific karmic causes and conditions have to take be acquired, such as training in morality and generosity and so forth, in order to attain the goal of a high status rebirth. Because of those subtleties the causes for a good rebirth are extremely hidden phenomena, even though it is a mundane attainment.

When citations from the Buddha in relation to the ultimate goals of liberation and enlightenment are established through sound logical reasoning, then other extremely hidden phenomena can be established automatically, because of the fact that when a very high level of attainment is established through sound reasoning, then mundane goals are easily understood as being valid.

This ultimately proves through logical reasons that the Buddha, is incontrovertibly a valid being; meaning a being who is able to perceive all levels of phenomena directly and who, with compassion, is solely devoted to benefit all sentient beings. That is what valid being means.

Thus:

Having ascertained dependent arising free from fabricated extremes through correct reasoning without relying on scriptural citations as proof, one should ascertain extremely hidden things relying on the Buddha's words as reason.

Here are the logical reasons that establish the validity of citations from the Buddha's teachings. In the syllogism, 'The citation "through generosity one accrues wealth and through morality one obtains high status" is incontrovertible in its meaning, because the meaning of these words cannot be invalidated by any of the three kinds of cognitions used to investigate them', the predicate is that the citations are valid

or 'incontrovertible', and the reason is 'because it can not be invalidated when investigated using the three kinds of cognitions'. Thus the Buddha's statements can be established as being incontrovertible with those reasons and in that way one generates strong faith in the Buddha.¹

As the commentary further reads:

Regarding the general presentation of this, the explanations of Dignaga and his spiritual son are like those of the great trailblazers [some other translations use 'charioteers']. In this context objects can be understood through the presentation of four kinds of valid cognition

Dignaga and his spiritual son established two types of cognition: direct cognition and cognition through inference. However the explanation here is based on a text called *Tsiksel* (another teaching on valid cognition) in which four types of valid cognition are established.

These four kinds of valid cognition (which are listed in footnote 9 on page 366) are direct valid cognition, inferential valid cognition, valid cognition through appraisal and valid cognition through scripture. Valid cognition through appraisal refers to establishing or proving that something is valid through the use of examples or analogies. Valid cognition through scripture is what we have been referring to earlier; that citations from the Buddha are valid or incontrovertible. However valid cognition through appraisal and valid cognition through scripture is said to be subsumed into inferential cognition.

1.1.1.3.2. SHOWING THAT OTHERS' TEACHERS ARE NOT AUTHENTIC

Those who find it hard to see 281
This world are ignorant of others.
Those who follow them will be
Misled for a very long time.

While the Buddha is established as being a valid being, because he is able to perceive directly all levels of phenomena (obvious phenomena, hidden phenomena, slightly hidden phenomena and extremely hidden phenomena) with his omniscient mind, teachers or expounders of other doctrines are unable perceive very hidden phenomena. What is being established here is how other beings lack that omniscient ability.

As the commentary reads in explanation of the verse:

Non-Buddhist teachers who have difficulty in discerning even the way coarse cause and effects operate in relation to the physical environment and inhabitants of this world are ignorant regarding other subtle matters.

Here, we can refer to the earlier chapters that went into great detail refuting the non-Buddhist schools' assertions, such as the absurd assertion that certain impermanent phenomena are permanent, the different citations of time, and assertions about a self, partless atoms and so forth. Their assertions show that even coarse phenomena, not to mention the subtleties of reality, are obscured for the expounders of the non-Buddhist theses.

Coarse phenomena, like the physical environment and so forth are mentioned in the commentary as 'physical environment and inhabitants'. So if even the very coarse reality of phenomena is obscured from their view then there is no need to mention not being able to properly establish

the subtleties of phenomena. As the commentary further reads:

People who follow them will thus come under the influence of innate and intellectually formed attitudes which must be given up, and they will be misled for a very long time. Those interested in their own good should leave false teachers.

The term 'innate and intellectually formed attitudes' is in relation to wrong conceptions of the ultimate nature of phenomena. These misconceptions are either innate or intellectually-acquired, and if people cannot give them up, these wrong conceptions will be further reinforced, and thus 'they will be misled for a very long time.'

Innate and intellectually acquired attitudes, specifically refers to the innate and intellectually acquired misconceptions of grasping at the self. These misconceptions have been explained earlier², however to reiterate the main points: Innate grasping means the grasping at a self that we have had from beginningless time as an ordinary person. We didn't acquire it intellectually as we have it naturally within us. Whereas intellectually acquired means that which is acquired through other external sources i.e. doctrines, philosophies and so forth.

One must remember that all of the explanations given here should be taken as personal advice. Even though 'people who follow them', may sound like it is referring to other beings and that we are talking about someone else, in fact, we should take this as personal advice, and not be influenced by innate and intellectually acquired attitudes. As followers of a correct tenet of Buddhism, we do not have intellectually-acquired or intellectually formed wrong conceptions. They would have been removed by adhering to the correct explanations of selflessness, however we still have the innate grasping at a self, and if we allow our attitudes to be influenced by that innate grasping at a self, then we will be misled and liberation and enlightenment will be out of reach for a long time. Thus we who strive to achieve the goals of liberation and enlightenment must be constantly conscientious, and beware of being misled by the wrong conception of, specifically in our case, innate self-grasping.

The last line of the explanation in the commentary is:

They should trust and value the true one.

Again we should take that as personal advice and relate it to our personal practice. Being aware of our situation and our conditions right now, we should rejoice and feel very fortunate that we have come into contact with the unmistakable teachings, and teachers who propound the teachings. It is indeed rare to find teachings that explain how products are impermanent and that all phenomena are selfless. These teachings, being valid, incontrovertible and unmistakable, lead us to the ultimate goals. We must realise that we are extremely fortunate to come into contact with the teachings and the teachers who propound them and feel happy about that. Being aware of that, we must take advantage and try to use our time and energy to understand them, and then put them into practice. On a daily basis we should also make strong aspirational prayers such as, 'In this life and in all future lives may I never be separated from the true sources of the teachings and the teachers who propound these teachings'.

¹ This is covered at greater length in the teaching of 19 June 2001. Also see footnote 8 on page 366 of the text.

² See *Madhyamakavatara*, 25 March 2003

While we are extremely fortunate to have these conditions of having the unmistakable teachings and the teachers who explain them in an unmistakable way, it could be easy for us to just take it for granted and not do much with these perfect conditions. What a waste if we were to just let the opportunity go! Rather, we should seize this opportunity to really try and gain an understanding, and then reflect again and again on the teachings that explain selflessness and emptiness. Think about the reasonings the teachings give: why things lack an inherently existent self, establishing how things are selfless and lack a permanent nature. Then, the more we familiarise our mind with the reasonings that are given in the teachings, and reflect upon them and their validity, the stronger the imprint on our mind, and on that basis one day we may be able to gain the actual realisations of selflessness and emptiness. In this way it can be useful for us.

It is very meaningful for us to relate to these teachings while we have the resources and the means to do so and try to really reflect upon them and use them in our daily practice. When we use it for our practice then we can begin to see a shift in our mind and we begin to really have some sort of warm feeling from reflecting on these teachings. The mere fact of reflecting on these teachings can give a confirmation, felt in one's heart, which then becomes very meaningful. Whatever validity we gain in our mind becomes a good experience for us at our level. In order for our practice to be pure and authentic, particularly at our level, it is very important to reflect on the impermanent nature of phenomena, particularly the impermanence of our life.

As we all recall from the Lam Rim teachings, not reflecting on impermanence is one of the main faults of becoming complacent in our Dharma practice, as not reflecting on impermanence will initially make us not even think about the Dharma. Even if we were to think about the Dharma, we might not engage in it. Furthermore, even if we engage in the practice of Dharma, we may not be able to keep its continuity if we don't reflect on impermanence again and again. Continuity and pure Dharma practice do not come about if we don't reflect on impermanence. Thus, to encourage us in our practice initially, and then to secure our practice, and to keep the continuity of our practice, we must all reflect on impermanence again and again.

By reflecting on the teachings and trying to put them into practice, we are able to subdue our delusions. Even on a gross level, if we are able to subdue the manifest level of our delusions, it brings a great relief to our mind. We can immediately experience the positive effect of reducing the intensity of the delusions in our mind, even on a manifest level. That is something which really seems to help our mind; we can see a change and a shift take place in our life. That is something you should be able to experience from your practice.

1.1.2. Difficulty of understanding the meaning of the fundamental mode of existence

This heading which is sub-divided into five:

- 1.1.2.1. Why emptiness is feared
- 1.1.2.2. Faults of impeding others' understanding of emptiness
- 1.1.2.3. Taking care not to lapse from the view of suchness
- 1.1.2.4. Stages leading towards suchness
- 1.1.2.5. Recognising suchness

1.1.2.1. WHY EMPTINESS IS FEARED

This heading has three sub-divisions:

- 1.1.2.1.1. Why some, although seeking liberation, follow the Forders
- 1.1.2.1.2. Recognising a person who fears emptiness
- 1.1.2.1.3. Why childish people fear emptiness

1.1.2.1.1. WHY SOME, ALTHOUGH SEEKING LIBERATION, FOLLOW THE FORDERS

Question: Why do those who seek liberation follow the Forders? [which refers to non-Buddhist schools, such as the Samkyas]

Answer: Because they are afraid to listen to teaching on emptiness.

*The unwise take no delight in letting
Their mind follow a guide
Who has done that which is
Most difficult-attained nirvana.* 282

As mentioned previously, those who are not prepared to hear the teachings on emptiness can easily misinterpret what emptiness means, believing that nothing exists. So when the *Heart Sutra* says that there is 'no form' and so forth, they misinterpret that as saying that no form exists at all, and likewise no other phenomena exist at all. Thinking that nothing exists, and losing all sense of reality, believing that they are losing everything, they develop fear in the mind.

As the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

To be taken care of by a spiritual friend and go to the city of Nirvana, having rid oneself of the stains of conceiving things as truly existent, is very difficult. Though one with great compassion who did what was difficult to do has come to guide them, unwise people take no delight in letting their minds follow this guide because they fear emptiness.

That is all quite clearly illustrated` and can be understood without further comment.

1.1.2.1.2. RECOGNISING A PERSON WHO FEARS EMPTINESS

This identifies the type of people would be afraid of emptiness.

Question: Who is afraid? [of emptiness]

Answer:

*When it is not seen, fear does not begin.
When seen, it stops completely.
Thus one can say with certainty:
Those who know a little are afraid.* 283

As the commentary explains:

People like cowherds, who see neither virtues nor faults in it, can hear about emptiness a hundred times without beginning to feel afraid, because they do not regard it as either beneficial or harmful.

This is very vividly explaining that people who have no concern about whether it is beneficial or not can hear, for example, 'form is empty...' and so forth from the *Heart Sutra* many times, but it doesn't really have any effect on their mind, because they take no personal interest in it and thus don't see any benefit or fault.

As the commentary further reads:

When one perceives emptiness directly through a gradual process of hearing, thinking and meditating,...

This refers to the gradual process of acquiring the realisation of emptiness, which is by first hearing about it through teachings, and then thinking, contemplating and analysing it, and then meditating on it. Through that gradual process one then perceives emptiness directly.

Then:

...fear stops completely because one is free from conceptions of a self which are the cause of fear.

This is really a very important point that one should keep in mind. What causes the fear and where does it come from? It is very explicitly mentioned here that the conception of a truly existent self is the cause of fear. When that is removed all fear naturally subsides. It is the misconception of the self that brings that natural grasping at the self, which promotes that notion of 'me' being very important. The self-interest is always saying, 'me', 'what should I do for myself?' 'What will happen to me?' Thus all the fears come about through having a very strong concern about the 'me' or the 'I'.

As the commentary states:

Thus one can say with certainty that fear arises in people who have only a little knowledge of emptiness.

It is also explained in other teachings that those who are beginning to gain some understanding of emptiness, will initially be fearful. That fear is, in fact, initially seen as a good sign because it means that the explanation of emptiness is doing something to one's mind, that it is beginning to alter one's strong view of an independent and inherently existent self. The initial fear that occurs is said to be from a sense of losing everything. It is said that when Lama Tsong Khapa was giving teachings, one of his disciples started to develop that fear and started to hold on to his monk's shirt. When Lama Tsong Khapa saw this he pointed it out saying, 'That's a good sign', meaning that the disciple is getting something. Of course we cannot relate our meagre understanding of emptiness to the high level of understanding that a direct disciple of Lama Tsong Khapa would have gained. However that sort of external analogy proves that gaining some understanding of emptiness can bring fear to the mind.

The commentary then provides an analogy to illustrate the point:

A well-trained person is not afraid to mount a mad elephant...

The term 'mad elephant' can also refer to a wild elephant. Someone who is trained and is skilled in mounting a mad or a wild elephant, would have no fear because they have mastered the mad elephant mounting technique. Likewise trainees who engage in the gradual process of understanding emptiness by hearing it again and again, reading it, then further analysing the teachings on emptiness, and then using that understanding to contemplate and meditate on it will become skilled in the meaning of selflessness or emptiness, and then all fears in relation to understanding emptiness will cease. Otherwise there might be the fault of not being able to identify the object of negation. When the self is negated, the existing self is completely negated; it is the object of negation – an inherently existent person, and not the person itself – that has to be removed in order to understand emptiness. If the person itself is completely negated, that is an extreme view and thus then those fears and misunderstandings will arise.

...nor is an extremely stupid person.

This refers to a person who does not know the dangers of mad or wild elephants, and who doesn't have the skills of mounting a mad elephant. Such a stupid person would have no fear, but that is dangerous, because there is no knowledge of the risks at all.

Finally:

Yet someone who knows a little about the dangers and benefits involved feels frightened.

Someone who knows about the dangers, who has some skills but is not really skilled yet, would fear mounting a mad elephant. This illustrates that with someone who is in the process of understanding emptiness, and who has had not yet realised emptiness directly, but has some conceptual understanding, may initially have some fear.

The earlier points made in the teaching about valid cognition, and how to prove the Buddha to be a valid being and how to establish the reasoning of obvious, slightly hidden and extremely hidden phenomena were explained in the teachings on *lo rig* (mind and mental factors) and *drup ta* (tenets). It is good to refer to those teachings again to freshen the mind with those explanations.

It is really hard at our level, to validate the possibility of obtaining a good rebirth in a future lifetime. In order to validate and establish that in our mind, and also for others, but especially for oneself in our practice, we need to rely on citations from the Buddha's teachings. Then when we gain an understanding of the Buddha as being a valid being, we can accept his sayings as being valid as well, thus proving to our mind that it is possible to obtain a good rebirth in the next lifetime.

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