
Study Group – *Aryadeva's 400 Verses*

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As usual it is appropriate to sit in a comfortable, relaxed posture. Withdrawing our mind from distractions we set our mind by generating a positive motivation such as, 'In order to benefit all sentient beings by freeing them from all suffering, I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

1.1.1.2.1.2. Refuting truly existent auditory objects

The three subdivisions of this heading are:

1.1.1.2.1.2.1. Refutation by examining whether sound is a maker of noise

1.1.1.2.1.2.2. Refutation by examining whether or not sound is apprehended through contact

1.1.1.2.1.2.3. Showing the flaws in this contention

1.1.1.2.1.2.1. Refutation by examining whether sound is a maker of noise

This outline has to be put into the appropriate context. What is being refuted is sound as being inherently existent sound, i.e. as a maker of either inherently existent noise, or noise that is existent by way of its own entity, or truly existent noise. Sound itself does exist, however what is being refuted is sound as an inherently existent phenomenon.

Texts such as this one give a detailed refutation of sound as being inherently existent, truly existent, or existent by way of its own nature and so forth. With a good understanding gained through the analytical process that is described in this text, then when one refers to the Buddha's teachings such as the *Heart Sutra* (where it says there is no sound) one would immediately be able to understand that what that really means is that there is no sound that exists inherently, or independently, or from its own side. That is something that one will be able to reflect upon immediately, as a result of having studied texts similar to this.

It would be a good result if one were to apply one's understanding of emptiness to any text that explains emptiness. Having studied these texts, and reflected upon them, the positive outcome that we should try achieve is spending some time every day in reflecting on the meaning of emptiness. It would be best of course to do this for a few hours every day, but if not then a few minutes reflecting on what emptiness means, and what bodhicitta means, and the actual meaning behind those words. For example, reflecting on emptiness means reminding oneself that things appear as being inherently existent - they appear to exist independently by way of their own entity, or by way of their own nature. In reality that's not how things are. In fact they exist in the opposite way to how they appear to one's consciousnesses. Then, what does bodhicitta mean? Try to simulate the feeling of

bodhicitta in one's mind to go beyond the words: try to feel what bodhicitta means. If we reflect like this even for a few minutes every day then that practice would place very strong imprints on our minds.

The whole purpose of studying is so that we can use what we learn in our daily life. As mentioned in the teachings, the whole purpose of reflecting upon selflessness is so that we can loosen the grip of grasping at the self. Then the practice becomes worthwhile. At our level the manner of practice is to reflect upon emptiness again and again. It is not as if the realisation of emptiness will suddenly come upon us, or that some day some great being will grant us the realisation of emptiness. That is not going to happen. We have got to put in an effort from our own side, and that is why we are studying texts such as this one.

As mentioned previously, it is worthwhile to spend some time reflecting upon how the two types of grasping arise within oneself. Having identified the two types of grasping, one goes further and examines the faults and disadvantages that arise as a consequence of that grasping. Having reflected upon that, and clearly identified how all our problems and difficulties and sufferings arise because of the two types of grasping, the determination to overcome self-grasping slowly becomes stronger in our mind.

Then we will develop a keen interest in developing the two types of selflessness, which serve as an opponent to the two types of grasping within oneself. Even though we may not be able to gain an actual realisation of selflessness, whatever time we do spend in reflecting on selflessness to that extent it will begin to harm the grasping within ourselves. So there is definitely a purpose in reflecting on selflessness.

As we reflect on bodhicitta, we again see how grasping at the self serves as the master, and the self-cherishing mind becomes the slave to that master. Whatever self-cherishing we have is due to grasping at the self. Thus as we contemplate bodhicitta, we reflect on the relevance of overcoming grasping at the self in order to overcome the self-cherishing mind. In that way the whole structure of the teaching on bodhicitta and emptiness becomes relevant to our daily practice and that is how we progress. There is no other way.

With respect to the heading the text reads:

Just as form cannot be looked at in terms of its own suchness, sound too cannot be listened to in this way.

If sound makes a noise as it travels

Why should it not be a speaker?

Yet if it travels noiselessly, how could

Awareness arise in relation to it?

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The earlier verses refuted form as existing in its own way, or by its own entity. Sound is the next object to be discussed. Just as the refutation of form as existing by way of its own entity has been refuted, now sound as being inherently existent is being refuted.

What is being presented here first is the object of negation. In order to be able to establish the emptiness of any object, what is being negated has to be clearly identified first. What is being negated here, (the object of

negation) is sound existing by way of its own entity, meaning existing without having to depend on anything else, without depending on any causes and conditions, i.e. sound existing by its own nature or inherently. Once one identifies that as the object of negation, then the meaning becomes much clearer. So the text presents the faults that arise if sound were to exist inherently.

In explaining the meaning of the verse the commentary reads:

When sound is heard, does hearing occur because it approaches as an object of that which listens or not?

In order to refute the contention that sound is inherently existent, the counter question being asked here is that if sound were to be inherently existent then does the hearing of the sound occur because it approaches the object that listens, or not? In other words does the hearing itself travel towards the consciousness, or not?

In the first case, if it [i.e. sound] approaches as an object of auditory consciousness, does it do so emitting sound or silently?

More simply, if the sound does travel to the consciousness, becoming an object of the auditory consciousness, then does it travel so by making a sound or does it travel silently?

In relation to the first question:

If it travels toward auditory consciousness making a noise as it travels, why is it not a speaker...

The absurdity being pointed out is that if sound travels to the auditory consciousness while emitting a sound, then the sound itself would be the one that produces sound,

...since like Devadatta it travels, emitting sounds? If this is accepted, it follows that it would not be sound.

What is being explained is that if the sound itself is emitting sound as it travels to the auditory consciousness, then it would be like the speaker and so it would not be sound. By default, something that produces sound couldn't be sound itself, just as when Devadatta speaks or makes any sound he is the one who produces the sound, and is not sound itself. Similarly, if sound were to emit sound by itself from its own side as it travelled, then it would be the speaker and not sound itself.

In relation to the second counter question:

Alternatively, if it travels toward auditory consciousness noiselessly, how could awareness focusing on the sound be produced, since no sound is emitted?

If sound travels noiselessly then what is being perceived? How could it be perceived as sound if it doesn't make any sound? That is the absurdity in the second case.

1.1.1.2.1.2.2. Refutation by examining whether or not sound is apprehended through contact

*If sound is apprehended through contact, 319
What apprehends the beginning of sound?
If sound does not come alone,
How can it be apprehended in isolation?*

As the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

Furthermore, if sound is apprehended through contact with the ear organ, what apprehends the beginning of sound before contact occurs?

Here 'beginning' refers to the first moment of sound. Like any substance, every product has its first, second and third moments and so forth. So when a sound is produced, that first moment of sound is what is referred to here as the beginning. At the first moment of sound there wouldn't be time for contact. Who could perceive the first moment of sound as being sound, because there is no contact at that time?

It follows that there is nothing with which to apprehend it, since neither the ear organ nor any other does so. If this is accepted, it follows that it would not be sound. Sound consists of nine substances and thus since it does not come alone, how can sound in isolation be apprehended?

As mentioned previously, sound is made up of the nine substances, which are the four elements, the four that are derived from the elements plus sound. Because it is made up of nine substances sound cannot be said to be apprehended or perceived in isolation by itself.

As the commentary further reads:

It follows that smell and so forth which are inseparably combined with it would also be apprehended, for according to you they must, like the sound, have contact with the ear organ.

The absurdity being pointed out is that as sound is made up of nine substances, then when sound is perceived it is not as if sound can be isolated, and only the substance that is sound perceived. The very composition of sound is a combination of the nine substances, so sound cannot be separated and perceived in isolation. It has to be perceived as a combination of all the substances. That being so, then it follows, 'that smell and so forth which are inseparably combined with it would also be apprehended, for according to you they must, like the sound, have contact with the ear organ'. The absurdity being pointed out is that if sound is perceived through contact with the ear organ, then because the ear organ comes into contact with all the substances, smell and so forth would also have to be perceived. But that is an absurdity.

1.1.1.2.1.2.3. Showing the flaws in this contention [which was mentioned earlier]

Question: What is wrong if the beginning [or the first moment] of sound is not apprehended?

Answer: It would fail to be sound.

*While sound is not heard, it is not sound. 320
It is impossible
For that which is not sound
Finally to turn into sound.*

If the first moment of sound is not apprehended then, by default, it would fail to be sound because, according to the explanation in the text, the definition of sound is that which is perceived by the ear consciousness. So if the first moment of sound is not perceived by the ear consciousness then by default it would have to fail to be sound, as it does not fit with the definition of sound.

Furthermore, as the commentary explains:

Until it is heard it is not sound because, like smell, it is not the ear's object.

Their contention is that, 'It becomes sound when it is heard'. The objection to that from our system is that:

If initially it was not sound but later became sound, it would follow that smell and so forth could do so too, but this is unacceptable with regard to permanent functional things.

If the first moment of sound is not sound, but later becomes sound then the other substances such as smell could also become sound. If what was first not sound can later become sound, then likewise smell could also turn into sound. That would be the absurdity that would follow.

Other schools could not accept that because they accept sound as being a permanent functional thing, and so it is not possible for one entity to change into another entity. The very fact that something is permanent means that its nature, or entity, always remains the same, and can not change. The sutra that is quoted here explains how sound, and so forth, does not arise independently without relating to anything else. Rather, sound arises in dependence on causes and conditions, and not independently without causes and conditions.

Sūtra says:

For instance, in dependence upon the strings and wood
And the hand's effort-through these three together
Sound is produced and issues from
Instruments like the vina and flute.

This explains how sound is not an independently existing entity, but rather a conventionally dependent arising phenomenon. It does so by using the analogy of a vina and a flute. A vina, which is like a small lute, is dependent upon the string and the wood and the effort of hands. In order for sound to be emitted from a vina, or violin, there has to be the wood structure, and the strings upon it, in addition to the function of the hand striking it. For a violin or vina the production of sound is dependent on these three conditions. Likewise, this true for a flute too.

The sutra continues:

When the wise investigate and think
From where it has come and where it has gone,
Searching in the main and intermediate directions,
They find no coming nor going of sound.

Here 'wise' refers to those who have mastered the understanding of interdependent origination and emptiness. When these wise beings investigate sound, they can establish conventionally existent sound. But when an inherently or independently existent sound is searched for it cannot be found anywhere. So the lines, 'From where it has come and where it has gone, Searching in the main and intermediate directions, they find no coming nor going of sound' relate to inherent or independently existent sound. Not finding an inherently existing sound is establishing the emptiness of sound.

I had intended to finish chapter thirteen in this session, but there are five more verses to cover, plus some other

analogies that are explained in detail. So, we might as well leave it for our next session, which will be next year.

We have had a very good year in covering the text. From my own side I feel very fortunate to have been able to present the explanation of this teaching without any obstacles of illness and so forth. So I feel very fortunate.

We can consider ourselves fortunate, in contrast to the beings who are not fortunate enough to grasp the meaning of this teaching, because *400 Verses* is a text that is quite difficult to understand and comprehend. Those who don't have much interest in the topic want to give up and not come to the teaching at all, especially when it sounds complicated or doesn't seem to make much sense to them. But even though the text is quite complicated and difficult to follow, you have kept coming to the sessions, regardless of being able to understand it or not. That means you have the keen interest in the subject itself, so in that way you are fortunate.

When we initially started the study group, I was advised against it by some. They said that previously Geshe Dawa had taught some difficult topics and the group ended up being reduced to only a few people coming; not many lasted. So I was advised against teaching difficult topics, because people might not be able to understand and give up. I started it anyway with the intention to see how far I could go. And it seems that we have got a good result!

The first topic that I taught the study group was the twelve interdependent links, which is quite a difficult topic. However people appreciated it and it went well. The next topic I taught was tenets, again a difficult topic, but nevertheless that seemed to be really taken well. Those who came appreciated it and said that it really seemed to open their minds to further understanding of the Dharma. I felt fortunate that I chose that topic, as it was successful.

Having put energy and time in studying the text zealously throughout the year, it is now an appropriate time to make a strong dedication, which means making strong aspirational prayers. We can make the strong prayer or wish to continuously be able to meet the great masters who propound these teachings, such as the great masters Aryadeva, Asanga, Maitreya, Manjushri, Nagarjuna and so forth. The basic structure of the teachings that they propounded so clearly is of conventional reality as well as ultimate reality, and they structured the whole path around these two realities or truths, i.e. conventional and ultimate truth. These teachings were propounded with great clarity by the great masters throughout the centuries, and later on other great teachers explained these teachings to us very clearly. So we can dedicate thus, 'Having met with a teacher who explain these teachings to us at this time, may I and other like-minded students continuously be able to meet with great teachers, with all the characteristics intact, and who explain the teachings faultlessly'.

Now of course I am not implying in any way that I am a teacher with all the characteristics intact, especially in relation to profound teachings like the ones that we have been covering. I am in no way qualified to be able to give detailed explanations of such a profound teaching.

However, what I can assure you is that I have given whatever explanations as best as I can, with a good intention, with a mind wishing to benefit others. However it is important to make strong prayers and dedications to continuously be with qualified teachers, meaning qualified teachers who have all the characteristics of a perfect teacher intact, continuously in this lifetime and in all future lifetimes.

I always have the attitude that I don't understand much. As a practical benefit of that, I don't seem to develop much pride in thinking that I have grand knowledge. Because of the general attitude I have as being on the lower side of understanding, it is my normal way of conduct to take a lower place. At teachings and so forth I like to go behind and sit at the side, where I am not noticed but more comfortable. However there are others who try to push me ahead saying, 'You should be sitting up at the front'. But I always feel uncomfortable there so I sit at the side. Recently in the teachings at Varanasi, I was sitting somewhat behind as usual, and there happened to be nun seated up at the front, She is from our organisation and knows me, and at one point she looked back, and when she saw me she was very startled to see me seated way behind. Nevertheless, adopting that sort of attitude seems to bring some sort of joy to the mind. I find that it is a more comfortable attitude.

At another teaching in Bodhgaya by His Holiness, organised at Lama Zopa's request, I was sitting below the platform, and at one point Roger Kunsang, (Lama Zopa's attendant) noticed where I was sitting, so he sent a message to someone else to bring me up. She said, 'Please come up and sit on the platform', but I explained that I felt comfortable where I was seated and wish to remain there. So she left me alone, but then another monk, Tenzin Sopa from Kopan, came over and said, 'Please Geshe-la', and again I tried to reason with him that I felt comfortable where I was. Then he said, 'It may be comfortable for you, but it is not for us!'

So, it is my general conduct to adopt a place where I have a bit more freedom for myself. If I am at the side then I am not noticed much and I have a bit more freedom. There are times and occasions where I enjoy having a bit more freedom and really being open to the generosity of others. It would be a really good thing to go out in the street and survive by taking alms, but that is impractical here - it wouldn't work out.

Besides the nice feeling that one gets by seeking alms, and allowing others to be generous, it is also a way to remember the Buddha's conduct, as he advised bikkhus and bikkshunis to adopt a life of depending on alms. That is why it occurred to me that it would be nice to adopt that custom sometimes. In fact, one time in Kushinagar in India I borrowed the begging bowl of another bikkhu and went around for alms with some others. I did that for the sake of remembering the Buddha and his tradition. Whatever I received then I offered back to the bikkhu, so by lending me his bowl he got quite a few offerings himself.

The main point of these stories is that it is important for all of us to recognise the value of modesty, and try to overcome pride within ourselves, especially in relation to

our Dharma brothers and sisters. We are all Dharma brothers and sisters with the same goal. In order to reach our goal we all need to practise and study together. We are here to help each other, not to compete with each other. It is natural that humans have different mental capacities - some may have a sharper intellect, others less and so a little bit slower in learning. Rather than ridiculing and shunning someone who is not very good at learning, or who seems to get it wrong, or who has questions and forth, one must try to help them, to nourish their understanding, and encourage them to go forward. That is how we must use whatever intelligence and knowledge we may have to help and support others, not to generate pride and particularly jealousy between each other. That is something we should try to avoid at all costs.

As advised in the teachings, one must try to adopt the practice of using whatever wisdom one gains from hearing the teachings to contemplate and analyse the teachings, and then using whatever wisdom one has gained from that for meditation. Then the meditation practice becomes a sound firm practice, because we will not be just meditating on some vague understanding or knowledge that we have. Having heard authentic teachings and gained wisdom from that, then analysing using the techniques that are presented in the teachings by using one's own intelligence and wisdom becomes a basis for one's object of meditation. Then meditation becomes really firm and stable. That is the process that we should endeavour to apply.

If one depends on a faith that is derived from merely hearing the qualities and benefits of the practice, then that faith is not a very stable faith. Rather, if we try to cultivate a faith that comes through having heard the teachings, analysed them and thought about them, and then further analysed them with one's own thinking process, then that is what is called a convinced faith. Such a faith is a very firm and stable faith, and it is something that we need to cultivate and develop within ourselves.

Finally I would like to thank you by putting my palms together, because you are all very generous and kind to me. As mentioned in the teachings there is great benefit by giving teachings, but that benefit is dependent upon having listeners. If the listeners have been good listeners then there will definitely be a benefit from the teachings that one gives. Likewise it is mentioned that when we listen to the teachings we will benefit, and that is dependent on the teacher. So there is clearly an interdependent relationship between the one who is giving the teachings and the one who is listening to the teachings. When I thank people for listening to the teachings some say 'That is not appropriate, how could you thank us?' but I know that I am not wrong!

*Transcribed from tape by Adair Bunnett
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Edited Version*

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