

Study Group – Aryadeva's 400 Verses

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As we normally do, it is good to set a motivation for the teachings such as, 'In order to benefit all sentient beings and to liberate them from all suffering I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well.

Setting a motivation can also serve as a pledge. When we generate the motivation of listening to the Dharma and putting it into practice in order to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all mother sentient beings, the part where one commits to putting the teachings into practice is in fact making a pledge to oneself.

1.1.2. Refuting true existence of that which perceives objects

This has two subheadings:

1.1.2.1. Defining the aggregate of recognition

1.1.2.2. Refuting its true existence

1.1.2.1. DEFINING THE AGGREGATE OF RECOGNITION

One needs to understand from the outline that what is being refuted is the aggregate of recognition as being truly existent, or existent by way of its own entity. Earlier, consciousness existing by way of its own entity was refuted, so there might be yet another doubt that the mental factor of recognition or discrimination may be inherently existent. In order to remove any doubts that mental factors also exist by way of their own entity, the specific mental factor translated here as recognition is refuted as being inherently existent.

For the consciousness to perceive things, all three factors of consciousness, the organ and the object must be present. When the consciousness perceives the object the five omnipresent mental factors also function together in apprehending or perceiving the object. These five ever-present or ever-functioning mental factors are feeling, recognition, intention, contact and attention.

With respect to the ever-present mental factor of **feeling**, we can assert from our own experience that whenever we have a conscious mind apprehending an object, there is always a feeling that accompanies that apprehension. Either you feel pleasant by coming into contact with that object, or you may have an unpleasant feeling, and there might be times when you have neither pleasant nor unpleasant feelings, but just a neutral feeling. From our own experience we can definitely assert that there are these three types of feelings - pleasant, unpleasant and neutral.

Recognition or, as sometimes translated discrimination, is defined as the mental factor that sees the aspect of the object. For example, in order to perceive the colour 'blue', the two factors of the consciousness apprehending blue, the eye faculty or eye sense organ, and the object itself, the colour blue, have to be present. With these conditions being intact, then when the consciousness in the act of apprehending the object, recognises the aspect as being blue, then that factor determining it as 'blue' is the mental factor of recognition or discrimination.

The function of the mental factor of **intention** is to move the mind towards the object. Indeed the definition of karma is normally defined as intention, which is an appropriate definition of karma. Going back to the example of perceiving an object such as blue, the factor that naturally and spontaneously moves the mind towards the object without any control, is called the mental factor of intention.

The mental factor of **contact** is said to be the mental factor that serves as the basis for feeling to arise when any object is perceived. It serves as a basis is when the consciousness, the sense organ and the object come into contact. So, that combination of the three conditions for an object to be perceived, which is what contact is, serves as a basis for the mental factor of feeling to arise.

The mental factor of **attention** is that which holds on to a particular object allowing the consciousness to focus on it. This is the function of the mental factor of attention. The ability to identify a particular object is basically because the mental factor of attention keeps the mind focused on the object for a certain duration, which can be very short.

The mental factor of recognition and the aggregate of recognition are actually one and the same - they are synonymous.

An object already seen

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Is perceived by mind like a mirage.

That which posits all phenomena

Is called the aggregate of recognition.

The objection that is raised to which this verse serves as an answer is:

Objection: If sense organs and their objects do not exist inherently, the aggregate of recognition which discerns what is exclusive to them will be non-existent.

Of course the aggregate of recognition is present whenever any one of the five senses perceives an object. For example when we hear something, that which discerns what we are hearing is the function of the mental factor of recognition, which is concurrent with the hearing consciousness. Likewise recognition is always present when we smell, taste or touch something. So the objection here is that the aggregate of recognition could not exist if it doesn't exist inherently.

Answer: Although they do not exist when analysed by reasoning, they are not conventionally non-existent, for mental consciousness apprehends the exclusive aspects of an object such as a visible form which has already been perceived.

What this is saying is that although things do not exist ultimately when analysed by reasoning, they do exist conventionally. This differs from the lower Buddhist schools which assert that if things exist conventionally they also exist ultimately. What is being stated in this answer is that if things exist conventionally that does not mean that they have to exist ultimately, or by way of their own entity.

The answer states that things do exist conventionally 'for mental consciousness apprehends the exclusive aspects of an object such as a visible form which has already been perceived'. What is being indicated here is that when we perceive an object, the fact that we are able to remember what we saw for example the colour 'blue' or that we heard a certain sound etc., is because of the recognition that takes place at that time.

Even though things do not exist inherently when analysed conventionally, they are perceived and they are not non-existent. The commentary gives this analogy:

For instance, though a mirage does not contain even a drop of water, recognition of water occurs.

We all know that even conventionally a mirage does not contain any water. However for someone who perceives a mirage, the recognition of water being there still occurs. Even though there is not even a drop of water there, that does not hinder the recognition of water being generated in the person who perceives the mirage. Using that as an analogy, we can understand that although the objects of the five senses appear as being inherently existent, there is not even an atom of inherent existence there. However the lack of inherent existence does not prevent the recognition of the perceived object from occurring, so even though things do not exist inherently, recognition of those objects can still be present and valid. There is no fault in the recognition being present, but that doesn't mean they have to be inherently existent.

As the commentary explains:

Likewise that which perceives the exclusive aspects of an object, a mental factor positing the exclusive signs of all phenomena, is called the aggregate of recognition.

Here the commentary establishes what I explained earlier: that which perceives the exclusive aspects of an object, such as the colour blue, which then allows us to recognise and say this is 'blue', this is 'red' and so forth, or particular aspects of sound (and likewise with all the other sense objects) is posited as being the aggregate of recognition.

As the commentary concludes:

Phenomena are simply posited by recognition and do not exist by way of their own entity.

From the Prasangika Madhyamika point of view, positing recognition does not validate that things exist by way of their own entity. One can still posit recognition even though things do not exist by way of their own entity. Whereas the lower Buddhist schools posit that the recognition of objects occurs in relation to seeing objects as being inherently existent, and that, they say, is why things are inherently existent. It is that view that is being negated here in our system.

When things are posited by recognition, it is positing the existence of the object but it does not validate the inherent existence or 'existence by way of its own entity' of the object. That should be clear and understood well.

1.1.2.2. REFUTING ITS TRUE EXISTENCE

This refers to refuting the true existence of the aggregate of recognition. Again, one should refresh one's memory about how the different schools posit the existence of phenomena. The schools below the Madhyamika posit things as being inherently existent, as well as existent by way of their own characteristics, and as well as being truly existent. The Svatantrika Madhyamika school however posits inherently existent phenomena but not truly existent phenomena while the Prasangika Madhyamika school refutes all true existence, as well as inherent existence, and existence by way of its own entity or characteristics.

Objection: If the aggregate of recognition does not exist inherently, it is impossible to posit phenomena.

Answer: There is no such error.

In dependence upon the eye and form

Mind arises like an illusion.

It is not reasonable to call

Illusory that which has existence.

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The lower Buddhist schools assert that if the aggregate of recognition is not inherently existent then it is impossible to actually establish phenomena? However in our system there is no error if recognition is not inherently existent.

As an answer to the earlier objection, the main point being explained in the verse is then further clarified in the commentary.

Even though it does not exist by way of its own entity,

Here one must remember all of the synonyms such as not existing inherently, or not existing by its own characteristics, or not existing truly, are implied. Reading on the commentary continues:

...mind arises like a magical illusion in dependence upon the eye and visible form.

What we also can derive from this explanation is the fact that the Prasangika Madhyamika assert that all phenomena are merely labelled, or imputed, by the mind. As described earlier, the aggregate or mental factor of recognition functions, for example, to perceive the aspect of an object such as the colour 'blue'. So, the recognition of the object as 'blue' is from the mental side. It is not as if the object itself appears and calls out saying, 'I am blue'. Rather it is the mind that labels the object, 'This is blue', or 'This is red'. From that we can understand how, as the Prasangika explain, everything is labelled by the mind. That very process of perceiving an object, whatever the object may be, involves the mind saying 'This is blue' or 'This is big or small' and so forth. So that very function of recognition also shows how it is the mind that actually labels objects.

The analogy that is used here is a magical illusion. When a magician conjures things, the classic example being a horse, or here in the west a rabbit, that illusory rabbit or horse does not actually exist, yet the mind perceives a rabbit or horse. The conjured horse or rabbit is a mere illusion, which means that it does not actually exist, but this does not negate the fact that there is the perception of a horse or rabbit. Using the analogy that even though the mind perceives an illusion, it does not negate the existence of mind, we can understand that even though phenomena do not exist inherently or by way of their own entity, the mind that perceives the inherent existence of phenomena can still arise.

As the commentary explains, the mind rises like a magical illusion in dependence upon the eye and visible form. All three conditions arise in dependence upon each other, though none of the conditions are inherently existent. This means that the mind itself lacks inherent existence, the eye or the sense organ lacks inherent existence, and visible form, or the object, also lacks inherent existence. All are equally like an illusion insofar as they lack inherent existence, yet they appear as being inherently existent. They are described as being an illusion because of the fact that they appear as being inherently existent.

As the commentary continues:

Any phenomenon whose existence is existence by way of its own entity cannot be called illusory, just as women who exist in the world are not called illusory.

What is being explained here is that if phenomena were to exist by way of their own entity then you couldn't call it illusory. The example given is 'just as women who exist in the world are not called illusory'. Women who actually exist, who are alive and living would not be called illusory as opposed to women who might be conjured up by magicians or seen through hallucinations and so forth. Similarly if phenomena were inherently existent or existent by way of

their own entity, then you couldn't call them illusory. So the fact that they are called illusory means that phenomena don't exist as they appear to ordinary perceptions.

1.1.3. Showing that lack of true existence is, like magic, a cause for amazement

In explaining the following next verse the assertion in the commentary reads:

Assertion: It is amazing to claim that the sense organs can in no way whatever apprehend objects and that visual consciousness is produced in dependence upon the eye and visible form.

This assertion comes from the lower Buddhist schools. As has been proved earlier, the eye-consciousness, for example, does not have the ability to apprehend objects by way of its own entity or by way of its own side. Having that ability has been refuted by our system. Things are perceived in fact by way of the three conditions of consciousness, the sense organ and the object. The lower schools say that it is very peculiar and amazing that the sense organs cannot apprehend objects (inherently).

The response to that is:

Answer: That alone is no cause for amazement.

When there is nothing on earth 324
That does not amaze the wise,
Why think cognition by the senses
And suchlike are amazing.

As the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

Although when analysed by reasoning a sprout and so forth neither comes into existence from a seed which has ceased nor from one which has not ceased, [sprouts are produced in dependence upon seeds].

This analysis has been presented in the earlier parts of the teaching and in other texts as well. When analysing how the sprout comes about, does it occur at the time of the seed or when the seed has already ceased to exist? The answer to that is that it neither comes into existence from a seed when the seed is present (meaning an inherently existent seed), nor does it come from a seed that has inherently ceased. As the text further reads:

When to the wise there is nothing on earth which is not as amazing as magic, why should one think that cognition of objects by sense consciousnesses which do not have true existence and such-like are amazing, for this applies equally to everything.

What is to be understood as the meaning of, 'when there is nothing on earth that does not amaze the wise' is the understanding of the fact that things are dependent originations while at the same time they lack inherent existence. Thus from a non-inherently existent seed a non-inherently existent sprout is produced. They function to exist interdependently, as a dependent origination. Understanding and seeing that fact is most amazing for the wise. The recognition of the cause (the sense organs), the sense consciousness and the object coming together is not a cause of amazement for the wise, when much greater reasons for amazement are already in place.

1.2. Showing that emptiness of true existence is like magical illusions and so forth

The firebrand's ring and magical creations, 325
Dreams, illusions, and the moon in water,
Mists, echoes, mirages, clouds
And worldly existence are alike.

As the commentary explains:

Thus all dependently arising phenomena are like the ring formed by a firebrand which is whirled quickly.

We are all familiar with this effect. A fire or incense stick when whirled around very quickly looks like a firebrand and from a distance one sees it as a ring of fire, when in fact no ring of fire exists. This is the first of many analogies in the verse. Even though no ring of fire actually exists it is perceived as such by the eye and believed to be so. Using that analogy, though all phenomena do not have even an atom of inherent existence they appear as being inherently existent.

Though the woman created through meditative stabilization and the dream body do not have true existence, they act as causes for erroneous attachment to the self.

'A woman created through meditative stabilization' is a literal translation of a woman who is basically a mere illusion. Although such a woman, or a woman who appears in a dream, does not actually exist, it will still be a cause for attachment to arise for someone who is attached to that form. This analogy is used to show that even though phenomena do not exist inherently, they appear to be inherently existent, and we engage with such objects in the belief that they are actually inherently existent.

We should personalise all of these analogies in our practice to affirm how all of our misconceptions arise from our own mind. For example with the analogy of the firebrand, even though we know theoretically that there is no firebrand, we see it and momentarily we believe in it. From a distance we might believe there is a ring of fire, however when we analyse and find out what is causing it, we realise that there is no firebrand, and it is just one spark of fire that is being turned quickly. To personalise that analogy one must remind oneself that even though things do not exist inherently, not even oneself, still one perceives oneself as being inherently existent and thus the grasping at the self and other phenomena arises because of that misconception.

Another point that is good for us to take note of is that just because something appears as existing in a particular way, and we perceive it that way, that does not negate the fact that the perception itself is valid conventionally. We have to say that the consciousness is still valid in perceiving the thing, even though the object itself does not exist in that way. In relation to the firebrand there is nothing wrong in the perception; it is not as though we have a faulty mind. It is a valid mind which perceives that ring of fire, and there is nothing wrong with our senses - anyone would perceive it as a firebrand. But the fact is that it does not actually exist in that way. There is no real firebrand and it is the same with all the other analogies - there are certain things that may not exist in the way that we perceive them. That is good to understand.

Knowing that something does not exist in the way that it appears conventionally would help to overcome our fear, wouldn't it? When things appear to be dark or spooky, if we remind ourselves that that what we are seeing appears like that, but it doesn't really exist in that way, then that helps us to overcome the fear of whatever seems to be threatening. Similarly that will be true with the real understanding of emptiness. Once we develop a genuine understanding of emptiness which leads to the realisation of emptiness, then strong attachment and all the other delusions can be overcome, and fear can actually be overcome with the genuine realisation of emptiness.

When objects of attachment appear to us, we might notice from our own experience that for as long as the attributes of the object appear attractive and we really believe in that, then to that extent our attachment to the object increases. But as soon as we remind ourselves that even though it appears very attractive and beautiful it does not really exist in that way, our attachment is reduced. Just going through that process of analysis helps to reduce the attachment to the object.

Likewise with an object of anger: for as long as we exaggerate the negative qualities of that object we seem to experience strong anger or hatred. Whereas if we remind ourselves that the negative aspects that appear to us do not really exist in that way, then we will notice that the anger reduces a bit. Our limited experience of how anger and attachment can be reduced through our analysis should be a good sound affirmation of how, if we were to actually realise emptiness, that realisation would serve as an antidote to completely uproot the delusions from their source.

Although the illusory maiden conjured by a magician does not have true existence, she confuses the mind.

It is quite clear that even though things appear as being inherently existent, then just as an illusory maiden does not really exist so too things do not exist inherently.

Similarly the moon in the water,

The analogy of a reflection of the moon on a lake or still water is vivid and it may appear to be the moon that we see in the sky but, as we know logically, it is not the moon. Likewise even though things appear to be inherently existent, in fact in reality they are not inherently existent.

...mists and echoes resounding from mountain clefts and caves give rise to a distorted perception of them as they appear to be. A mirage causes mistaken perception, and clouds in the distance seem like mountains. Worldly existence consisting of environments and living beings, while empty of inherent existence, is able to function. Understand that it is like these analogies.

What is being summarised here is that, as with all the earlier analogies, things do not exist in the way that they appear to the perceptions.

Worldly existence consisting of environments and living beings,

The whole universe can be divided into the two categories of the environment and the living beings in the environment. So all existence, the environment i.e. those things used by living beings, as well as the living beings who live in the environment, are all equally empty of inherent existence:

...while empty of inherent existence, is able to function. Understand that it is like these analogies.

Like the analogies of things that do not exist and yet still appear to function, while the environment and living beings are empty of inherent existence and lack any true existence they still function. Then the commentary concludes:

Understand that it is like these analogies.

Then the commentary quotes from the sutras. Although it is quite straightforward we will read through the verses.

Sutra says:

1. In a young girl's dream she sees
A youth arrive then die, and feels
Happy when he arrives, unhappy when he dies.
Understand all phenomena are like this.

The sutra can be understood quite literally. In a young girl's dream she sees a youth arrive. Even though there is no

handsome young man, in her dream she believes that the young man arrives and then dies. She is happy when she sees the youth arriving but then feels very sad when he dies. All of these emotions occur yet they are just a dream. As in earlier examples the final line reminds us to 'Understand that all phenomena are like this'.

2. Those who conjure illusions create forms
Of various kinds-horses, elephants and chariots.
They are not at all as they appear.
Understand all phenomena are like this.

This verse is using the analogy of a magician conjuring objects like elephants and horses and so forth. While they appear to be very real, they do not exist in reality, so one should understand that all phenomena are like that.

3. The reflection of the moon, shining
In the sky appears in a clear pool,
Yet the moon does not enter the water.
Understand the nature of all phenomena is like this.

As explained in the verse when the reflection of the moon is seen on still, clear water, then it appears like the moon. However it is not as if the moon has travelled from the sky to enter the water, even though the moon appears vividly and clearly there. Thus one should understand that all phenomena are like that.

4. Echoes arise in dependence upon
Caves, mountains, forts and river gorges.
Understand all products are like this.
Phenomena are all like illusions and mirages.

One can relate this analogy to how things do exist. Echoes arise in dependence upon caves and mountains, fords and gorges, so when an echo is produced it is in relation to either caves, the sides of caves or mountains and so forth. Likewise one understands all phenomena to be like this, existent merely in dependence upon causes and conditions.

5. A person who is tormented by thirst
In summer at noon-that transmigrator
Sees mirages as a body of water.
Understand all phenomena are like this.

One could go into quite a lot of detail with this analogy. One of the conditions is a person tormented by thirst. It is noon on a hot, summer day. At such a time and in such conditions the transmigrator, or person, sees mirages of a body of water. Under those particular conditions they believe that there is water there. So using that analogy one could explain much more profoundly how we see things as being inherently existent under certain conditions. We won't go into detail but the main point is that one must understand that all phenomena are similar to this - even though they lack true existence they appear as being truly existent or inherently existent.

6. Although a mirage contains no water
Confused beings want to drink it.
Unreal water cannot be drunk.
Understand all phenomena are like this.

Using this analogy in relation to ourselves, ordinary beings things do not exist inherently or truly by way of their own entity. They appear to us as being truly existent and we totally believe in that. We engage with objects and so forth with that false notion that they do truly exist or exist inherently. But unreal water cannot be drunk even though confused beings want to drink it. Likewise understand that all phenomena are like this for us ordinary beings - even though phenomena or objects do not exist inherently, that is how it appear to us and we totally believe in that appearance.

7. Instantaneously in a cloudless sky
A circle of clouds appears,
But try to find from where they came
Understand all phenomena are like this.

In a seemingly cloudless sky clouds can suddenly appear as if they had existed there all the time. In fact, earlier on there were no clouds, but when the clouds are there they appear to be very solid and realistic. The analogy as used here is that if you were to look for their causes and conditions you could not find where they came from. Yet they did appear there. Understanding this analogy we see that things appear as being truly existent, and really seem to be true and real. But if we were to look to see if they exist in that way, then we would find that they are not truly existent. One should understand all phenomena are like that.

Like mirages and smell-eaters' cities,
Like magical illusions and like dreams,
Objects of meditation are empty of a real entity.
Understand all phenomena are like this.

The summarising stanza by Gyaltzen Rinpoche is:

Thus in the illusory city of the three false worlds
Manipulated by the puppeteer of karmic action
The smell-eater maiden performs her illusory dance.
Amazing that desire should chase a mirage!

2. Presenting the name of the chapter

This is the thirteenth chapter of the Four Hundred on the Yogic Deeds, showing how to meditate on the refutation of sense organs and objects.

This concludes the commentary on the thirteenth chapter, showing how to meditate on the refutation of sense organs and objects, from *Essence of Good Explanations, Explanation of the Four Hundred on the Yogic Deeds of Bodhisattvas*.

We will begin the next chapter in the next session.

*Transcribed from tape by Judy Mayne
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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