
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 usual we shall sit in a comfortable sitting posture and generate a positive attitude in our mind, such as, 'in order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well.

1.4. Showing the need to understand absence of true existence

This has two sub headings.

1.4.1. Inherently existent dependent arising is not seen by the Exalted

1.4.2. Release from worldly existence is gained through understanding emptiness

1.4.1. Inherently existent dependent arising is not seen by the Exalted

Here, 'the Exalted' refers to an Arya who is engaged in meditative equipoise.

Things do not assemble 349
Unless there is an effect.
Aggregation for an effect
Is not included for the Exalted.

In explaining the meaning of the verse the commentary says:

Since nothing is produced by way of its own entity things do not assemble and come together to produce an effect unless there is an effect to produce. Since anything inherently existent would be permanent, it could not rely on an effect.

First of all, 'an effect' relates specifically to products such as compounded phenomena, where there has to be an assembly of things in order for it to be produced. What is being pointed out here is that such an assembly of things is not an inherently existent assembly. If something were to exist inherently then it would not need an assembly of things in order to produce phenomena. The main point is that while there has to be an assembly for compounded phenomena to be produced, that assembly cannot be inherently existent.

If an inherently existent aggregation for the sake of an effect is, in fact, possible then it would have to be perceived by a noble being in a state of meditative equipoise. The fact is, however, that an Arya being in meditative equipoise does not see any aggregation for the sake of an effect taking place.

I have explained this in greater detail earlier. The meaning of the last two lines of the verse was clarified in the teachings on the *Madhyamika*, and in other teachings. For an Arya being in meditative equipoise, there is no appearance of conventional phenomena. In a single-pointed meditative state on emptiness there is no appearance whatsoever of conventional phenomena. So the conclusion, as explained in the teachings, is that not seeing conventional phenomena while in meditative equipoise is ultimate seeing.

What this also implies is that if conventional phenomena were to appear to an Arya being in meditative equipoise, then they would have to be inherently existent. The lines, 'an

aggregation for an effect is not included for the Exalted', mean that an Arya being in meditative equipoise does not see the assembly of an aggregation in order to produce an effect. This implies that an aggregation for an effect is not inherently existent. There can be no inherently existent assembly for an effect to take place, because of the fact that it is not seen by Arya beings.

The main point is illustrated in the last part of the explanation in the text, where it says:

Aggregation for the sake of an effect is not included within the perception of the Exalted during meditative equipoise which sees suchness, because it directly perceives the lack of inherent existence of things.

An Arya being in meditative equipoise does not apprehend conventional phenomena. In relation to a particular phenomenon such as a vase, the non-appearance of the vase to an exalted or noble being in meditative equipoise is the appearance of emptiness of the vase. Such exalted beings don't see conventional phenomena, because they are focused on ultimate phenomena. This further implies that it is not possible for any sentient being's mind to single-pointedly focus on both conventional and ultimate phenomena at the same time. It is only an enlightened mind that is able to do that.

When a sentient being's mind is single-pointedly focused on ultimate phenomena, conventional phenomena cannot appear, and when conventional phenomena are apprehended, then ultimate phenomena cannot be perceived at the same time. A sentient being, even an Arya, cannot engage with conventional phenomena when in a state of meditative equipoise on emptiness. This means, for example, that an arya being in meditative equipoise would not be able to teach the Dharma, and would not be able to listen to the Dharma. Only an enlightened being, such as Buddha Shakyamuni, is able to simultaneously be in meditative equipoise on emptiness while teaching the Dharma.

We see images of the Buddha with the left hand in the mudra of meditative equipoise and the right hand in the mudra of turning the wheel. You must understand that this indicates that only a buddha, an enlightened being, is able to remain in meditative equipoise while simultaneously being able to teach and propound the Dharma.

The conclusion to take note of is that if the question is, 'Does the conventional exist for the wisdom of an Arya being in meditative equipoise?', then you would have to say that the answer is, 'No, conventional phenomena do not exist for the wisdom of an Arya being in meditative equipoise'. Does a conventional phenomenon exist normally? Generally it does exist. But here the point is that it does not exist in the perception of an Arya being's wisdom of meditative equipoise, in which the non-perception of conventional reality is the perception of emptiness.

In debate one could bring up the question: Is the non-existence of vase emptiness or not? Likewise is the non-perception of a vase the perception of emptiness or not? The conclusion is that the non-existence of a vase is of course not emptiness, however the non-existence of a vase in the wisdom of meditative equipoise of an Arya being is the emptiness of a vase. It is good to take note of these points so that one can relate it to other phenomena and the understanding of emptiness.

This sort of investigation enables one to pinpoint the subtleties in understanding the presentation of ultimate reality or emptiness. It is good to work with these sorts of

topics in one's mind and come to the right conclusions. If we have doubts and questions, and are not familiar with these particular analyses, then we might be lost in doubt and not be able to clarify the point. The subtle points and differences explained in this mode of reasoning will help to remove certain doubts from our mind when they arise.

1.4.2. Release from worldly existence is gained through understanding emptiness

This heading implies that without an understanding of emptiness one will not be released from worldly existence or samsara. In basic language what is being said is that if one has gained a realisation of emptiness then one can obtain freedom from samsara, but freedom from samsara will not be possible without that realisation.

One gains release from cyclic existence when deluded ignorance which conceives things as truly existent ends. This depends on understanding emptiness of inherent existence.

The awareness that is the seed of existence 350
Has objects as its sphere of activity.
When selflessness is seen in objects,
The seed of existence is destroyed.

As mentioned here, the question is whether one will be able to gain release from cyclic existence. The answer is yes, it is definitely possible to gain release from cyclic existence, but that doing so depends on understanding the emptiness of inherent existence. The conclusion is that one can definitely gain release from cyclic existence when the deluded ignorance, which conceives of things as being truly existent, ends. So in order to obtain freedom from cyclic existence one must end that ignorance, which depends on gaining an understanding of the emptiness of inherent existence.

As explained in the commentary, the **first line** of the verse means that:

The seed of worldly existence is the conception that phenomena are truly existent.

The awareness that is said to be the seed of cyclic existence is the conception that phenomena are truly existent i.e. the misconception of grasping at true existence. It is good to take note, as explained in the commentary, that here *existence* refers not just to any existence but specifically to cyclic existence or samsara, and that *awareness* refers to not just any kind of awareness, but the misconception grasping at true existence. This ignorance of grasping at true existence is referred to as the *seed*.

The commentary explains the meaning of the **second line** as:

Objects such as form are its sphere of activity.

The seed has been defined as the ignorance grasping at true existence. The *objects* perceived by that ignorance are presented here as *form*, which appears as being truly existent. So the appearance of true existence in relation to form is explained here as the *sphere of activity*, meaning that ignorance engages in perceiving phenomena such as form, as truly existent.

The phrase, 'objects such as form' includes other objects as well. If we relate that to internal phenomena then this would relate to our five aggregates, which are form, feeling, recognition, compositional factors and consciousness. The five aggregates, referred to here as internal phenomena are the basis of imputation of oneself. So we relate form for example to our physical body, and perceive it as being truly existent, inherently existent or independently existent, which means not relating on anything else, but existing in its own

right. So seeing our body in this way and then grasping at it is called grasping at true existence. It is the same for the other aggregates. That is how we perceive them as being truly existent.

As further explained in the commentary:

The seed of worldly existence is destroyed and one attains liberation by seeing that these objects lack an inherently existent self and by gaining familiarity with this.

Having identified the seed of worldly existence, which as explained previously, is the ignorance of grasping at true existence, this part now explains the **last two lines** in the verse. What is being explained is that one then attains liberation when the seed of worldly existence, which is the ignorance of grasping at true existence, is completely eliminated. How? By 'seeing that these objects lack an inherently existent self'.

After we have understood that perceiving all phenomena as being truly existent is a misapprehension by a faulty state of mind, and that phenomena such as form and the other aggregates lack true existence, we meditate on that - not just once or twice but again and again. In that way we further investigate, and see more and more clearly how they lack true existence. Then through that familiarity one slowly gains a more and more profound understanding of the lack of inherent existence or true existence. Through that familiarity, one will eventually completely destroy the seed or the root of samsara, which is ignorance, and thus obtain liberation.

As further explained in the commentary:

On becoming a Hearer or Solitary Realizer Foe Destroyer or on reaching the eighth ground, one achieves the complete elimination of conceptions of true existence.

This explanation is in accordance with the view of the Prasangika-Madhyamika. According to this viewpoint, grasping at true existence is the deluded obscuration, while the imprint of grasping at true existence is the obscuration to omniscience. The Prasangikas say that deluded obscuration is abandoned when a Hearer or Solitary Realiser attains the level of foe destroyer or arhat. For the Mahayana who has not entered any of the two lower vehicles first but enters the Mahayana path from the very beginning, the conception of true existence, which is the deluded obscuration, is abandoned on the eighth ground. That is what is being specifically explained here.

These are very profound explanations about the necessity of realising emptiness, because without the realisation of emptiness one cannot overcome cyclic existence and obtain liberation. It is good to relate to these explanations and encourage oneself to try with every means to gain that realisation. The process begins with first recognising what cyclic existence is, and this is gained through understanding, for example, the four noble truths. The first noble truth is the truth of suffering, so one goes over exactly how that truth relates to cyclic existence, and the different levels of the truth of suffering. One particularly focuses on pervasive suffering, understanding how the contaminated aggregates are in the nature of suffering, and how that is the basis for being in cyclic existence.

Then one reflects on how one actually obtains those contaminated aggregates, thus gaining an understanding of the truth of origination by seeing how through delusions and karma one obtains the contaminated aggregates. Then one goes deeper into the nature of delusions and karma,

specifically identifying the seed, i.e. the ignorance of grasping at true existence. What is that misconception and how does it come about? After having identified ignorance, then one thinks about how to apply the antidotes for overcoming the grasping at an inherently or truly existent self. In this way one gains a further insight, which contributes to the understanding of emptiness or selflessness.

It is also important to relate whatever uncomfortable circumstances one may find oneself in to the understanding of the four noble truths. For example, the experience of just a headache can be used as an opportunity to actually reflect upon all of the four noble truths in great detail, using that as a great analytical meditation, which then helps to generate a very strong Dharma state of mind. For example, when one has a headache thinking immediately: Why do I experience a headache? Where does this pain come from? What is the nature of the pain? What does the pain reflect? By reflecting on the pain like this, one realises that one experiences the pain because of having the contaminated aggregates.

Then one relates that pain to a more subtle level of suffering, thinking about how one's contaminated aggregates serve as the basis to experience the pain of that headache. Then the next question arises. How did one obtain the contaminated aggregates? So one begins to reflect on the truth of origination, thinking about delusions, and how it is delusions and karma that were the cause of those contaminated aggregates, which were not causeless. So the real cause of the headache is the delusions and karma that were the main causes for one to obtain contaminated aggregates. Then, one analyses delusions and karma further, pinpointing as mentioned previously, the main cause of delusions, and the specific delusion of the ignorance of grasping at a truly existent self.

Having identified that, one reflects on how these causes can be removed. It is possible. How? It is when one develops the wisdom that serves as a direct opponent or antidote for overcoming that ignorance, which is the wisdom realising selflessness or emptiness. Then one can remove the causes within oneself and that understanding or wisdom is referred to as the true path. When one reflects on that, one realises that through that understanding one can remove the causes and obtain the state of true cessation, which is the complete elimination of all suffering. So in this way, with the experience of a headache one can use the four noble truths generally to serve as a basis for a deeper understanding of the whole structure of the path.

If one can structure one's practice along the basis of the four noble truths then it becomes a really comprehensive, complete practice in itself, and moreover a manageable practice that we can relate to. After the Buddha gave the teaching on the four noble truths he then explained further that the truth of suffering is to be recognised, the truth of origination is to be abandoned, the truth of cessation is to be actualised, and the truth of the path is to be meditated upon. So the incomparably kind Buddha explained the actual manner of how to practise.

One has to fully understand why one is in the nature of suffering. What does that mean? To fully understand that is the first step. Then when one fully understands the nature of suffering, the truth of suffering in relation to oneself, then the wish to abandon the causes of suffering, which is the truth of origination, will arise spontaneously in the mind.

When one sees that it is possible to abandon the original cause of suffering then the wish to actualise the cessation of

suffering will spontaneously develop as well. When the strong determination to actualise cessation is developed, then the wish to meditate upon the path, the true path, which is specifically the wisdom realising emptiness or selflessness, will arise. That then becomes the actual true path that is to be meditated upon. Becoming familiar with this, and meditating upon it becomes the antidote. In this way one gets the true essence of the practice while meditating on emptiness.

An assumption that one is meditating on emptiness but lacking a deep basis of understanding of how it relates to the whole structure of the path is quite shallow. While befriending grasping at a self, attempting to meditate on emptiness would just be pretentious. Meditating on that sort of emptiness can never serve as an antidote to self-grasping, because it is in fact befriending that grasping at a self.

The way to practice is to befriend the wisdom realising selflessness, and to see the self-grasping as the real enemy. We are not talking about external enemies here. Meditating on, and befriending the wisdom realising selflessness means gaining a familiarity with meditating on selflessness and emptiness, and that understanding will then lead one to real freedom—overcoming cyclic existence.

The summarising stanza by Gyaltsab Rinpoche is:

All who have gained a free and fortunate human body,
Following the reasoning of Nagarjuna and his son,
Should understand emptiness to mean dependent
arising.
Who would not make effort to achieve this end?

The meaning of the first line is clear. It refers to those who have obtained this precious human life in order to gain the ultimate freedom from cyclic existence and so forth. According to the second line one then follows the reasoning of Nagarjuna and his sons. Here 'his sons' refers to Aryadeva and Chandrakirti, specifically Aryadeva. The third line refers to the particular reasons establishing emptiness, which were presented earlier and also explained at other times. They are: being free from independent or inherently existent one or many; using dependent arising itself, such as a sprout is not inherently existent because of being dependent origination; being free of the four extremes; lacking the four possibilities of production; and lacking an inherently produced effect at the time of the cause.

By referring to the text you will be able to determine the particular type of reasons used by the great masters as a way to gain a profound understanding of the explanation of emptiness. The last line implies that one should make every effort using these means to achieve the ultimate goals.

We have covered texts that were composed by the masters that have been referred to here. The root text composed by Nagarjuna is *The Root of Wisdom*, and this text, Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses*, is a commentary on that text. We have previously studied Chandrakirti's *Madhyamakavatara*, which is also a commentary on *The Root of Wisdom*. In Study Group we have also covered the ninth chapter of Shantideva's *Guide to a Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, which relates to the teachings on emptiness. So when we reflect upon what we have ventured into and studied, we can rejoice and commit to further expanding our knowledge.

Even though I cannot claim that I have clear understanding of these texts, I rejoice in feeling that I have had great fortune to be able to try to make an attempt to explain them, and in that way I feel that I have made good connection with the

explanations found in the texts. I definitely rejoice on having had that opportunity, and likewise you can rejoice too.

So regardless of whether the teacher has been able to explain it well, and regardless of whether the listeners have been able to understand much of it, the point is that we can definitely rejoice in having made an attempt to try to explain and understand these teachings and texts. Just the attempt has been a great fortune for us. But we should not leave it just as being a great fortune.

We should make the strong aspirational prayer, 'Even though I may not have understood much now, may the imprints that I have gained from having listened to these teachings serve as a cause to be able to gain a clearer understanding of these teachings throughout this life. And particularly in future lifetimes, may I never be separated from the teachings such as these of the great masters, which very clearly and precisely explain the unmistakable ways to liberation and enlightenment. May I be able to continuously, in all my lifetimes, come into contact with such teachings, and never be separated from them'.

In fact the opportunity that we have had to be able to come into contact with the teachings, i.e. the teacher teaching, and the students listening, is in itself definitely a result of having made previous connections, aspirational prayers and so forth. So the fact that we are able to do it now is already a great fortune as a result of previous connections that have been made. Having made the connection now we can use it as an opportunity to further our connection with these teachings, to gain the ultimate understanding of wisdom.

2. Presenting the name of the chapter

This is the fourteenth chapter of the Four Hundred on the Yogic Deeds, showing how to meditate on the refutation of extreme conceptions.

This concludes the commentary on the fourteenth chapter, showing how to meditate on the refutation of extreme conceptions, from *Essence of Good Explanations, Explanation of the "Four Hundred on the Yogic Deeds of Bodhisattvas"*.

CHAPTER XV: REFUTING THE INHERENT EXISTENCE OF PRODUCTION, DURATION AND DISINTEGRATION, THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PRODUCTS¹

This heading is actually the definition of a product, which is that which has the characteristics of production, duration and disintegration. So this chapter refutes the inherent existence of the specific characteristics of products, which are production, duration and disintegration.

The chapter is divided into two main sections.

1. Explanation of the material in the chapter
2. Presenting the name of the chapter

1. Explanation of the material in the chapter

The material of the chapter is divided into two sections.

- 1.1. Extensively establishing dependent arisings which are not inherently produced as existing in the manner of a magician's illusions
- 1.2. Concluding summary of the refutations of inherent existence

1.1. Extensively establishing dependent arisings which are not inherently produced as existing in the manner of a magician's illusions

This has three subheadings.

- 1.1.1. Specific refutation of inherent production
- 1.1.2. General refutation of inherently existent production, duration and disintegration
- 1.1.3. Refuting that what is in the process of being produced is being produced inherently

1.1.1. Specific refutation of inherent production

This has two subheadings.

- 1.1.1.1. Extensive explanation
- 1.1.1.2. Summarized meaning: showing the effects of refuting production

1.1.1.1. EXTENSIVE EXPLANATION

This has five subdivisions.

- 1.1.1.1.1. Refutation by examining whether that which exists or does not exist is produced
- 1.1.1.1.2. Refutation by examining the beginning, middle and end
- 1.1.1.1.3. Refutation by examining both self and other
- 1.1.1.1.4. Refutation by examining sequentiality and simultaneity
- 1.1.1.1.5. Refutation by examining the three times

¹ The correct numbering of this chapter heading is 3.2.2.1.3. Refuting the Inherent Existence of Production, Duration and Disintegration, the characteristics of products, but as, has been the case throughout, numbering starts anew with each chapter for ease of reference.

See 4 March 2008 for a complete of the structure of the text, part of which is

3.1 An overview of the text

3.2 Specific explanation of the different chapters, which has two outlines:

3.2.2. Explaining the stages of the path dependent on ultimate truth, the first section of which is:

3.2.2.1 Extensively explaining ultimate truth, which in turn has three sub-headings:

3.2.2.1.1. General refutation of true existence by refuting permanent functional phenomena

3.2.2.1.2. Individual refutation of truly existent functional phenomena

3.2.2.1.3. Refuting the inherent existence of production, duration and disintegration, the characteristics of products

1.1.1.1.1. REFUTATION BY EXAMINING WHETHER THAT WHICH EXISTS OR DOES NOT EXIST IS PRODUCED

There are four subdivisions of this heading.

1.1.1.1.1.1. Reason refuting production of that which exists or does not exist

1.1.1.1.1.2. Establishing its mode [of operation]

1.1.1.1.1.3. Refutation by examining the time of production

1.1.1.1.1.4. Refutation by examining the thing itself and another thing

1.1.1.1.1.1. Reason refuting production of that which exists or does not exist

This relates to one of the five reasonings, which is the reasoning concerning whether and effect exists or does not exist inherently.

Assertion: Products exist inherently because their characteristics such as production exist.

Answer: Products would exist if their characteristics existed, but these do not exist inherently.

How can the non-existent be produced, 351
If what does not exist at the last is produced?
How can that which exists be produced,
If what exists from the outset is produced?

Some schools say that production is inherently existent, because their characteristics, such as production, exist. That is the assertion that is being refuted. The reason given in the assertion as to why production is inherently existent, is because its characteristics of production, duration and disintegration exist. What is being specifically refuted here is the inherent existence of products as well as their characteristics. 'Products would exist' means that products would exist inherently if the characteristics also existed inherently, but the characteristics do not exist inherently.

The commentary elaborates on the answer to the assertion.

If production is asserted to produce products,

What should be understood in this explanation is that if production is asserted to produce products is a specific reason for that which exists, or which does not exist, then does the effect exist at the time of the cause or not? There are two possibilities.

If the **effect does exist at the time of the cause:**

...then according to those who propound the non-existence of the effect, the sprout which does not exist at the time of the seed is produced after the final moment of a seed for which the necessary causes and conditions are assembled.

A sprout which does not exist during the last moment of the seed cannot be produced by way of its own entity, otherwise it follows that donkeys' horns and so forth would also be produced. Thus how can anything which does not exist at the time of its cause be produced by way of its own entity? It cannot.

If the assumption is that the effect does not exist at the time of the cause then, 'how can anything that does not exist at the time of the cause be produced by way of its own entity? It cannot'.

If the **effect does not exist at the time of the cause**, implying it does not exist by way of its own entity at the time of the cause, then the refutation was made earlier.

How can anything which exists at the time of its cause be produced?

If it does exist by way of its own entity, then

It follows that it will not be produced, since anything existing at the time of its cause was produced from the outset, prior to being itself.

The absurdity that is being pointed out is that if the effect already exists at the time of the cause, then what is the need for producing it if it already exists? There would be no extra need as it already exists at the time of the cause.

Then the actual syllogism follows:

The subject, a sprout, is not produced by way of its own entity, for neither that which exists at the time of its cause nor that which does not exist at the time of its cause is produced by way of its own entity.

The subject is the sprout, the predicate is 'not produced by way of its own entity', and the reason is 'for neither that which exists at the time of its cause nor that which does not exist at the time of its cause is produced by way of its own entity.'

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