
Study Group - *Madhyamakavatarama*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

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Generate a virtuous motivation as usual, thinking, 'I have to attain complete and perfect enlightenment to be able to accomplish the welfare of all sentient beings. In order to achieve this aim I am now going to listen to this profound teaching, and then I am going to put in into practice as much as possible'.

Last time we went through the verses that introduced the different divisions of emptiness. We had the two-fold division, the sixteen-fold division and the four-fold division. We have already covered the two-fold division.

At this point the debate arises as to whether or not practitioners following the hearer path realise the selflessness of phenomena, and whether or not they have complete realisation of selflessness arises. We have already covered this in the explanation of the homage.

One can say that the hearer practitioners have a complete realisation of selflessness for the purpose of eliminating the afflicted obscurations, but they don't have the complete realisation of selflessness for the purpose of eliminating the obscurations to knowledge. Otherwise, when they attain the path of no-more-learning, they would have to abandon the obscurations to knowledge. Another way of saying this is that they have a complete realisation of selflessness, but they don't have a complete realisation of selflessness via the door of limitless inference. This is yet another way of saying that they don't understand emptiness on the basis of great compassion.

The hearers' realisation of selflessness is an antidote to the obscurations to knowledge, but it isn't a complete antidote to the obscurations to knowledge. Their meditation on selflessness is merely a complete antidote to the afflicted obscurations.

6.3.5.2.1. Explaining the divisions of emptiness in brief

6.3.5.2.2. Explaining the meaning of the individual divisions

This has two sub-headings.

6.3.5.2.2.1. The sixteen emptinesses

6.3.5.2.2.2. The four emptinesses

6.3.5.2.2.1. The sixteen emptinesses

One crucial thing to keep in mind here is that this division of emptiness into sixteen comes about merely because of a difference in the basis of the emptiness. It doesn't come about through a difference in the nature of the emptiness itself. We are always dealing with a lack of inherent existence. The object of negation is always inherent existence. The only difference is the basis on which inherent existence is negated. This is very important to keep in mind, otherwise it could happen that somebody reading the line 'The eye is empty of the eye' could think there is no eye in the eye. One has to attach the words inherent existence, so that the quote means 'the eye is empty of an inherently existent eye'.

6.3.5.2.2.1.1. Inner emptiness

Here the basis of the emptiness refers to inner phenomena. The distinction between inner and outer phenomenon is whether or not the phenomenon is held by the mental continuity. An example to clarify this distinction is one's hair. The tip of one's hair is not held by one's mental continuum. Why? Because we can cut off the tip of our hair without causing any particular feeling in the mind. However the root of one's hair is held by the mental continuum, because if we rip out our hair by the root then it causes a particular feeling. Likewise one's other faculties, the five physical sense-powers, are all held by the mental continuum, because they all cause different types of feelings to arise through contact with outer objects.

Because this is its nature

The eye is empty of the eye.

Similarly, ear, nose, tongue,

Body and mind should be taught likewise

Because of not remaining unchanging and

Because of not disintegrating.

The lack of inherent existence of

The six, the eyes and so forth

It is asserted as inner emptiness.

Here the six sources are listed. We refer to the eye source, ear source, nose (smell) source, tongue (taste) source, body source and mental source as the six inner sources.

Mirror:

Take the subject '*the lack of inherent existence of the six, the eyes and so forth*' – it *is asserted as inner emptiness* – because it is the emptiness that is the lack of inner true existence.

Mirror:

Take the subject '*the eye*' – it *is empty of* the quintessential nature of *the eye* – *because this emptiness is its nature* – *because it does not ultimately remain unchanging and because of not disintegrating* ultimately. *Similarly, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind should be taught likewise.*

What this means is that the eye is empty of being truly existent. The reason why that is the case is because this particular emptiness is its nature. The eye lacks an inherently existent nature, and since the eye lacks an inherently existent nature it is empty of an inherently existent nature. If the eye didn't lack an inherently existent nature then it wouldn't be empty of an inherently existent nature, and the lack of inherent existence would not be its final nature.

One can apply this principle to each and every one of the different bases. If the eye were to exist inherently it would have to be established ultimately, and that would mean that it would either have to remain ultimately unchanging or it would have to disintegrate ultimately. But because the eye neither ultimately remains unchanging nor disintegrates ultimately it lacks inherent or ultimate existence.

Mirror:

Similarly, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind should be taught likewise.

This principle can be applied to all of the inner sense bases. If they were to exist truly they would have to be truly permanent or truly impermanent and so forth.

6.3.5.2.2.1.2. Outer emptiness

Because this is its nature

Form is empty of form.

Sound, smell, taste, tactile stimuli and Phenomena are the same.

The mere lack of quintessential nature of form And so forth is asserted as outer emptiness.

Here the bases are the six outer sources, which are the form source, sound source, smell source, taste source, the source of tactile stimuli and the phenomena source.

In this verse 'form' refers to form source, which could also be described as visual stimuli. In general there is a difference between form and form source. 'Form source' refers to visual form, which is shape and colour for example, while 'form' just by itself includes all the other types of form such as sound, smell and so forth. Here 'form source' refers specifically to visual stimuli. For example with the example of food the first thing that one apprehends in relation to the food on the plate is its colour and the shape. This is comprehended by the eye-consciousness.

Colour and shape are visual forms that are only apprehended by the visual consciousness, by the eye-consciousness. One's ear-consciousness or one's smell-consciousness doesn't apprehend shapes and colours.

Normally there is a sound source in relation to food, which is the chomping sound that one makes when the food is chewed in the mouth. The smell source is the form that is apprehended only by the nose-consciousness. Then of course we have the taste source, with the different tastes such as salty, sweet, sour and so forth. The taste source is apprehended by one's taste-consciousness, which is the consciousness that is generated in dependence upon the taste sense-power in the tongue.

The tactile stimulus of the food refers, for example, to its temperature. Once we put the food into our mouth we recognise its temperature as being hot or cold and so forth. There is also the texture of food - whether it is a very coarse or smooth texture and so forth. Even though they are apprehended in the mouth these are examples of tactile stimuli, which will not be apprehended by the taste-consciousness. They will be apprehended by what is referred to as the tactile-consciousness or the body-consciousness. Then we have what is referred to as phenomena source, an example of which would be the impermanence of the food. The momentary nature of the food is an example of the phenomenal source of food. These are the six outer sources - the objects that are not held by the mental continuum.

Mirror:

Form is empty of the quintessential nature of form because this emptiness is its nature. Sound, smell, taste, tactile stimuli and phenomena are the same.

Take the subject '*the mere lack of quintessential nature of form and so forth*' - it is asserted as outer emptiness - because it is the emptiness that is the lack of outer true existence.

The emptiness of the six outer sources, form source and so forth, is referred to as outer emptiness, because their bases are outer objects. They are objects that are not held by the mental continuum. The inner sense-powers such as the five physical sense-powers and the mental sense-power are all held by the mental continuum. Their lack of inherent existence is regarded as inner emptiness, while the emptiness of the outer objects that we have just mentioned is regarded as outer emptiness, because of the base.

These emptinesses were taught to oppose specific types of true-grasping. For example, inner emptiness was taught in order to oppose the true-grasping at inner phenomena

contained within the continuum as truly existent. One can apply this principle to all the other types of emptiness, which are always taught to oppose specific types of grasping.

6.3.5.2.2.1.3. Outer inner emptiness

The mere lack of inherent existence of Both is outer inner emptiness.

Mirror:

Take the subject '*the mere lack of inherent existence of both*' - it is outer inner emptiness - because it is the emptiness that is the lack of outer inner true existence.

In *Illumination* Lama Tsong Khapa explains outer inner emptiness by referring to the emptiness of, for example, the eyeball. One shouldn't confuse the eyeball with the actual eye sense-power. The eyeball is more like the container in which the eye sense-power resides. On the one hand the eyeball is regarded as an inner object, because it is contained within the continuum of knowledge. It causes mental benefit or mental harm upon contact, and therefore, as was explained before, it causes different types of feeling. That is why the eyeball is regarded as an inner object.

However, at the same time the eyeball is also the container of the eye sense-power, and not the eye sense-power. It is not contained within the category of sense-power. Therefore it is regarded as an outer object. In general there are many different ways of how A can contain B, but here we talk about containing from the point of view of being that object. The eyeball, the container of the eye sense-power is not contained in the category of sense-power because it is not a sense-power. That is why it is also referred to as an outer object.

That is why its emptiness is referred to as outer inner emptiness. The lack of true existence of outer inner phenomena is outer inner emptiness.

6.3.5.2.2.1.4. Emptiness of emptiness

The mere lack of inherent existence of phenomena Is taught by the sages to be emptiness. This emptiness is also asserted to be Empty of the entity of emptiness.

The emptiness of that called emptiness Is asserted as emptiness of emptiness. It is taught to oppose awareness Grasping at emptiness as a phenomenon.

The sages taught the mere lack of inherent existence of phenomena to be emptiness. What the sages defined as emptiness is the lack of inherent existence of a phenomenon, such as, for example, the instance of the lack of inherent existence of outer inner phenomenon.

Mirror:

This emptiness that is the mere lack of inherent existence of phenomena as taught by the sages is also asserted to be empty of the entity of emptiness, because all phenomena are empty of true existence.

Here, of course, when it says it is also asserted to be empty of the entity of emptiness it refers to being empty of the entity of truly existent emptiness or inherent emptiness. Why? Because all phenomena are empty of true existence. As all phenomena are empty of true existence, emptiness itself has to lack true existence.

Mirror:

Take the subject 'the teaching on the emptiness of

emptiness' – it has a purpose – because *it is to oppose the awareness grasping at emptiness as a phenomenon*, i.e. as truly existent.

The *Perfection of Wisdom sutra*, for example, teaches that emptiness is also empty of true existence.

6.3.5.2.2.1.5. Great emptiness

*Because of pervading all, i.e. sentient beings
And the worlds containing them, and because
There is no limit through the example
Of the infinite, directions are great indeed.*

*Whatever is the emptiness of
The ten directions
Is the great emptiness,
Taught to oppose the grasping at the Great.*

What this is saying is that regardless of whether something is great or big or small it can't escape lacking true existence.

Mirror:

Take the subject 'the ten *directions*' – they *are great indeed* – *because of pervading all, i.e. sentient beings and the worlds containing them, and because the limitless* expanse of immeasurable love focussing on the sentient beings of the ten directions is taught *through the example of their infinity*.

Whatever is the emptiness of the inherent nature of *these ten directions*, i.e. the eight points of the compass together with up and down, *is the great emptiness*.

Sometimes the ten directions are referred to as the Great. As you know the ten directions are the four cardinal directions and the four intermediate directions, along with up and down.

The ten directions pervade all sentient beings and all the worlds that contain sentient beings. That is why it is appropriate to refer to the ten directions as the Great.

What 'there is no limit through the example of the infinite' refers to is 'because the limitless expanse of immeasurable love focusing on the sentient beings of the ten directions is taught through the example of infinity'. When we meditate of the four immeasurables, i.e. immeasurable love, immeasurable compassion, immeasurable joy and immeasurable equanimity, we focus on all sentient beings of the ten directions. The object of one's meditation is no longer really countable in number - it is infinite. Through the example of the infinite object of the four immeasurables we can also understand why the directions are referred to as the Great.

These meditations are referred to as 'immeasurables' because their object is infinite. There is no limit to sentient beings, there is no limit to the ten directions, there is no limit where one could say sentient beings stop here, or the ten directions stop here, and there is infinite benefit. That is why there are referred to as the four immeasurables. From infinite objects infinite benefit arises. Infinite benefit refers to both the benefit one can give to sentient beings as well as the benefit one receives from those meditations.

Mirror:

Take the subject 'teaching that emptiness' – it has a purpose – because it is *taught to oppose the grasping at* the true existence of *the Great*.

Teaching great emptiness has the purpose of overcoming the grasping at the ten directions as truly existent.

6.3.5.2.2.1.6. Ultimate emptiness

*Because of being of great purpose,
To go beyond sorrow is the ultimate.
Whatever is the emptiness of this,
That is the ultimate emptiness.*

*To endeavour opposing the grasping
Awareness at nirvana as a phenomenon,
Ultimate Exalted Wisdom took to
Teaching the ultimate emptiness.*

Here 'ultimate' refers to either the dharmakaya or liberation i.e. having gone beyond sorrow.

Mirror:

Take the subject '*gone beyond sorrow*'...

As we said this refers to liberation, nirvana, and also the dharmakaya

...it is ultimate because of being of great purpose.

One's ultimate or final purpose is to attain the dharmakaya.

From here the idea originates that the truth of cessation is emptiness. For the Prasangika the truth of cessation is emptiness, which relates to this point. Because the ultimate aim is to go beyond sorrow or actually the state of gone beyond sorrow is referred to as ultimate,

Whatever is the emptiness of the quintessential nature of *this* ultimate *that is ultimate emptiness*.

Take the subject '*Ultimate Exalted Wisdom teaching the ultimate emptiness*' – there is a purpose – because it is *to endeavour opposing the grasping-awareness grasping at nirvana as a phenomenon*, i.e. as truly existent.

Because liberation is referred to as ultimate the idea could arise that it exists ultimately. In order to oppose the grasping-awareness that would grasp at a nirvana as truly existent Ultimate Exalted Wisdom, i.e. the Buddha, taught ultimate emptiness.

6.3.5.2.2.1.7. Compounded emptiness

*Because of arising from conditions the three
Realms are taught with certainty to be compounded.
Whatever is the emptiness of this,
That is taught as compounded emptiness.*

Mirror:

Take the subject '*the three realms*' [the desire realm, the form realm and the formless realm] they *are taught with certainty to be compounded* – *because of arising from conditions*.

Take the subject '*whatever is the emptiness of* the quintessential nature of *this* compounded phenomenon' – it *is taught as compounded emptiness* – because it is the emptiness that is the lack of the true existence of the compounded.

A compounded phenomenon refers to an impermanent phenomenon. The reason why impermanent phenomena are compounded is because they arise from causes and conditions, and because compounded phenomena arise from causes and conditions they therefore lack true or inherent existence. This lack of inherent existence of compounded phenomena is referred to as compounded emptiness.

6.3.5.2.2.1.8. Non-compounded emptiness

*That which does not have generation, abiding,
And impermanence, that is non-compounded.
Whatever is the emptiness of it,
That is non-compounded emptiness.*

Mirror:

Take the subject 'space' – it is non-*compounded* – because it is *that which doesn't have generation, abiding and impermanence*.

Take the subject 'space' - it is a non-compounded phenomenon - because it doesn't have the three features of compounded phenomena, which are generation, abiding and impermanence. If an object is compounded then initially it is generated, intermittently it abides, and finally it will disintegrate. Permanent phenomena such as space don't have these three features. They are not initially generated intermittently, they don't abide, and finally they don't disintegrate. That is why they are non- compounded.

We can relate this to our own situation - initially we were born, then intermittently we abide, but finally we disintegrate.

Mirror:

Take the subject '*whatever is the emptiness of the quintessential nature of this non-compounded*' – it is *non-compounded emptiness* – because it is the emptiness that is the lack of the true existence of the non-compounded.

6.3.5.2.2.1.9. Emptiness having transcended extremes

*Anything that doesn't have extremes
Is called 'having transcended extremes'.
Its emptiness of merely that
Is called 'emptiness having transcended extremes'.*

Mirror:

Take the subject '*any dependent arising*' – it is called '*having transcended extremes*' – because it *doesn't have the extremes* of eternalism and nihilism.

Any dependent arising is called 'having transcended extremes', because there is no dependent arising that exists in the extreme of eternalism or nihilism. Anything that exists is not established within either of those two extremes.

Mirror:

Take the subject 'emptiness of the quintessential nature of that having transcended extremes – it is called '*emptiness having transcended extremes*' – because it is the emptiness that is the lack of true existence of that having transcended extremes.

For example, the Mind Only tenet asserts consciousness as truly existent because of not existing within the two extremes of eternalism or nihilism. This emptiness was taught in order to counteract this grasping, for example, that the consciousness must exist truly, because it is not established within any of the two extremes.

6.3.5.2.2.1.10. Emptiness without beginning or end

*Beginning is first, the last is the end.
Because of lacking these, cyclic existence
Is described as lacking beginning or end.
Since it lacks going and coming, that which
Is the void of this dreamlike existence
Is called emptiness without
Beginning and without end.
It is accurately taught in the treatises.*

First of all what is referred to here as 'that without beginning or end' is cyclic existence. Cyclic existence has no beginning, because there is nothing that can be pinpointed as the beginning of cyclic existence. Likewise, because it is difficult to pinpoint the end of cyclic existence cyclic existence is referred to as having no end.

With regard to cyclic existence having an end, there are different views. According to the Sera Je textbook, there is an end to cyclic existence.

However there is also the other view is that in general there is no end to cyclic existence, but that there is an end to one's individual cyclic existence. This view also has a very profound meaning.

One can see the end of one's individual cyclic existence when one begins to see emptiness. For example, when a seed is burnt then one can see the end of the continuity of that seed. It might be difficult to pinpoint the exact beginning of the continuity of the seed, but when the seed is burnt then one is able to see the end of the seed continuum. Likewise, on an individual basis, when one sees emptiness one is able to see the end of one's cyclic existence or samsara.

Because one's individual cyclic existence comes to an end, one can say there is an end to cyclic existence.

Being in cyclic existence one goes around the wheel of cyclic existence, from one existence to the next. This coming and going in cyclic existence, coming from one existence going to the next existence, then again going from that existence to the next existence, has no true existence. So it lacks inherent existence, and it is the emptiness of that without beginning or end.

Mirror:

Cyclic existence is described as lacking a beginning or an end, because the beginning is the first and the last is the end, and samsara lacks both.

Take the subject '*that which is the void of the quintessential nature of this dreamlike existence, since it lacks inherent going and coming*' – it is *definitely taught in the treatises* that it is called *emptiness without beginning or end* – because it is the emptiness that is the lack of the true existence of coming and going.

The coming and going from one existence to a new existence in cyclic existence is without beginning or end, and it lacks a true existence. In such a way it is dream-like, because it lacks inherent going and coming. The emptiness that is the lack of the true existence of this coming and going is referred to as the emptiness without beginning or end.

*Transcribed from tape by Jenny Brooks
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Tenzin Dongak*

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