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# Tibet House

Cultural Centre of His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Special Intensive Course  
(March 29 - 31, 2013)

on

## “Staircase to Emptiness”

*Based on the teachings Geshe Dorji Damdul gave during the 13-Day Retreat (Series – I) in January, 2013 in Ragavendra Ashram, Puniyasthala near Bangalore*



# Some important stanzas for meditation on Dependent Origination/Emptiness

## ***Given by the Precious Child Sutra:***

Manjushri, whoever listens (even) with doubt to this this teaching (on emptiness) generates much greater merit than a Bodhisattva who, lacking skill in means, practices the six perfections for a hundred thousand eons. This being so, what need is there to mention of a person who listens (to it) without doubt! What need is there to say anything about a person who imparts the scripture in writing, memorizes it, and also teaches it thoroughly and extensively to others!

## ***The Treasury of the One Thus Gone Sutra:***

Any person, who, possessing all these (ten great non-virtues), enters into the teaching of selflessness and has faith and belief that all phenomena are pure since primordially, does not go to a bad rebirth.

## ***Section on Subduing Devils (sutra):***

If any Bhikshu realizes that all phenomena are absolutely pacified and the beginning of defilements is devoid of self nature, it will remove the guilt of having defilements and make unstable the (defilements), thus deeming even the immeasurable negativities dysfunctional, let alone the secondary wrongs done associated with ethics and rituals.

## ***Arya Deva's (2<sup>nd</sup> Cent. AD) 'Four Hundred':***

Those with less merit will not even have a doubt  
In this Dharma (of ultimate reality).  
Should a doubt ever arise in someone,  
Will shatter Samsara into pieces.

***Chandrakirti's 'Entry into the Middle Way':***

Upon hearing about emptiness even while being an ordinary person,  
Whoever repeatedly gives rise to inner joy,  
And this joy bringing tears moistening the eyes,  
And hairs of the body standing on end,  
In them is present the seed of wisdom of the Perfect Buddhahood.

***Upali Requested Sutra:***

The various delightful flowers blossom,  
And the sparkling supreme golden abodes (stand) alluringly.  
They have no creator at all;  
There are posited by the power of thought.  
Through the power of conceptualization the world is imputed.

***Bhikhuni Vajira's Utterance in a Fundamental Vehicle Sutra:***

The mind is demonic (which views) a (true) self,  
You have a wrong view.  
These compositional aggregates are empty;  
There is no person in them.

Just as one designates a cart  
In dependence upon a collection of parts,  
So we assert the conventional sentient beings'  
In dependence upon the aggregates.

***From a Sutra:***

Just as in the dream of a young girl,  
She met with a boy and saw his death.  
Joyous was she at the meeting and despair at his death.  
View all phenomena as thus.

***Arya Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way:***

Through ceasing karma and afflictions, Nirvana is achieved.  
Karma and afflictions arise from (distorted) conceptions.  
These arise from elaborations (of grasping at true existence),  
Elaborations cease by emptiness.

Neither the aggregates, nor different from the aggregates,  
The aggregates don't (depend) on him, nor is he (dependent) on  
them,  
The Tathagata does not possess the aggregates,  
What is the Tathagata? (*replace by your name*)

That which dependently originates  
Is posited to be empty (of independent existence)  
That being dependently designated,  
This is the Middle Way.

Since there is no phenomenon  
That is not a dependently originated,  
There is no phenomenon  
That is not empty.

***Arya Nagarjuna's Precious Garland:***

If the person is not earth, not water,  
Not fire, not wind, not space,  
Not also consciousness, and not all (of them)  
Where is the person out of those?

Just as a person is not truly existent  
Because of being an aggregation of the six constituents,  
So each constituent also is not truly existent  
As they are aggregations (of their own constituents).

***Arya Deva's Four Hundred Stanzas:***

When dependent arising is seen  
Ignorance does not occur.  
Thus through all efforts  
Just strive to find this subject.

***Guide in the View – the Four Mindfulness (H.H. Kalsang Gyatso, the VII Dalai Lama)***

At the crossroads of the six collections (of consciousness) which have  
diverse perceptions,  
Are seen the hazy dualistic phenomena which are baseless.  
There is a magical show which is by nature deceptive.  
Don't believe it to be true, but view it as having the nature of  
emptiness.  
Don't let your mind go astray, but place it in the nature of  
appearance-emptiness.  
Through not losing mindfulness, hold it in the nature of appearance-  
emptiness.

***The Three Principal Paths (Lama Tsongkapa)***

Although you train in renunciation and the mind of enlightenment,  
Without wisdom which realizes the ultimate reality,  
You cannot cut the root of cyclic existence,  
Therefore, strive to understand dependent arising.

One who sees the infallible cause and effect  
Of all phenomena in cyclic existence and peace,  
And destroys all focuses of apprehension,  
Has entered into the path which pleases the Buddha.

Appearances are infallible dependent arising:  
And emptiness is the understanding that is free of assertions.  
As long as these two are seen as distinct,  
You have not yet realized the intent of the Buddha.

When these two realizations are simultaneous,  
Where, from the mere sight of infallible dependent origination  
Concurrently destroys all modes of grasping through definite  
discernment.  
At that time the analysis of the (profound) view is perfected.

Furthermore, appearances refute the extreme of existence,  
Emptiness refutes the extreme of non existence;  
When you understand that emptiness arises in the form of cause  
and effect,  
You are not captivated by the view of extremes.

***The concluding prayer in Lama Tsongkhapa's commentary on Arya  
Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way:***

Throughout my future lifetimes,  
May I always be guided by Arya Manjushree  
And be able to uphold the Dharma in general and the teachings on  
Dependent Origination in particular  
Even at the cost of my life.

***Translation from a part of Shree Hey-Ru-Ka Sadhana***

Shree Hey-Ru-ka

Hey is the Selflessness of Phenomena – the mind which is the source of everything is empty (of true existence), as it is imputed to be of causal nature.

Ru is Selflessness of Person – the emptiness of Self as fabricated by the web of conceptual thought which grasps at the self of person.

Ka is the ultimate reality where there is non-abiding of the duality of the object and subject in dissonance.

Shree is the non-dual exalted wisdom which abides in congruence with emptiness of the object. This is the meaning of Ay-Wam

# Ultimate Reality in Madhyamaka Philosophy

**An Extract from “Illuminating the Clear Intention,”  
Lama Tsongkhapa's Commentary on Arya Chandrakirti's**

## **Entry into the Middle Way**

Here I am going to concisely explain as to how to bring within (us) the insight into the illusion-like appearance of all phenomena.

Object of knowledge can be divided into functional and non-functional objects. The former is of two kinds – forms and non-forms. Refute, as explained in other (texts\*) (Vasubhandu's Twenty Stanzas), (the existence of) directionally partless particles in the case of forms and temporally partless moments in relation to minds. Establish that all functional things necessarily have parts.

Given that the whole and parts will be unrelated if they have distinct entities, reject (distinctness of the two and) show that the whole and parts are of the same nature. However much we may reflect upon their (relationship), while in reality (the two) exist as of same nature, (they) undeniably appear as distinct. This, like a magical illusion, discerns the union of (their) appearance in that way, (but) the emptiness (of the object existing) in that form.

(While) this (union) finds no inconsistency with a deceptive mode of existence where (things) are posited through the power of (their) appearance to a mind, it is absolutely not feasible for an object whose mode of existence is not through the power of the object's appearance to a mind. In the case of a true existence, which is explained earlier, it is not permissible to have inconsistencies between the appearance and the mode of existence (of the object), as it is the sheer absence of falsities that true existence should exist.



Moreover, it deems untenable of their same nature, as the mind perceiving them as distinct natures becomes non-mistaken otherwise.

Through this understanding, one refutes true existence with respect to non-functional objects as well by these reasoning. How? Even in the case of non-compounded space, we have to accept that there are some forms where it pervades (and others not). Within that, some pervade the east and others pervade other directions. In the same token, the ultimate reality also has many pervading parts and has many parts in the sense of being objects of realization of various temporal (moments) of the mind. This, likewise, can be extended to other non-compounded objects.

(Establish) that the whole and its multiple parts are of the same nature as they can not be different entities. This is feasible for a deceptive nature and not for a truly existent one. Thus by rejecting (true existence) as done earlier, all phenomena are established to be empty of true existence.

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*\*Vasubandu's "Twenty Stanzas":*

Because of being simultaneously surrounded by six (other particles),  
The (central) subtle particle is found to have six parts.  
If these six (parts) have the same spatial dimension,  
A massive (object) will conflate into (a size of) just a minute particle.

*Translated by Geshe Dorji Damdul at Sravasti Abbey, Spokane, US on September 20, 2008*

## Staircase to Emptiness

Be well informed about the Four Essentials to Discern Emptiness with emphasis on the first essential which is the essential of identifying the object of negation.

Visualize a beautiful picture of a flower with size one inch by one inch, 200 DPI resolution (*the picture is made of 200 dots per inch*), is blown up to a gigantic picture of the size 20 feet by 20 feet.

**Question 1:** *From distance what do you see?*

**Answer:** A picture of a very beautiful tender flower.

**Question 2:** *What is your mental reaction towards this picture of the flower?*

**Answer:** It is so appealing. (*technically your mind is pulled by the object thinking that the picture is there from the screen. Here is the dynamic relationship between all other afflictions such as attachment and aversion with the ignorance grasping at true/objective existence. All other afflictions are triggered by the ignorance. Seeing the picture from the screen is the 'ignorance viewing objective reality.' Your mind being pulled towards the picture is an 'afflictive emotion of attachment.' With a bad picture, your mind will be repulsed by the picture. That is the 'afflictive emotion of aversion.' All afflictions are either inclined towards attachment nature or aversion nature. That which is not inclined to the either is of ignorance nature.*)

**Question 3:** *Does the picture of the flower exist or not? Be very sure with your answer.*

**Answer:** It does exist. It is there on the screen. It is so nice picture. I like to see it more closely.

**Question 4:** *Go up to the screen if you like to see it more clearly. What happens to the picture now?*

**Answer:** The picture of the flower disappears.

**Question 5:***What happens to the appealing feeling you had earlier?*

**Answer:** It also disappears. Aversion arose instead at seeing the 200 pictures of demons.

*(This indicates how all our afflictive emotions such as attachment and anger are triggered by our mental perception which is always under the influence of the ignorance grasping at true existence except for the wisdom having non-dual experience of emptiness. Likewise, it shows how all other afflictions will come to cease if the ignorance is eliminated, just as the attachment to the flower stops as soon as the flower disappears from the screen to your eyesight.)*

**Question 6:***(Ask the same question again) Does the picture of the flower exist or not? If it does, where is it now, on the screen, in the eyes, or in between?*

**Answer:** Yes it does exist. Not too sure as to where it is. Earlier I thought it was on the screen, but as I am closer to the screen, to my amazement, it is not there. As Arya Nagarjuna said in Ratnavali (*Precious Garland*), "If the mirage were to be water, why not it is seen by the one who is close to the mirage", the picture of the flower does not exist from the screen, as I should be able to see it now if it does exist from the screen. Likewise it does not exist in my eyes as I am not looking at my eyes for the picture. It makes no sense either to say it exists in between the screen and the eyes.

**Question 7:** *What for have you come close to the screen and to look for what?*

**Answer:** To look for the picture of the flower more clearly on the screen. *(Putting the same response in more technical terms, you came closer to the screen to look for an objectively\*<sup>1</sup> existent picture of the flower as opposed to a mere mentally imputed \*<sup>2</sup> existence of the picture of the flower. Here you are looking for something ultimate which is more than just what your perception makes. If you do find something that way, it should be the ultimate reality of the picture of the flower.)*

**Question 8:** *What did you find after coming closer to the screen?*

**Answer:** We found nothing amidst the 200 dots of demon's faces which are themselves separated wide apart by distance. As Arya Nagarjuna cautioned in his *Mulakadhyamikakarika*:

“Whatever is dependently originated  
Is posited to be empty (of objective reality);  
That being mentally designated,  
Is indeed the middle way.”

The picture of the flower disappears. It is not there. The screen is empty of the picture of the flower. The disappearance of the picture of the flower is found. Emptiness of the picture is found. *(Many years ago, in Dharamsala in 1988-89, my friend Dr. Barry received an empty carton box as postal parcel from Australia – all contents lost. He was asked by the post master to put his signature to acknowledge the receipt of the empty box. Likewise, what did you find on the screen. You found the emptiness of the flower.)*

*(On the screen, you see two things - emptiness of the flower and the 200 dots which are the faces of demons. While the two, like the two sides of the same coin, are of the same entity, but are different isolates. Of the two isolates, for the specific purpose of meditation on emptiness, simply pick up the isolate of the emptiness of the flower – the disappearance of the flower. Pay no emphasis on the isolate of the dots.)*

Abide in this experience of emptiness for a while.

**Question 9:***Now going away from the screen while continuing to look at the screen, what appears to your eyes when you are at the same distance from the screen where you were initially?*

**Answer:** The flower picture came back. *(This is the infallible dependent origination. Only the flower picture appears and not other images such as an image of tree, man or house. Every phenomenon, while lacking objective reality, still exists and infallibly functions but on this conventional level through dependent origination. In this case, by dependence on the various factors such as the dots, the space between the dots, light, the screen and the perceiving mind, only then the picture of the flower arose. This should profoundly help generate in us a deep conviction in the efficacy of dependent origination which subsumes all phenomena including the law of karma. While everything exists but never on the ultimate level, only on the conventional, our chronic ignorance, however, always drive us to see and believe things to exist on the ultimate level. This understanding of the infallible dependent origination, does not bring the phenomenal world from the ultimate level to the conventional. It is already there on the conventional since primordially and never on the ultimate. This understanding allows our mind to simply shake our chronic belief by lifting up in our thought the reality of the functional world operating from the ultimate to the conventional level.)*

**Question 10:***As you keep going towards and away from the screen, again and again, what is happening to the perception of your eyes?*

**Answer:** The perception keeps on changing from the picture of the flower to the emptiness of the picture of the flower.

**Remark 1:**

- a) This indicates that the same object on the screen shows two faces. While nothing changes at all from the side of the screen, your perception of the object changes. This is indicative of the fact that what you see on the screen as the picture of the flower is nothing other than just your own perception. Perception means purely mental and subjective.
- b) Just as the ghost in the dream does not exist in reality from its side and thus is dream, even the picture of the flower is just your mental projection and is subjectively existent and thus dream-like. It is devoid of objective reality.

Abide in this experience of emptiness for a while.

**Remark 2:** What you see very closely of the same object on the screen (which is the emptiness of the picture of the flower) is the face of the ultimate reality of the picture of a flower. What you see as the picture of the flower from distance is the face of the subjective/conventional reality of the picture of a flower. These are the two truths of the same object. Every phenomenon necessarily possesses two truths or realities. Emptiness is no exception.

**Remark 3:** Meditate on the emptiness of 1) yourself or 2) your mind in a similar manner. Keep in mind the following analogies.

- a) the picture of a beautiful tender flower is analogous to 1) Yourself, 2) your mind
- b) the 200 dots of demon faces is analogous to 1) the atoms which constitute you, or the six elements, or the five aggregates, 2) temporal moments of the mind which constitute your whole mind.
  
- c)

The stanzas by Arya Nagarjuna such as the following can be used.

*“Precious Garland:”*

If the person is not earth, not water,  
Not fire, not wind, not space,  
Not also consciousness, and not all (of them)  
Where is the person out of those?

Just as a person is not truly existent  
Because of being an aggregation of the six constituents,  
So each constituent also is not truly existent  
As they are aggregations (of their own constituents).

*“Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way:”*

Neither the aggregates, nor different from the aggregates,  
The aggregates don't (depend) on him, nor is he (dependent) on  
them,  
The Tathagata does not possess the aggregates,  
What is the Tathagata? (replace by your name)

*“Bhikhuni Vajira’s Utterance in a Fundamental Vehicle Sutra:”*

Just as one designates a cart  
In dependence upon a collection of parts,  
So we assert the conventional 'living beings'  
In dependence upon the aggregates.

**Remark 4:** Repeat as often to abide in the experience of emptiness you got (*from Question 8 and Remark 1b*). Bring the sacred stanzas from Sutras and other compositions on emptiness of Indian saints such as Arya Nagarjuna to reinforce the experience. This practice is the life-force of the whole meaning of our life. Make sure we don't compensate with this practice on daily basis.

**Remark 5:** In all moments of your waking state, try to be mindful that everything (the three spheres of action) is dream – like, including the object you are interacting with, you as the agent interacting, and the action of interaction (*from Remark 1a*). All lack true objective reality. Yet they deceptively appear to exist from the object side as truly to your mind in all moments when you are awake and also in sleep and dream. Remember the stanzas from the Buddha’s Sutras such as the following to engage in the daily activities with the mindfulness and awareness that everything that I encounter with is dream-like. As advised by Lama Tsongkapa in “The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lamrim Chenmo)” engage in all your virtuous actions by seeing them in the light of dream-like nature. This helps accumulate both the collections – merit and wisdom – in all our actions.

*“Upali Requested Sutra:”*

The various delightful flowers blossom,  
And the sparkling supreme golden abodes (stand) alluringly.  
They have no creator at all;  
There are posited by the power of thought.  
Through the power of conceptualization the world is imputed.

*“From a Sutra:”*

Just as in the dream of a young girl,  
She met with a boy and saw his death.  
Joyous was she at the meeting and despair at his death.  
View all phenomena as thus.



*“Guide in the View – the Four Mindfulness” (H.H. Kalsang Gyatso, the VII Dalai Lama)*

At the crossroads of the six collections (of consciousness) which have diverse perceptions,  
Are seen the hazy dualistic phenomena which are baseless.  
There is a magical show which is by nature deceptive.  
Don't believe it to be true, but view it as having the nature of emptiness.  
Don't let your mind go astray, but place it in the nature of appearance-emptiness.  
Through not losing mindfulness, hold it in the nature of appearance-emptiness.

**Remark 6:** You should not give in to this ignorance grasping at true existence (*tib: dhakzin marigpa or timuk dhakzin*) any more. Dispel this darkness of ignorance from the minds of all dear mother sentient beings by lighting the lamp of the wisdom of emptiness. Let us better not waste our precious time. We are on an urgent mission for all our mothers and ourselves. Concluding our day with a meditation on emptiness and sealing the day's virtuous practices with prayers such as the following would be profoundly helpful.

*The concluding prayer in Lama Tsongkhapa's commentary on Arya Nagarjuna's Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way:*

Throughout my future lifetimes,  
May I always be guided by Arya Manjushree  
And be able to uphold the Dharma in general and the teachings on  
Dependent Origination in particular  
Even at the cost of my life.

## **Meditation on the emptiness of mind:**

- 1) As mentioned in the Remark 3
- 2) Analyzing that the present moment, which is the frame of reference for the three times, is not findable.
- 3) Analyzing the mind's deceptivity of experiencing its objects. Through close analysis, one realizes that the mind cannot discern the object which it thinks it is discerning or experiencing due to the object's fast moving transitoriness.

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\*1 ultimately, truly, inherently, intrinsically and independently existent are synonymous.

\*2 mentally imputed, subjective, conventional existence are synonymous.

*Prepared by Geshe Dorji Damdul at the request of Ellora for the participants of Bodhicitta Retreat (Series – I) at Shree Ragavendra Krupashrama, Punnyasthala from January 15 – 28, 2013*

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