

**Commentary on the Heart Sutra (*The Essence of Wisdom*)**  
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**Translated by Ven Steve Carlier**

**Motivation**

To begin with please review your motivation for studying this topic because without an appropriate attitude and motivation, activities are less useful and meaningful, and might be neither Dharma<sup>1</sup> nor spiritual practice. Three scopes of attitude are considered appropriate.

If the motivation for an action such as coming, going or meditating is to avoid one's own rebirth after death in the unfortunate realms of existence, this is Dharma or spiritual practice of the most modest or least scope. The motivation is of middle scope if the aim is to avoid rebirth anywhere in cyclic existence thereby achieving one's own liberation. Finally, the highest motivation, of a person of great scope is if one practises to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all beings. Studying the teachings with excellent attitude and motivation is very powerful, less good is of middling benefit and the least or weakest is not so significant.

The supreme attitude or motivation, embracing all living beings, is thinking "Everything I do until I achieve enlightenment is for the sake of all sentient beings. All I do from now until my death I dedicate to every single living being without exception. Particularly I dedicate everything I do this year, this month, this week and today for the sake of all living beings."

This highest motivation "To be of benefit to all living beings I shall use my time and energy to achieve enlightenment" is important for students and teacher alike. It is dreadful if a teacher's whole reason and mental attitude for teaching is to make money, become famous, be well thought of, make friends and so forth. Likewise, if students have these attitudes, their motivation for study and practice is completely wrong.

The Kadampa lamas, great Tibetan practitioners of the past, had a saying that two particularly important focal points of any activity are at the beginning and the end. At the beginning it is especially important to have a good *kuenlong* — an appropriate attitude or motivation. At the end, having performed a well-motivated activity, it is important to make prayers of dedication. By making such prayers, all the virtuous goodness created by engaging in the action with such a positive motivation is retained. For example, if subsequently one gets angry without having dedicated the good energy created by an action, the anger completely destroys the benefit. However, having dedicated, even if one gets angry later, it cannot destroy the goodness. Therefore, it is very important to dedicate.

There are traditional prayers like the *jam.pel pa.wo* that begins, "Just as the great bodhisattvas of the past like Manjushri and Samantabhadra, made dedication, I also dedicate." With this one mentally transfers one's positive energy to the safe-keeping of these two bodhisattvas, entrusting them with the virtue created. Even without

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<sup>1</sup> Buddhist practice — literally that which prevents suffering.

knowing the formal words of the prayer, it is sufficient to understand the main point which is thinking that “I dedicate exactly the same as whatever prayers of dedication all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, those great holy beings made in the past and are making now.” Similarly, when setting the motivation, think, “With my life, time and energy, may I too engage in every action they did and are doing for the sake of all sentient beings! May I emulate them!”

### **The Heart Sutra: Emptiness and Lines of Reasoning**

To examine the Heart Sutra word by word from the beginning would take too long and might become tedious for those who have already studied teachings on emptiness. With some experience of emptiness study there is already some understanding so it could feel frustrating to start from the beginning without reaching the main point.

In general there are several methods to study and meditate on emptiness. The following are the best known lines of reasoning leading to an understanding of emptiness. The line of reasoning of being **free from one and many** analyses the very nature of things. The **vajra slivers** line of reasoning analyses causes. The line of reasoning analysing the results of things is **the refutation of existing and not existing**. The reasoning of **dependent arising** is known as the king of reasoning.

From the *Supplement to the Middle Way* (Sanskrit *Madhyamakavatara*<sup>2</sup>) comes **the sevenfold analysis** refutation of self existence. Another very important line of reasoning, **the refutation of production from self and other** is derived from the first verse of Nagarjuna’s *Fundamental Stanzas on Wisdom*:

*Neither from itself nor from another  
Nor from both,  
Nor without a cause  
Does anything anywhere, ever arise.*<sup>3</sup>

### **The Prajnaparamita Sutras**

The title of this sutra is *The Essence of Wisdom*, often known as *The Heart Sutra*. Just as our heart is the most important part of our body, this sutra contains the heart or essence of the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*, the most important teachings of the Buddha. *Prajnaparamita* means the Perfection of Wisdom, the Wisdom Gone Beyond or the Transcendental Wisdom.

Amongst the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* are the extensive, middling and concise “Mother Sutras”. The great or extensive one is the *Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Verses*; the middling is that in 20,000 verses and the concise one is in 8,000 verses. *The Essence of Wisdom* sutra is so-called because it contains the essence of all of the wisdom sutras.

Different types of wisdom analyse conventional and ultimate phenomena. The ultimate here means emptiness. The wisdom intended when calling *The Essence of*

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<sup>2</sup> By Chandrakirti

<sup>3</sup> Translated by Jay L. Garfield

*Wisdom* a sutra containing the essence of all the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* is wisdom analysing the ultimate which means wisdom realising emptiness. Various levels of this are wisdom from hearing or studying, wisdom from reflecting or contemplating, and wisdom from meditation.

Wisdom analysing the ultimate analyses and realises emptiness. This wisdom is the complete opposite of the ignorance which is the true-grasping or self-grasping mind, the root cause holding us in cyclic existence. Although this wisdom and ignorance have completely opposite ways of engaging they refer to the same object. Being directly contradictory, they are complete opposites.

The *Prajnaparamita Sutras* explicitly teach or reveal the stages of profound emptiness. Implicitly they explain the grounds and paths, the various realisations produced or arising sequentially in the mind of the practitioner gradually progressing through the path, and the methods of practice.

### **Dependent Arising**

Lama Tsong Khapa wrote *The Brief Explanation of the Way of Discerning the Difference between the Sutras of Definitive and Interpretative Meaning* more commonly known as the *Dependent Arising Praise* in which he explained emptiness by stating that the Buddha based all he taught on everything which exists being a dependent arising. Buddha taught emptiness never losing the perspective of it totally fitting with everything being a dependent arising.

Tsong Khapa made the point that, in the multiplicity of teachings Buddha gave, *everything* was taught in terms of dependent arising. In other words, Buddha never taught so that you could possibly lose sight of the view of everything being a dependent arising.

Furthermore, by teaching like that, absolutely everything the Buddha taught was aimed at helping all sentient beings to overcome all inner mental afflictions and every fault and problem deriving from those afflictions. In other words, absolutely everything the Buddha taught was aimed at bringing all sentient beings to the state of nirvana. What the Sanskrit term *nirvana* means is “the state beyond sorrow.” This means beyond the sorrow of the mental afflictions.

By what method can beings achieve this peaceful state which goes beyond or completely transcends all inner mental afflictions? One can achieve the state beyond sorrow with the wisdom realising emptiness. At present, sentient beings are unable to see the true nature of their own minds. The wisdom realising emptiness will enable them to see this.

The presence of mental afflictions prevents us from seeing the true nature of our minds. By meditating on that nature we can overcome those afflictions, (*nyon mongs* (Tib); *klesas* (Skt)) and thus achieve the state beyond sorrow. It is said that by extinguishing *karma* (action) and the *klesas* (mental afflictions) we find liberation. Mental afflictions impel us to engage in harmful destructive actions that lead to our experiencing suffering in the future. *Karma* (action) refers to destructive actions engaged in through the force of mental afflictions.

Suffering arises due to karma, and karma arises due to mental afflictions. Because of mental afflictions we engage in harmful karmic actions. Where do they come from? Tsong Khapa's text makes the point that karma and afflictions come from a particular kind of conceptualisation, the true-grasping mind (ignorance). Destructive actions (*karma*) come from mental afflictions derived from this true-grasping conceptualisation (Tib. *nam.tok*) or "superstition"—in other words, the mind of ignorance or true-grasping.

The way to eradicate this true-grasping mind is by reflecting upon and understanding dependent arising. "Dependent arising" refers to the fact that everything arises (comes into being or existence) through depending on other factors.

### **The Setting and Structure of the Heart Sutra**

The prologue to *The Heart Sutra* is called "a basis for the discussion" (Tib. *ling.shi*), meaning the background or setting for the sutra. For example, in the case of some of the monastic precepts there is an explanation about how a particular precept came to be given. This can include a description of how a certain monk made a mistake and how, when the Buddha came to know of this he said, "This is something that the monks and nuns should not do." From that point on the monks and nuns had to follow that precept. The background to how and why it came about is called the *ling.shi* or prologue.

The prologue to this sutra begins with:

*Thus I have heard at one time: the Lord was sitting on Vultures Peak near the city of Rajgir. He was accompanied by a large community of monks as well as a large community of Bodhisattvas.*

This is the common prologue. The next two lines form the special prologue,

*On that occasion the Lord was absorbed in a concentration called the profound appearance.*

The common prologue describes how the Buddha was sitting with a great community of monks and Bodhisattvas. The special prologue, that he *was absorbed in a concentration called the profound appearance* means that the Buddha was himself reflecting or meditating on emptiness.

*Meanwhile the bodhisattva, the great being, the noble Avalokiteshvara was contemplating the profound discipline of the perfection of wisdom. He came to see that the five aggregates were empty of any inherent nature of their own.*

The Buddha meditates on emptiness and throughout most of the rest of the sutra starting from *Through the power of the Buddha*, the Buddha blesses and causes a change to occur in the mental continuum of two of his disciples, Avalokiteshvara (Tib. *Chenrezig*) and Shariputra. He blesses their continuums so that Shariputra asks Avalokiteshvara a question. The rest of the text is Avalokiteshvara's answer.

Both question and the answer arise through the blessing of the Buddha and are called the holy word of the Buddha. There are different types of word or teaching of the Buddha and one is called the holy word that comes through the blessing of the Buddha. Although spoken by Shariputra and Avalokiteshvara, with the question coming from Shariputra, and Avalokiteshvara giving the answer, it is still referred to as the Buddha's word. Specifically in this case it is the Buddha's word that comes through his blessing these two beings. At the very end of the sutra it says,

*At that time the Lord arose from his concentration and said to the noble Avalokiteshvara,*

*“Well said, well said, that is just how it is my son, just how it is. The profound perfection of wisdom should be practiced exactly as you have explained it, then the Tathagatas will be truly delighted”*

This is the Buddha's holy word spoken from his own mouth. Although more detail is possible, this gives a rough idea of the structure.

To recap, a question comes from Shariputra followed by Avalokiteshvara's answer, and both are the word of the Buddha called the “blessed word”. Later where the Buddha says, “*Well said, well said,*” he confirms that what Avalokiteshvara said about emptiness is absolutely faultless. That is also the Buddha's word, specifically that spoken by the Buddha.

Thus there are three sections. In brief, *The Heart Sutra*, has three points—the question from Shariputra, the answer from Avalokiteshvara and finally the Buddha's approval.

### **Dependent Arising and Emptiness**

The passage up to the fifth line of the third paragraph, *the five aggregates are empty of any inherent nature of their own*, is the brief answer about how to meditate on emptiness. Following that is the extensive explanation.

First is an extensive explanation of the meaning of emptiness in relation to form,

*Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form and form is not other than emptiness*

This detailed explanation of emptiness in relation to form is followed by an explanation of how to apply it to the remaining aggregates and other phenomena such as the twelve links of dependent arising. What you understand from the discussion of emptiness in relation to form, should be applied to other phenomena such as the eighteen elements, the twelve sources, the twelve links of dependent arising and the Four Noble Truths. Evidently, it is important to understand how this works in relation to form because then you can apply it to anything else.

In brief, it says that all phenomena (everything which exists) are empty of existing by their very nature (by their own nature). There are various ways to express this. One can say either that everything is empty of true existence or of self-existence.

With cause and effect, for example mother and child, the mother is the cause, and the child is the effect. As an effect the child depends upon the mother as a cause. It is straightforward to understand how results depend upon causes—the child depends upon the mother because the mother gave birth to the child. However, somebody cannot be called a mother without there being a child to be mother of, so also the mother exists depending upon the child.

One can easily see that the child's existence depends upon the mother. However, one might have doubts about the idea of the mother's existence depending on the child. This illustrates cause depending on effect, not simply effect depending on cause.

According to the highest system of Buddhist philosophy, the *Prasangika* (Consequentialist<sup>4</sup>) system, not only do effects depend on causes, but causes also depend on effects. They say the mother depends on the child. This is obvious when one considers how a woman does not become a mother merely by reaching a certain age, such as by becoming an adult. She becomes a mother by having a child. Without a child there would be no mother.

Likewise a series of moments culminates in the formation of a particular object. The later moments depend upon the earlier moments, but also the earlier moments of the series exist in dependence on the later moments.

In terms of time, a year, being composed of twelve months, depends on twelve months. Regardless of the different lengths of months—thirty or thirty-one days and so on—a month exists depending on its days, a day depends on twenty-four hours, an hour depends on sixty minutes and so on. Parts and whole are mutually interdependent.

Likewise with respect to short and long, something is only long in comparison to something shorter and something can only be short in comparison with something longer.

There are many other instances of this principle. For example, inside and outside: outside only exists in relation to inside and inside only exists in relation to outside. Likewise, big and small. Moreover, with cloth—fine cloth or course weave cloth—or thick and thin. We can understand this if we apply our minds to it.

One can see how a large object like a house exists depending upon its various parts and can see an interdependent relationship in so many other things too. The more one reflects the more one sees that everything exists and comes into being through depending on something else. One simply cannot find anything that cannot be analysed or described in this way.

According to the Consequentialist system of Buddhist philosophy which is the system of this commentary, there is nothing which does not exist depending upon something else. For example a watch for telling the time can only exist through the convergence and fitting together of its various parts. Since nothing is completely independent, not

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<sup>4</sup> So-called because of the system's logical method of demonstrating to others the unwanted consequences of their mistaken views

depending upon something or other, there is nothing self-existent. This is because to be self-existent would be to exist in and of itself without depending on anything else, whereas everything exists through depending on something else.

“Emptiness” implies the non-existence of something. When we use the term “emptiness”, something is denied or negated. What is negated or denied is a thing’s being self-existent, where self-existence implies the capacity to come into being and exist without depending on anything else. Nothing exists completely independently of anything else; everything depends upon something. For that reason everything is empty, meaning “empty of self-existence”.

The great master Nagarjuna says in *The Fundamental Stanzas on Wisdom* that there is nothing at all which is not dependent and therefore, there is nothing at all which is not empty. If one could find something not dependent, in other words completely independent of anything, one would have found something self-existent, because self-existent means existing in and of itself without having to depend upon anything else. Thus it would not be empty. If something were independent it would not be empty, because empty means “empty of self-existence”. Emptiness negates the self-existence of everything.

It is said that “empty” and “dependent arising” are synonyms—possessing the same import. This means that saying something is dependent means it depends on this and that, and so is not independent. If it is dependent, of course it is not independent and the fact that you know it to be dependent means you know it not to be independent. If it is not independent, it is empty of being independent, or empty of being self-existent, because “independent” means “self-existent”, these being the same thing. “Empty of being self-existent” is exactly what is meant by saying things are empty.

Recognising something as empty enables recognition of it as dependent; it comes to the same thing. Being empty means “empty of self-existence”, or empty of existing in and of itself, independent of anything else. Therefore if it is empty it is not independent. Not being independent must mean that it depends, because these are opposites. Therefore thinking about something’s being dependent brings one to the same conclusion, that it must be empty. Thinking about how something is empty brings one to the conclusion that it is dependent, so in this sense “empty” and “dependent” have the same import and may be regarded as synonyms.

Thus, saying something is either empty or dependent comes to the same thing, because something’s being empty means it is empty of self-existence or not self-existent. It is not self-existent because self-existent would mean independent of anything else. Being empty of being self-existent means to depend. Whether you describe something as empty or dependent it means the same thing.

### **Questions and Answers**

*Student:* I always expected that because the Heart Sutra is about emptiness Manjushri would give the explanation. Is it significant that Avalokiteshvara gives it?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* I don’t have a particular answer for that. There does not seem to be any particular reason why Avalokiteshvara, the Deity or Buddha of Compassion

would need to answer it, because any enlightened being could have answered. It could have been either Avalokiteshvara or Manjushri since they have the same insight. There is the cause and effect process of developing love and compassion through different stages of the meditation required to develop compassion. Therefore Avalokiteshvara would have a particular kind of insight into dependent arising, so perhaps he is particularly qualified from that point of view. However, any of the Deities would have the same insight and understanding.

*Another student:* What is the benefit of studying emptiness in relation to achieving the path? What is the main attribute and the main point?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* That is a very good question. The reason for wandering in cyclic existence, going from life to life and experiencing suffering in one life after another, is the ignorance of the true-grasping or self-grasping mind. One takes birth because of karma—destructive actions done under the control of inner mental afflictions. These mental afflictions are derived from ignorance. The purpose of learning about then meditating on emptiness is to remove or eliminate that ignorance.

This knowledge is the particular and indispensable thing needed to eliminate the root of cyclic existence. By eliminating its root one can eliminate cyclic existence itself. When completely free of cyclic existence one achieves liberation. So this is the single indispensable cause, practice and insight needed to achieve liberation.

In general, to learn about or meditate on emptiness is an extremely powerful purification. Without the wisdom realising emptiness, there is no way to overcome and eliminate the true-grasping, self-grasping mind. Without overcoming the mind of ignorance all the mental afflictions that derive from it cannot be overcome, so one will continue to create karma and be born in cyclic existence. As long as one lacks wisdom and insight, one cannot achieve liberation. Thus although it is most important and effective to meditate on bodhicitta, love, compassion and so on, no matter how much one does this without the wisdom realising emptiness one cannot become free of cyclic existence. They are not what principally free one from cyclic existence.

*Another student:* I have difficulty understanding the line *Form is empty. Emptiness is form.*

*Khensur Rinpoche:* The first point, *Form is empty*, is relatively straight forward. Form is empty means that form is empty of self-existence. Why is it empty and how do we know it is empty? We know it is empty because form exists through depending on other things and is therefore dependent. It does not exist independent of anything else, so it is not self-existent. It is not something one can see existing independently, in and of itself. So since it is not self-existent it is empty of self-existence which is why form is empty.

To understand the meaning of *Emptiness is form*, consider the emptiness of form. The emptiness of form is its emptiness of self-existence, which is its emptiness of existing independent of anything else. This is form's existence depending upon other factors, which is form itself. So that is the meaning of "Emptiness is form."

Form's existing dependent upon causes and conditions is form itself. This means that there is such a thing as form's existence dependent upon causes and conditions. If one has to point that out, to what can one point except form itself? That is the meaning of form's existence depending upon causes and conditions being form itself. It is similar with form's transience, its moment by moment changing nature. That nature is also nothing other than form. You cannot point out form's moment by moment changing nature anywhere other than exactly where form is. Therefore it is form itself.

*Student:* It seems the problem is to think of form as being separate from its changing nature.

*Khensur Rinpoche:* We might have that idea, but obviously it would not make sense. One could not possibly have form's moment by moment change or form's existence depending upon various causes and conditions as an object separate from form itself.

*Student:* So one may think about the impermanent form without thinking about the base of that impermanent form, but cannot have them separate. Can one *think* about them as two?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* Yes one can. Although for example, the moment by moment changing nature of form does not exist separate from form, still, with a conceptual mind one may think of them separately. Nevertheless that does not make them separate. Just because one may think of them separately does not endow them with any separate identity.

*Another student:* Some people recite the *Heart Sutra* a lot. Does it have some power in itself?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* Because the subject matter is extremely profound, it is said that even reciting the sutra which expresses it is a very powerful purification. It is said that if one recites this sutra every day, it is very helpful in overcoming illnesses and various external and internal forms of harm. Depending on how well and how much one recites it and so on, one could completely eliminate or at least reduce all kinds of obstacles, hindrances, harm and so forth. Besides that, if this recitation and reflection is reinforced by the practice of compassion, love, bodhicitta, the determination to be of benefit to others and so forth, it is most excellent and makes recitation and practice incredibly powerful.

There is a verse whose first line states that the perfection of wisdom is inconceivable and inexpressible. "Inconceivable" literally means that the conceptual mind cannot conceive of or realise it and "inexpressible" means that words cannot express it. The perfection of wisdom is like that.

The next line in that verse says "unproduced and unceasing", meaning that it is not inherently produced. Things are produced, but not inherently. Production is not self-existent and although things cease, there is no inherent cessation. There is no inherent stopping of things. When things cease, their cessation is not self-existent. The lack of inherent production and cessation is emptiness. These are both forms of emptiness and their nature is like space.

In the third line it makes the point that emptiness is an object experienced directly by the aryas, those beings who have a direct realisation of emptiness, when they are in totally non-conceptual single-pointed equipoise or meditation on emptiness. Emptiness is the object of that mind in the sense that it realises emptiness directly and non-conceptually.

In other words, although the first line says that emptiness is inexpressible and inconceivable, it does not mean that it is not at all possible for the mind to know it nor that it is impossible to be expressed at all. It is just that the conceptual mind cannot grasp or experience emptiness the way it is experienced by a direct non-conceptual realisation. Alternatively, although emptiness can be understood and realised by the conceptual mind, the experience of the conceptual mind realising it is not the same as the direct perception of emptiness.

Although emptiness can definitely be expressed and explained extremely — and very precisely at that, the words do not capture the actual experience of emptiness the way that the direct realisation of it does. This is how emptiness is and is not describable.

Also when we hear emptiness is inconceivable we might ask, “Does that mean that it cannot be realised at all?” The third line makes the point that it is not that it cannot be realised at all. It can be realised by the aryas’ direct perception of emptiness. For example the path of seeing<sup>5</sup> directly realises the sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths, such as emptiness and it is also directly perceived during the paths of meditation and no more learning.

*Another student:* What would be the benefits in this life from understanding and realising emptiness?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* The self-grasping mind thinks everything is self-existent, but meditating on emptiness opposes that. In the long-term or short-term, meditating on emptiness and reciting the *Heart Sutra* is very powerful in avoiding illness or reducing and eliminating one’s problems, difficulties and hindrances, because they come from the self-grasping mind. This is because the self-grasping mind is the foundation and root of all of the other afflictions. When afflictions of attachment, anger and so forth arise, we engage in various actions which lead to the suffering of having hindrances, illness and so on. Therefore there is a direct link. Meditating on emptiness works because it attacks the very root and foundation of problems and suffering. The meditation itself reduces them.

### **How Things Exist**

“Dependent arising<sup>6</sup>”, “empty” and “the middle way” all have the same basic meaning involving the same kinds of thought processes. Just as the word “middle” normally means the middle between right and left, likewise dependent arising is said to be “the middle way” or “the middle” with the connotation of being between two extremes. The path of the middle which goes through the central way is the one free of two extremes. These two are the nihilistic and the permanent/eternalist extremes. If

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<sup>5</sup> See below in the teaching on the meaning of the mantra.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Dependent arising’ means arising in dependence on other things

something were inherently or self-existent, existing in and of itself by its own nature, this would be the permanent extreme because the permanent or eternalist extreme basically means inherent existence.

That things (phenomena) exist means they have their own particular function to accomplish or perform. Within this context of things being able to perform a function, refuge<sup>7</sup> exists. We assert that there is refuge, and also that karma (action) and its results<sup>8</sup> exist. Although everything which exists can perform actions or functions, there is nothing which is inherently existent or self-existent.

Therefore one should distinguish between statements that things exist and that they *inherently* exist. They exist but they do not inherently exist—they are not self-existent. If they were self-existent, existing by their own nature, existing inherently or intrinsically (these are different ways of expressing the same point) they could exist completely independent of any action they perform, and of any other phenomenon. However, we know things exist and the way they exist because they can perform actions. They each have specific actions and functions they perform—that is the level on which they exist.

If things were self-existent, they would exist independent of the capacity to perform any action or function. Therefore there is a big difference between saying things exist and that they are self-existent. To repeat, things do exist, but they are not self-existent—they do not exist inherently.

We must distinguish between existing and being self-existent. These are complete opposites because existing means coming into being through depending on various other factors. However, something self-existent would be completely independent of anything else.

We must also distinguish between not existing inherently and not existing at all. Things are not inherently existent—they do not exist inherently—but that is very different from not existing at all. One should recognise that things are existent without being self-existent. When realising things are not self-existent, one should not think they do not exist at all.

### **Dependent Arising, Empty and Emptiness**

How are dependent arising and empty connected? They come to the same thing and have the same import. Therefore one should understand something as empty, in such a way as to see it as dependent. Moreover, one should understand something as dependent, in such a way as to see it as empty.

When something is empty, what does “empty” mean? It does not mean empty of existing—not existing at all. “Empty” means empty of self-existence which means being independent of anything else. Thus it means dependent. An empty thing exists depending on various other factors.

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<sup>7</sup> The Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha exist as a refuge from suffering

<sup>8</sup> Dependent on their motivation actions lead to the effects of future happiness or suffering

Knowing something to be empty leads one to recognise that it exists as a dependent arising<sup>9</sup>. The opposite is also true. Knowing something to be dependent, one knows it depends upon various other factors and is not independent. Independent meaning self-existent, and not independent meaning not self-existent, one knows something dependent to be empty of self-existence and therefore “empty”. This demonstrates that “empty”, “dependent arising” and “the middle way free of the two extremes” come to the same thing, are synonymous, having the same meaning or import.

Everything which exists is empty—of self-existence—but not everything is emptiness. There is a difference between “empty” and “emptiness”, because emptiness is the quality of a thing’s being empty, or the characteristic that an object has of being empty. Everything which exists is empty, but not everything *is* that quality of being empty, so not everything which exists is emptiness. One must distinguish between empty and emptiness.

Emptiness is the ultimate way of being of phenomena and is described as an exclusive negation<sup>10</sup>. It is neither a positive phenomenon nor an implicative negation<sup>11</sup>. It is a negation, and out of the two types of negation it is an exclusive negation. Not everything which exists is this exclusive negation, emptiness, but everything which exists is empty.

There is a difference between being empty and being emptiness. There are two types of truth, namely conventional truth and ultimate truth. Emptiness means ultimate truth, and not everything which exists is ultimate truth. Everything which exists is empty because of being empty of self-existence. Not everything is emptiness because not everything is an ultimate truth. There are also conventional truths.

Some texts seem to use the words “empty” and “emptiness” indistinguishably, suggesting that there is little difference between them. However, there is very definitely a distinction between them because emptiness is ultimate truth, and empty is not ultimate truth. Not everything which is empty has to be an ultimate truth, but everything which is emptiness has to be an ultimate truth. Although absolutely everything which exists is empty, it is not the case that everything which exists is emptiness, because emptiness is an ultimate phenomenon and not everything which exists is an ultimate phenomenon.

Just as dependent arising and empty are synonymous, also the appearances of dependent arising and empty are synonymous. “Dependent arising appearance” and “the appearance of dependent arising” mean conventionally existent. All that exists, exists conventionally and is also empty. Thus all that exists and appears is both a dependent arising and also empty. Things exist and appear but are also empty, so although they exist, things are not self-existent, but are empty of self-existence.

First is the idea of conventional phenomena appearing to be and being dependent and second the idea of them as empty and free from assertions. When these two ideas seem different and separate, one has not yet understood Buddha’s teaching of

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<sup>9</sup> ‘A dependent arising’ is something that arises depending on other things

<sup>10</sup> This means that in its act of negation it excludes any positive implications.

<sup>11</sup> Phenomena can be either positive or negative (e.g. ‘body’ or ‘nobody’). Negations may be implicative or exclusive. An implicative negation would imply something in place of the negation.

emptiness. On the other hand if one recognises that things both appear to be and are dependent, and that they are simultaneously empty, knowing these two without any conflict, one has correctly understood the definitive teaching of the Buddha.

Everything is both empty and dependent. Distinguishing between empty and emptiness, one should maintain the knowledge of everything's being simultaneously empty and dependent.

When recognising something as dependent, can one eliminate the sense of it existing in either of the two extremes? In other words, can thinking of things" being dependent eliminate the two extremes? It is not hard to see how dependent arising eliminates the extreme of non-existence (the nihilistic extreme). All four Buddhist philosophical systems<sup>12</sup> accept that. However, does recognising a thing as dependent, a dependent arising, also eliminate the permanent or eternalistic extreme, which is the extreme of things being self-existent?

When thinking how something is dependent does that bring to mind an idea of its being self-existent or does it bring to mind how in order to exist the thing depends on the coming together of various different factors? Reflection on how something is dependent certainly stops one from thinking it does not exist at all, but on the other hand does it stop you from thinking the thing is self-existent?

Recognising something as dependent implies that it is not self-existent and therefore stops both extremes. It stops the extremes both of thinking a thing does not exist at all and of thinking it is self-existent. This insight into how the understanding of dependent arising can eliminate both extremes is one of the unique and very difficult to understand points of the Consequentialist system.

Furthermore, recognising a thing's being empty stops the extreme of believing it to be self-existent, which is the permanent or eternalistic extreme. When recognising something as empty, one recognises that it is empty of self-existence. That self-existence means existence independent of anything else.

Thinking something is empty of self-existence, involves thinking that it is not independent. This is seen through recognising that it is dependent. So something's being empty means it depends, and therefore exists dependently. "Empty" stops both extremes. Thinking of something as empty stops both extremes in your mind, and thinking of it as a dependent arising also stops both extremes.

## **The Two Truths**

What we hear, smell, taste, touch and wear are examples of conventional truths. For an example of emptiness analyse the person, to seek a self-existing person in the aggregates—the form, feeling, discrimination, the conditioned phenomena and the consciousness aggregates. Investigate, searching for a self-existing person in each of those aggregates. At a certain point having looked everywhere and not having found it, there is an empty appearance, almost a feeling of having lost that self-existing

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<sup>12</sup> The four Buddhist systems are the philosophical schools of the *Vaibashika* (Particularists), *Sautrantika* (Sutra-followers), *Cittamatra* (Mind-only) and *Madhyamaka* (Middle Way).

person. What is then appearing to our mind is the emptiness of the person, which is an example of ultimate truth.

Having recognised that things appear to one as if self-existent the mind investigates whether or not what appears to be self-existent is genuinely so. The mind which analyses and searches for a self-existent thing eventually realises there is no such thing. This is called a valid mind experiencing ultimates or engaging in an ultimate analysis. That valid mind finally realises emptiness, the object found by a valid mind engaging in an ultimate analysis or experiencing ultimates.

Visual forms, sounds, tastes and so on, are not objects found by a mind performing an ultimate analysis, but they *are* objects found by a mind engaging in a conventional analysis. For example, the visual consciousness that realises (sees) visual form is a valid mind; the nose consciousness that smells various odours, so realising those odours is also a valid mind. These are examples of valid minds experiencing conventionalities.

Ultimate truth is not found by a valid mind experiencing conventionalities but is generally defined as the object found by a valid mind experiencing ultimates. This mind is a valid mind experiencing ultimates with respect to this object. Moreover, just as in general, things like emptiness are the objects realised by a valid mind performing an ultimate analysis, conventional phenomena or truths such as smells, tastes and so forth are objects found by a valid mind performing a conventional analysis.

*Student:* I have always thought that all phenomena are like coins with two sides, with conventional reality on one side and ultimate reality on the other. But am I mistaken, does emptiness not apply to all phenomena?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* One may say that a thing's empty and dependent aspects are like two sides of a coin. However emptiness is something else. It is correct to think of the two truths as being like two sides of one coin, because you are thinking of how the thing is empty rather than how it is emptiness.

Conventional phenomena do not exist as they appear, whereas ultimate phenomena do. This statement requires one to identify to what they are appearing. To which type of mind do conventional phenomena not exist as they appear? To which type of mind do ultimate phenomena exist as they appear?

Two types of valid mind are being discussed here. To one of them conventional phenomena do not exist as they appear and to the other ultimate phenomena do exist as they appear.

The mind to which conventional phenomena do not exist as they appear is the valid main<sup>13</sup> mind realising them. For example for visual form, it means visual (eye)

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<sup>13</sup> Mind can be divided into main minds and mental factors. An example of a main mind is the visual consciousness. An example of a mental factor is feeling. So if you see something you like, you have a visual consciousness as a main mind and pleasure as a feeling.

consciousness, the valid<sup>14</sup> main mind realising visual form. Visual consciousness is a valid mind experiencing conventionalities. That valid mind experiencing conventionalities is the main mind realising visual form. Visual form does not exist in the way it appears to that valid mind since it appears to be self-existent but is not. Therefore although that is a valid mind, visual form does not exist as it appears to it. It is the same with other conventional phenomena like smells, tastes, sounds and so on.

What appear to visual consciousness and what it realises are shapes and colours. Shapes and colours appear to visual consciousness as self-existent, whereas they are not. They are dependent, existing only through dependence, and not at all self-existent. In this sense, shapes and forms do not exist the way they appear to the valid mind realising them.

There is a difference between sense consciousnesses—visual consciousness realising visual form, shapes and colours and so on; ear consciousness realising sounds, and so forth—and the innate I-grasping mind. The innate I-grasping mind is a type of true-grasping or self-grasping mind that grasps or apprehends the “I” in one’s own continuum as being self-existent. There is a difference between the inborn I-grasping mind which thinks of and believes the “I” to be self-existent or inherently existent, and the mind which thinks, “I’m coming, I’m going, I’m doing this, I’m doing that”, which are minds realising the conventionally existing “I.” Those minds thinking, “I’m coming, I’m going, I must do this and I must do that,” are conventional minds and are not true-grasping, so are certainly not the innate I-grasping mind.

### **The Consequence (Prasangika) School View of the “I”**

The innate I-grasping mind is one to which “I” appears to be self-existent and which grasps that “I” to be self-existent just as it appears. To understand how this innate I-grasping mind works one should first understand the way the person actually exists.

Within Buddhism are four philosophical systems, each presenting differently how the conventionally existing person exists. This means they have different ideas about what comes from past lives to this life, goes from this life to future lives, engages in various types of actions and must take birth in cyclic existence, experiencing various types of suffering and so forth, as a result. Each school has its own idea but here the key proposition about the person is that made by the middle way (madhyamaka) school. Within that school are two separate systems, the middle way autonomy (svatantrika) school and the middle way consequence (prasangika) school. Between these two, the key proposition to investigate and understand is that of the middle way consequence school.

People are born and engage in various types of action (karma). As a result of performing particularly destructive types of action they are born in the three lower realms—the hell realm, the preta realm and the animal realm—and when they engage in more constructive or positive action, they are born as human beings, demi-gods or gods, thereby experiencing less suffering. There is some suffering, as these three higher realms are still in cyclic existence.

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<sup>14</sup> Valid means that the visual consciousness has correctly ascertained its object, so if it is seeing a sunflower, it is not mistaking it for a lotus, as it is actually a sunflower that is being seen.

All Buddhist philosophical systems agree that it is the person who engages in action, creates karma and has to be reborn in cyclic existence experiencing the various results of their karma. However, they describe and classify that person differently.

The consequence school assert that the “mere I” is the person that goes from life to life engaging in destructive and constructive actions, and experiencing suffering as a result. For them this “mere I” is the person and refers to the continuity of the aggregates, particularly the continuity of consciousness. Of the five aggregates, the fifth is the consciousness aggregate. “Mere I” meaning the consciousness aggregate includes six consciousnesses, namely the eye, ear, nose tongue, body and mental consciousnesses. The “mere I” refers to the continuity of the sixth one, the mental consciousness.

The specific significance of “mere” in the expression, “mere I” is that the “I” or the person does not exist from its own side. Therefore the “mere” negates the existence of the self-existence of the person. At the same time it indicates that the person who goes from life to life is a mere name, label, or imputation by conception.

To repeat: for the consequence school the person is the “mere I”; they usually describe it as the example or illustration of the person. For them the “mere I” is the person, but the term “mere I” refers to the continuity of the aggregates, specifically the fifth one, the consciousness aggregate. This is comprised of the six consciousnesses from the visual to the mental consciousness, and “mere I” is a name that specifically refers to the continuity of the mental consciousness. The “mere” in “mere I” negates the self existence of the “I” and indicates that that “I” is a mere name, label and imputation by conception.

The “mere I” is both the person and its illustration. The mind grasping or apprehending that “mere I” is not the innate I-grasping mind. The mind apprehending the “mere I” is a conventional valid mind. It is the mind that thinks, “I am coming, I am going, I am sitting, I am doing this, I am doing that.” These are all conventional valid minds, grasping<sup>15</sup> at an “I”.

Although the “I” appears to those valid minds as if it were self-existent, they themselves do not think it is self-existent the way it appears. Another mind does that. The “mere I” both appears to the innate I-grasping mind—a completely mistaken wrong mind—to be self-existent, and is also grasped by it as being self-existent the way it appears. The innate I-grasping mind believes in that appearance and thus thinks there is an inherently or self-existing “I”. The innate I-grasping mind is a type of true-grasping and a mental affliction.

Thus on one side is the innate I-grasping mind and on the other the valid I-grasping mind. The “I” appears to both of them as self-existent, but one grasps it as self-existent the way it appears whereas the other does not. Though the “I” appears as self-existent to the valid I-grasping mind, it does not believe in that appearance. It is not that it has realised the appearance is wrong, but just that it does not think the “I”

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<sup>15</sup> The word ‘grasping’ in this context does not refer to an ignorant mind. It refers to the normal way the mind takes hold of or cognises a conventional object.

inherently existent the way it appears to be. Therefore although the “I” appears to it as self-existent, that valid I-grasping mind does not *think* “self-existent”. On the other hand, to the innate I-grasping mind, not only does the “I” appear to be self-existent but it also thinks “self-existent”.

The continuity of the aggregates—specifically the continuity of the mental consciousness—is the basis of imputation of the person, but is not the illustration of the person. The illustration of the person has to be something which *is* the person, so whereas the continuity of the mental consciousness is not the person, the “mere I” is the person. That is why the “mere I” is the illustration of the person.

## Q & A

*Student:* Does the “mere I” seem relatively permanent as opposed to being impermanent and completely empty, because it exists for eons and eons, with its various manifestations? If the continuity of mental consciousness is the basis of the label “mere I” and if I say the “mere I” is the illustration of the person, that suggests that the “mere I” is something more than the continuity of the mental consciousness. It suggests that the “mere I” is something extra on top of the person, that the person has something added to it on top of the continuity of the mental consciousness. You say the continuity of the mental consciousness is not the person, but you say the “mere I” labeled on that continuity is the person. I cannot see the difference.

*Khensur Rinpoche:* Maybe one can explain it as follows. Take a watch for example: at first you make an object, but until somebody has labelled “watch” onto it, it is not a watch. The watch does not exist until the point of being called a watch. Could you say the watch exists before the label “watch” has been given to it, before it has ever been called a watch? Until people have decided, “Let’s call it “a watch”,” the watch does not exist, does it? The object would be able to perform all the normal functions of a watch, but until being called a watch it is not a watch, therefore the watch does not exist. It is only a watch when the name “watch” is applied to it. This does not mean that if somebody makes a watch today it is not a watch until somebody calls it a watch. It refers to that time at the beginning when the watch was first developed and given the name “watch”. Although the thing was there, it was not a watch until called “a watch”.

The same applies when somebody becomes a country’s president. Before being designated “president” according to the democratic system of the country, although the person has the same abilities, knowledge and so on, they are not the president.

Just as there is a sequence in these two cases, it is similar with designation of the “mere I”. The continuity of the mental consciousness is already there, but until designated “I” it is not the “I” and not the person.

*Student:* It seems to me that in your example the parts of the watch are like the continuity of the mental consciousness, and the “mere I” is like the label “watch”. However there is additionally the label “person” on top of the label “mere I”. This strikes me as being like adding the label “Rolex”, but “Rolex” really has no effect whatsoever on the watch. “Person” does not add anything to the “mere I” in the same way that “Rolex” just does not really support the idea of watch.

*Khensur Rinpoche:* When we look at the “mere I”, person and so on, once the continuity of the mental consciousness has been designated “mere I”, meaning that the continuity of the mental consciousness is the basis of designation of “mere I”, at that point the “mere I” exists and at that point the person also exists, because the continuity of mental consciousness is the basis of designation not just of “mere I” but also of “person”.

*Student:* Are they synonyms?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* Yes. They usually say that “I,” self and person are synonymous. Although “mere I” and person are synonyms, “person” does not have the particular connotation that “mere I” does, of negating the self-existence. This is because in “mere I” the *mere* negates self-existence. Thus it has a particular connotation that “person” does not specifically have.

For example, you might be walking along and see a shape in the distance. At first you are unsure whether it is a person, a tree, a heap of bricks, or something else. As you get closer you see it is a person. Then as you get closer still you recognise who it is and think, “Oh, it is so and so who did such and such to me or helped me in such and such a way in the past.” Where does that thought, “This is so and so who hurt or helped me at such and such a time in the past,” come from? It comes through the appearance of the person’s aggregates, specifically in this case their physical form. Thus through that person’s physical form appearing you have the thought, “It is so and so who hurt me or helped me in the past.” The aggregates are the basis of imputation of the person, because it is through the appearance to our minds of the person’s aggregates that we have the thought and imputation, “It is so and so.”

The point is that the mind apprehending or grasping at this conventionally existing “I” when thinking, “I am coming, going, doing this or that,” is a valid mind. It is neither a mistake, nor any form of true-grasping. We might think that every mind thinking “I” has something wrong with it, that it is self-grasping, true-grasping, or ignorance. But this is not the case. The mind thinking “I” when thinking, “I am going, coming and so on,” is a valid mind. It is neither true-grasping, nor the innate I-grasping mind. Nevertheless, there is an appearance to that mind of the “I” being self-existent.

Apart from the wisdom of meditative equipoise of an arya being which directly, non-conceptually realises emptiness free from the appearance of self-existence, there is an appearance of self-existence every single consciousness of a sentient being. In other words, other than that single exception, objects appear as self-existent to every kind of mind and consciousness of a sentient being, apart from that sole exception. This includes our valid minds thinking, “I this” and “I that”, which means that not every mind to which things appear to be self-existent, grasps them as being self-existent the way they appear. However, the innate I-grasping mind both experiences the appearing “I” as self-existent and also believes this self-existent “I” to exist.

Regarding the valid and innate I-grasping minds, the sequence of arising of those two is that first the valid and then the innate I-grasping mind arises. First one might think, “Oh, it is such and such a person” which would be the valid mind, and after that the innate self-grasping mind would arise.

First the valid mind thinking “I” arises, and then the innate I-grasping mind. With respect to the two types of self-grasping—at the person and at phenomena—the first to arise is the self-grasping at phenomena, followed by self-grasping at the person. However, in terms of the order of realisation, first is the selflessness of the person, followed by the selflessness of phenomena.

Although the person is a phenomenon, we distinguish between the self of the person and that of phenomena, and therefore of the selflessness of the person and that of phenomena, because generally the aggregates—the form aggregate, feeling aggregate and so on—are objects used by the person. The person is the user and the aggregates and so on are things used by that person.

Thus when meditating on emptiness the first thing one does is to meditate on and gradually realise selflessness with respect to the person who uses phenomena, namely the aggregates and so on. After that we meditate on and realise the selflessness of the phenomena used by that person.

At first, one can meditate on the selflessness of the person, through thinking of how the person is a dependent arising. It is then relatively easy to progress to the phenomena of the aggregates and so on, which are the objects used by that person, thinking about how they are empty because of being dependent.

### **Form is empty...the Fourfold Purity**

The essential point of this sutra is contained in the words

*Form is empty. Emptiness is form: Emptiness is not other than form; form is also not other than emptiness.*

The first point is relatively simple, since form is empty because of existing through dependence on its causes and conditions. The second point, that emptiness is form, means that when considering the emptiness of form, meaning form’s emptiness of being self-existent, one cannot find this emptiness anywhere other than form itself. The third point that emptiness is not other than form is because in looking at the emptiness of form one finds just form.

The fourth point is that form is not other than emptiness. Although it says “emptiness” it means “empty”. In other words, form being empty, or the empty aspect of form, is neither different nor separate from form. This is because form being empty—that empty aspect of form—is form being empty of self-existence, empty of existence independent of causes and conditions and so forth. It is that aspect of form being empty of independence, thus dependent. That aspect of form being dependent is precisely form itself, and as with form, it is emptiness.

Therefore the third and fourth points are similar, but from opposite perspectives. The third, *emptiness is not other than form*, points out form’s empty aspect and its not being separate from form. To understand the fourth, *form is not other than emptiness*, think of form and recognise how it is not separate from or other than the empty aspect of form. This fourth point is that the empty nature or aspect of form, its aspect of being empty, cannot be established (does not exist) separate from form itself. The fourth and third are similar, but while the fourth focuses on form itself and its not

existing apart from its empty aspect, the third shows how the empty aspect cannot be found separate from form.

I hope you can understand this explanation without error. When one can understand this fourfold purity with respect to form, one can understand how it works in connection with anything. The commentary states this very clearly.

### **Question & Answer**

*Student:* Rinpoche stressed the difference between emptiness and empty, and now I think that is clear. What is not clear for me is where it says in our text on the first of the eight profundities, *Likewise Shariputra, are all phenomena empty.*

*Khensur Rinpoche:* Empty and emptiness are different. Conventional and ultimate truths are different. “Everything is empty” means that absolutely everything that exists is empty of true existence, self-existence, and inherent existence, whereas not everything is emptiness, which is the ultimate truth.

*Another student:* Regarding what goes from life to life and the “mere I” being imputed to the aggregates and specifically to the continuum of mental consciousness, it seems to me that the potentiality for the other consciousnesses and aggregates also goes from life to life. However, potentialities” going from life to life has not been mentioned. Do those potentialities go from life to life and how do they connect with the “mere I”?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* In the case of karma, when an action has been completed, from the next moment onwards there is the state of having been destroyed (Tib. *shik.pa*) of that karma. The very next moment after the action has finished, comes the first moment of the state of having been destroyed, which gives rise to the second moment, which in turn gives rise to the third moment, the fourth moment and so on, in a continuity of the states of having been destroyed. That process continues, and one might say that the potential for the result to be given rise to is with or depending on the mental consciousness.

*Another student:* Everything that exists is dependent. The innate I-grasping mind exists, therefore the innate I-grasping mind is dependent, but on what does that innate I-grasping mind depend?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* The innate I-grasping mind arises through depending on the appearance of inherent existence to the earlier moments of consciousness. Therefore it comes into being or exists, depending on referring to the “I” and thinking it to be inherently existent. That is the process whereby the innate I-grasping mind manifests, because in fact it is there all the time, at least in latent form.

*Another student:* You said that the “mere I” is the “illustration of the self”? What proofs of illustration are there?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* Only once the term has been imputed can you speak of it as being the illustration. For example, up to the point that the person has been designated “president”, he or she would be the basis of imputation for “president”, but not an

example of a president. To repeat, before the person has actually been designated “president” they would be the basis for imputation of “president”. After having been designated president he or she would be not only the basis of imputation for “president”, but also an example or illustration for “president”. Actually this distinction between a thing’s being a basis of imputation, an example and so on is quite a subtle point.

### **The Object of Negation**

When meditating on emptiness it is important to be able to identify the object of refutation or negation. Without such knowledge it is like trying to catch a thief without being able to identify him. If you cannot identify the thief, not knowing what he looks like, it is very difficult to catch him. Similarly when we meditate on emptiness something needs to be negated, and without knowing what it is one will find it very difficult to make that negation.

If when trying to describe the thief one wants caught to somebody, one can say only that he has a round head, two eyes and two legs, this information is of little use to the thief-catcher because so many people fit the description. It is not precise. However, knowing what uniquely distinguishes the thief from everyone else, the thief-catcher will know for sure when she has found the right person.

In meditating on emptiness, whether the basis of your analysis is a person or a phenomenon, once you know what the object to be negated is, if you look in the basis for that object, on failing to find it you will realise emptiness. Realising emptiness means realising the meaning of emptiness.

The person uses phenomena, specifically the aggregates. If the person were self-existent he or she would be completely independent of all causes and conditions, of anything in fact. The only place where it makes sense to look for the object of negation, a self-existent person who is completely independent of anything, is within the aggregates. This is because the person actually exists depending on the aggregates. In a sense, the person exists on or in the aggregates. The person is based on the aggregates.

To try to find the self-existent person, one should look within the aggregates, the person’s basis of imputation. When analysing and searching for that self-existent person within the aggregates, and failing to find it, one realises or understands the meaning of emptiness. The emptiness thus realised is the selflessness of the person and one gains certainty of it with a valid mind, through one’s own logical analysis.

This is important because thinking there to be no such thing as a self of a person, or a self-existing person based merely on being told as much is insufficient. One must know exactly what one seeks, understanding what the object of negation is, and then must search for it oneself within the basis of designation of the person. Having looked and searched for it, not finding it means one understands emptiness.

How can one know whether or not one’s meditation on emptiness has been successful and effective? Having a clear idea of what one searches for, the object of negation—when meditating on the selflessness of the person, the self-existent person—one

searches for it within the aggregates. One enquires whether that self-existent person is any one of the aggregates individually, the group of the aggregates or whatever. Having searched exhaustively, not having found it means it does not exist. Recognising this shows the meditation on emptiness to be a success.

### **The Risk of Nihilism**

When looking for the object of negation, the self-existent person, within the aggregates, one fails to find it. Not finding it means finding that it does not exist. That means you have found or realised emptiness. However, approaching meditation on emptiness without a clear idea of the object to be negated, and simply looking for *the person* within the aggregates one fails to find the person. Simply looking for the *person* within the aggregates, without qualifying it with the object of negation, one fails to find that too. Thus, by looking for and failing to find the person within the aggregates there is the risk of concluding that the person does not exist.

This causes one to take emptiness as a form of nihilism, whereby whatever is empty does not exist. This is because in seeking the object within its basis of designation one fails to find it, suggesting it does not exist. Thereby meditation on emptiness may become a form of nihilism. As a result one could deny that karma and refuge exist and eventually abandon or reject emptiness itself. As a result of rejecting emptiness, one is born in the lower realms in a future life, specifically in the hell called “The hell of unrelenting torment”. In this case one’s meditation on emptiness will have been ineffective, and will have gone extremely badly.

In the process of searching for a self-existing person, when thinking “I this and that,” an appearance of an “I” existing from its own side is produced. Such an “I” or person existing from its own side is what one should seek.

If instead one looks for *the person* within the aggregates asking oneself if it is the aggregates, part of the aggregates, the collection of the aggregates and so forth, one will not find it. Likewise one does not find the watch when seeking a watch within its parts, enquiring whether it is this part of the watch, the front or the back, this cog, that cog and so on. Taking this to mean the watch does not exist is a mistake. When meditating on the selflessness or emptiness of the person, if, having failed to find it one takes that to mean the person does not exist, this spreads over to other areas leading one to think that refuge, karma and so forth do not exist.

Thus the emptiness on which one meditates will be a nihilistic emptiness—a form of nihilism. When taking the things on whose emptiness one meditates to be non-existent, one’s meditation kind of annihilates them. The ripening result of meditating through misunderstanding emptiness like that is birth in the hell of unceasing torment.

Whilst every other kind of negative action (karma) can be purified there is no way to purify the fault of nihilism. One can only experience the ripening result. This is the meaning of the scriptural statement that when a person of limited intelligence approaches emptiness mistakenly, it brings about their downfall.

One will not find the person when seeking it within the aggregates, the person's basis of imputation. Moreover, when seeking a self-existing person within the aggregates this is not found either. Thus there is a similarity between these two in the sense one fails to find either the person or the *self-existing* person within the aggregates. However, in the second case, not finding a self-existing person when looking for it within its basis of designation, the aggregates, equals finding it does not exist, which means *realising* it does not exist, and that is realising emptiness.

In the case of looking for the person within the aggregates, not finding it neither means to have found it not to exist nor that one has realised its non-existence. Nevertheless, one might make the mistake of thinking that the failure to find it means it does not exist.

Furthermore one could infer from that misunderstanding that like the person, other conventional phenomena do not exist from the perspective of the wisdom of meditative equipoise of the Arya<sup>16</sup> when single-pointedly and non-conceptually experiencing meditation on the true nature of reality, emptiness. Since the person does not appear within the perspective of that meditation, the person does not exist for such a meditation. The only thing that exists and appears for that meditation is ultimate truth. Conventional phenomena do not appear for it because conventional phenomena are false. Being untrue<sup>17</sup>, they do not appear.

One might think that because conventional phenomena do not appear to or exist for that meditation they do not exist at all. Moreover one might think that when an Arya is absorbed single-pointedly in meditation on this non-conceptual realisation of the true nature of reality, he or she realises the non-existence of all conventional phenomena, and so annihilates them. This misunderstanding of emptiness will lead to the ripening result of birth in the hell of unceasing torment.

In fact the non-existence of conventional phenomena from the perspective of the Arya's wisdom of meditative equipoise single-pointedly meditating on the nature of reality, emptiness is itself emptiness. Their non-existence from the perspective of that meditation is emptiness. There are two ways to misunderstand that, meaning there are two faults that may follow.

One fault is thinking that the view of emptiness is a nihilist position since conventional phenomena like karma and refuge do not exist from the perspective of that meditation. In other words, one thinks that because for the direct perception of emptiness conventional phenomena do not exist, emptiness means the non-existence of everything. To such a misunderstanding it seems that emptiness is the non-existence of or annihilates conventional phenomena. Therefore, although not rejecting emptiness one mistakenly thinks it means that conventional phenomena like refuge, karma and so on do not exist at all.

The other fault is rejecting emptiness as wrong or bad, for being like nihilism. When taking the view of emptiness to be a nihilistic position because it seems that emptiness annihilates things, one might conclude that emptiness is wrong. This follows because

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<sup>16</sup> An Arya is a superior or noble being, meaning one who has directly realised emptiness.

<sup>17</sup> Although true conventionally or relatively, ultimately they are untrue.

for the meditative equipoise of the Arya directly realising emptiness, conventional phenomena do not exist. That meditation realises they do not exist, so one might mistakenly conclude that meditation on emptiness annihilates conventional phenomena. This fault can lead the person to rebirth in the lower realms.

In the commentary it explains that a mistaken approach to the view due to low intelligence or limited wisdom brings about one's downfall. The afore-mentioned two wrong approaches to emptiness can cause this. The same passage continues to say that a poisonous snake grabbed hold of in the wrong way will bite and poison one, though it cannot bite someone who knows how to take hold of it.

### **Conventionally Existing Phenomena and Emptiness**

We cannot see the very subtle profound qualities of an enlightened being, but we have seen neither their non-existence, nor that the Buddha lacks them. One should not believe them to not exist just because of not seeing them. Likewise, it is natural that conventional phenomena do not appear to the wisdom of meditative equipoise of the Arya. Reality is all that mind focuses on, and all that appears to that mind is the ultimate truth of emptiness.

Though it is the nature of that meditation that conventional phenomena do not appear to or exist for it this does not mean that that mind has realised them not to exist. It is simply that they do not and cannot appear to such a mind.

There is a big difference between not realising something and realising that that thing does not exist. For example, the eye consciousness cannot experience or realise sweet, salty and sour flavours, and so on, but that does not mean the eye consciousness realises they do not exist. Similarly, the eye consciousness cannot hear or realise sounds, but this does not mean it realises that they do not exist.

In the same way, although we ordinary beings are unable to perceive, understand or realise the subtle qualities of the enlightened beings, this does not mean that through not seeing or understanding them, we understand and realise they do not exist.

The self-grasping mind looking at the person thinks that a self-existent person is there. The object of negation—in terms of the person, the self-existent person—appears to our mind, so to that very mind there is an appearance of the person being self-existent. It is not possible for a person who does exist and a self-existent person to appear separately. They appear to that mind as completely indistinguishable.

It is impossible to perceive only a self-existent person without the person itself appearing. These two appear mixed and indistinguishable because they cannot appear separately. One negates the self-existent person by meditating on emptiness using various forms of analysis to realise that there is no such thing. The appearance of the conventionally existing person disappears at the same time as that negation.

Because of that, when you negate the self-existent person it seems as though the conventionally existing person has also been refuted. However, you have not realised the conventionally existing person to be non-existent; you have realised there to be no such thing as a self-existent person.

For example, if you ask someone not to sit here but to move elsewhere, when they go they take their shadow with them. You do not separately tell their shadow to go, nor tell them to take their shadow with them. You merely ask the person to go, but their shadow goes along with them. This is similar and shows how meditation on emptiness does not imply the non-existence of conventionally existing phenomena such as refuge and karma.

*Student:* To ascertain the object of negation one must separate the appearance of the truly existent from the validly existent person, yet because we are ordinary beings, whenever the person appears to us it appears along with an appearance of inherent existence. Before we have realised emptiness how can we make that separation effectively in order to actually find the object of negation?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* The way to separate them is through thinking that the object of negation is a self-existent person that exists from its own side completely independent of causes and conditions. That is the thing to be negated. Get an idea of a self-existent person that exists completely independent of causes, conditions and anything else. Then recognise how the person actually exists depending on various causes and conditions and so forth. Thereby realise that because of being dependent, the self-existing one is a mistake and does not actually exist.

Several other options are available of reasoning showing that the self-existing person does not exist. However, the clearest, simplest and most straight forward is thinking about how the person is dependent.

*Same student:* It is very difficult to separate the validly existing person from the appearance of the inherently existing person.

*Khensur Rinpoche:* Everything that appears automatically appears not as dependent, but rather as self-existent. Things appear as independent, so use analysis to investigate whether “self-existing” things exist as they appear. Using the insight into dependent arising, see that they do not.

*Same student:* If one is having problems with that would it help to first establish that the conventionally existing person does exist, because of functioning for example, and then go on to establish that the truly existent person does not exist?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* Yes, one should recognise how the person does exist. There is a person who comes and goes, sits and eats, sleeps and so on. Then we need to realise that that person appears as if self-existent, meaning as existing independently, and then we analyse whether there is such a person.

*Another student:* I find the idea of being in a state where neither the “I” that is independent of causes and conditions nor the conventionally existing “I” arises a little bit frightening. I am wondering how you re-emerge from that experience to be able to function again? Do you just wait for some pain, for instance for your knee to hurt, to think “Ah, that’s conventional existence” or is there a meditative process, a way of analysing that there are indeed conventional realities?

*Ven Steve Carlier:* In other words if you have got to the point where there is a direct perception of emptiness, with no appearance of any kind of conventional phenomena, at what point would you reaffirm their existence?

*Student:* Clearly there are beings that have this meditative experience and then function. They do not just sit there for the rest of their lives, but they go out and function. How do they arrive at this place where they can function in conventional reality?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* When they come out of the meditation and just go about their normal activities, they are able to think very clearly how even though at that time there was no appearance of conventional phenomena nonetheless they do exist. That is the time of the meditation break.

*Ven Steve Carlier:* It is at the time of subsequent realisation.

*Khensur Rinpoche:* When they rise from their meditation they can see very clearly that although there was no appearance of the person during the meditation, nevertheless there *is* a conventionally existing person that can come and go, sit, sleep, and eat and so on.

The mantra of the Perfection of Wisdom, *tayatha gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha* is recited in the Heart Sutra. *gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi* contains five sets of syllables which can be understood in connection with the five paths of accumulation, preparation, seeing, meditation and no more learning.

The first two syllables are each translated as “Go!” Thus there is “Go! Go!” Next is *paragate*, “Go beyond!” *parasamgate*, “Go perfectly beyond!” Finally *Bodhi* basically means “Go to enlightenment!” and literally means to set up or place the basis or the foundation of enlightenment, so it means “Attain enlightenment!” The whole mantra means “Go! Go! Go beyond! Go perfectly beyond! Go to enlightenment!” or “Attain enlightenment!”

Imagine a criminal imprisoned in a cell or dungeon for life. After he has been there a long time a friend visits and advises him, “Don’t stay here any longer! You must do something to get out, to get free of this!” The friend explains the route out, with all the shortcuts and secret passages. The friend explains, “You have to go here, and there; there are actually four paths or legs on this journey. When you have gone through all four segments of the path, finally you will be completely free and will never have to come back and undergo this kind of bad experience again.” The path to enlightenment is like this.

First is the path of accumulation on which one mainly accumulates merit. Then, on the paths of preparation, seeing and meditation, one principally uses wisdom to progress along the path, although that wisdom must be reinforced by the method side of compassion and so forth. Thus, although during this phase method and wisdom must be practised inseparably in combination, the main driver is wisdom. For example, on the path of seeing, although it must be bolstered with the method side, it is mainly wisdom which eliminates the intellectually acquired obscurations. Then on the path of meditation the innate obscurations must be eliminated in several stages.

Once both types of obscurations are eliminated one achieves the fifth path which is enlightenment.

This means the journey across the ocean of cyclic existence to liberation relies mainly on the wisdom realising emptiness. One gradually eliminates the obscurations and faults in the mind through practising the perfection of wisdom (developing the realisation of emptiness) and thus gradually achieves enlightenment.

At the outset of the waxing phase, there is a very fine crescent of the new moon. That thin sliver of a crescent of the new moon puts an end to the total darkness. Before waxing began, only darkness was in the moon's place. Instead now, although predominantly dark it is no longer totally so. The very fine crescent eliminated the complete disc of darkness, of which less than a disc remains now. As the moon waxes, its light gets fuller and fuller, and what is being eliminated gets increasingly less until finally the full moon eradicates the finest, most subtle level, the final sliver of darkness.

Similarly, as we progress on the path, our wisdom is somewhat weak initially and can eliminate only the greatest, most superficial and gross obscurations. As the wisdom gets stronger and stronger it has the capacity to dispel increasingly subtle obscurations. On the path of seeing<sup>18</sup> one has strong enough wisdom to enable one to eliminate the grosser obscurations in the sequence of the sixteen moments of the path of seeing. These wisdom processes are called forbearances and liberation. Then on the path of meditation the remaining, more subtle obscurations are eliminated in nine cycles. There are nine cycles of the path of meditation called the three great, three middling and three smaller cycles.

### **Cutting the Root of Cyclic Existence**

*Khensur Rinpoche:* When we say “cyclic existence”, because we often talk about the ocean of samsara or the ocean of cyclic existence, what do you understand by that expression, “cyclic existence”?

*Student:* The process of birth, aging, sickness and death?

*Khensur Rinpoche:* So you are saying that cyclic existence is birth, aging, sickness and death?

*Student:* Yes, shaped by ignorance.

*Khensur Rinpoche:* Ignorance forces us to appropriate or take a set of aggregates. So, to be precise, cyclic existence refers to the aggregates which are taken under the control of ignorance. In more general terms the aggregates are taken under the control of karma and the mental afflictions.

The aggregates are characterised by birth, sickness, aging and death. Cyclic existence implies circling, and we are circling in the stream or continuity of the four or five

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<sup>18</sup> The path of seeing is the initial point of the dawning of the direct non-conceptual realisation of emptiness. This realisation is developed and deepened in the path of meditation which follows.

aggregates<sup>19</sup>. With the aggregates come birth, aging, sickness and death which occur under the influence or control of karma and afflictions.

This means that the only way to be free of cyclic existence and achieve liberation is through the wisdom realising emptiness. We are in cyclic existence because of karma and mental afflictions, in particular the latter. From amongst these mental afflictions the specific root cause compelling us to take birth again and again in cyclic existence is ignorance—self-grasping, true-grasping. The only way to be rid of that is by realising emptiness.

No matter how powerful one's love, compassion and bodhicitta, without wisdom realising emptiness, there is no way to achieve liberation from cyclic existence. No matter how strong one's altruistic attitudes are, without that wisdom one cannot sever the root of cyclic existence which is the true-grasping mind. What binds one to cyclic existence is ignorance. In order to sever that bondage one needs the wisdom realising emptiness.

Beyond such realising, one is tied to the peace of personal liberation by the self-cherishing mind. To cut through that bond the altruistic attitudes of love, compassion and bodhicitta are required.

The two types of mental obscurations are the afflictive obscurations and a subtler set of obscurations called knowledge obscurations. Hearer and Solitary Realiser Arhats, the Foe Destroyers<sup>20</sup>, are amazing because, through having thought about, understood and meditated on emptiness deeply, thereby realising it, they can destroy the foe—the mental afflictions. Of the two obscurations they can eliminate the afflictive obscurations.

However, they are not free of all faults. Not having overcome all obscurations, they still retain the knowledge obscurations. This is because they have not taken full responsibility for benefiting others. Not having developed a sufficiently powerful sense of love and compassion towards others, they still have that fault or obscuration in the mind.

Because they can improve themselves further the Arhats have not yet completely accomplished their own welfare. Theirs is not the most perfect experience a person can achieve. This is because of the self-cherishing mind. They experience only their own liberation and have not accomplished the ability to perfect the welfare of others. They remain in their own peace. The peace of that freedom from cyclic existence is much like a person that has gone to sleep. They cannot accomplish the welfare of others, or benefit others greatly because of still having the self-cherishing mind. They have not generated the altruistic attitude.

Both extremes must be overcome. The extreme of cyclic existence is vanquished by meditating on and realising emptiness while the extreme of remaining in one's personal peaceful liberation is defeated by generating the altruistic mind.

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<sup>19</sup> Most sentient beings in cyclic existence have the four aggregates of form, feeling, discriminations, compositional factors and consciousness. However, those in the formless realms have only four aggregates since they lack form.

<sup>20</sup> The 'foe' they have destroyed is that of the afflictions.

## **The Importance of the Wisdom Side**

Wisdom without the method side of bodhicitta and compassion binds one to the peace of personal liberation. This is the situation of the Hinayana<sup>21</sup> Arhats—the Hearer and Solitary Realiser Foe Destroyers, who are bound to the peace of their own liberation because of not having engaged in the practice of the perfections based on bodhicitta, which is in turn based on the altruistic attitudes of love and compassion.

Depicting the position of the Hinayana Arhats like that does not mean denigrating them. Nevertheless, when the Arhats are compared with the Buddha it becomes evident that they have become sidelined in the extreme of personal peace. Thus they are unable to benefit others extensively as can bodhisattvas and enlightened beings. They have not reached even their full personal potential.

Furthermore, one is tied down, bound or fettered with either wisdom divorced from method or method divorced from wisdom. In the latter case one is bound to cyclic existence. Practising the method side without wisdom leaves one unable to escape from cyclic existence. With only the first five perfections of generosity, morality, patience, enthusiasm, and concentration, but without the sixth perfection of wisdom, no matter how much one practises one cannot possibly achieve liberation.

A scriptural passage gives the example of a group of blind people who can reach their destination only with a sighted guide, whereas without one they are stuck. Similarly, the first five perfections can take one beyond cyclic existence to reach enlightenment only with the practice of wisdom. Without the practice of wisdom, which is like their eyes, the first five are unable to reach their destination.

To get somewhere you need legs to carry you and eyes to see where you are going. The first five perfections are like legs and the sixth perfection, wisdom, like eyes. [Walking was used to illustrate this point because when these scriptures were taught there were no cars and aeroplanes to travel by.]

With a complete set of eyes and legs operational one can go wherever one wishes and can even undertake a very long journey which would be impossible without them both. With all six perfections, one may handle the long journey to enlightenment. On the other hand, Hearers and Solitary Realisers with the practice of wisdom, but without the other perfections, lack the method side, like having no legs. Therefore they simply cannot manage the long journey to enlightenment which is too difficult for them.

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<sup>21</sup> Literally ‘small vehicle’, referring to the limited scope of motivation and result compared with those of the great vehicle, the Mahayana.

These are some of the benefits of the practice of meditation on emptiness. It is very useful to reflect on these benefits because it gives one the energy to put into the practice of understanding, meditating on and thereby realising emptiness.

A sutra called, *The Door of Entrance into Faith* says there that if a person were to provide each sentient being in the three realms—the desire, form and formless realms—everything needed for their whole life until death, there would certainly be a huge amount of merit or benefit. It is hard to grasp (if it were possible) how much merit there would be from that, yet there is even more merit in meditating on emptiness even for a short while. This does not mean even to have realised it.

Of course if one has realised it and meditates on it for one session, there is certainly far greater merit. However, even in the case of not having realised it but seriously thinking about, reflecting and meditating on it, there is far more merit than from providing all sentient beings of the three realms with everything they need for the rest of their lives.

To understand this it helps to look at another of Buddha's teachings which states that even though one kept pure morality and meditated one-pointedly for tens of thousands of eons, there is no way one could achieve liberation. This is because only with pure morality and stable concentration but without the realisation of emptiness, even meditating for tens of thousands of eons does nothing to harm ignorance, the root of cyclic existence. Despite having meditated with such stability for such a long period, one would finally have done nothing to harm ignorance, the true-grasping mind which is the root of cyclic existence. Hence, one would still be a samsaric being, meaning a person in cyclic existence just as before.

Although such a long period of meditation would not even touch that self-grasping mind of ignorance, it is said that even having doubts about self-existence in the sense of thinking “*maybe* things are empty of self-existence”, completely undermines cyclic existence and inflicts very heavy damage on its root. The teachings use the image of reducing a piece of cloth to rags or tatters, making it very weak, so that were one to just pick it up it would fall to pieces.

The importance of practising wisdom is illustrated towards the end of the three “Mother Sutras” where Buddha presented a section called “the complete entrustment”. At that point in the Perfection of Wisdom teachings the Buddha said to Ananda that even if he were to forget everything else Buddha had taught, as long as Ananda could retain, memorise and remember all he had taught concerning the words, content and meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, he would not feel that Ananda in any way disrespected him as his teacher. However, were Ananda to remember absolutely everything else the Buddha had taught, but were to forget just one word or a single aspect of the meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, the Buddha would not even consider Ananda to be his disciple. In that case, the Buddha said, Ananda should not consider himself to be his student, nor consider the Buddha to be his teacher. Furthermore, were he to forget any element of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, the *samaya*<sup>22</sup> between Buddha Shakyamuni and Ananda would have been completely destroyed.

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<sup>22</sup> The bond or personal pledge of commitment

This underlines how important the Buddha himself considered the Perfection of Wisdom to be. Of course it is so important because without wisdom, there is absolutely no way of going beyond the suffering of cyclic existence.

We consider Ananda to be very important in Buddhism; such beings are considered to be most precious. Similarly the seventeen pandits of Nalanda, the six “ornaments” of India and the two sublime beings are considered to be highly important and precious. The reason for this is that it is due to them that the teachings the Buddha gave so many centuries ago still exist in a pure and complete form for us to use today.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the importance of wisdom is that none of us sentient beings could possibly gain liberation from cyclic existence without the wisdom realising emptiness. Therefore it is highly praised and many scriptures describe the importance of this practice in various ways. One scripture says that were one to seriously meditate on the actual meaning of emptiness for only a minute or two, again not necessarily having realised it, the merit would be far greater than spending eons either listening to teachings on or reciting the Perfection of Wisdom, or practising the other five perfections of generosity, morality, patience, enthusiasm and concentration. Therefore, although practising the first five perfections for eons would create a huge amount of merit, meditating on emptiness for just one or two minutes would make far more merit.

The main reason why there would be so much more merit is that even if you spent eons engaged in listening to or reciting the Perfection of Wisdom or practising the first five perfections you would still be in cyclic existence. Being tied down in and bound to cyclic existence, you would still be compelled to take birth repeatedly in cyclic existence. You would not have escaped cyclic existence at all.

I am sure you know that you cannot expect to be able to practise perfectly right from the beginning. Practising in general and specifically here thinking about and trying to understand emptiness is something that will get better and better but only if you apply yourself to it. As Shantideva says, there is nothing that will not get easier with familiarity. Therefore, if one keeps trying, it will get more and more familiar, and as that happens it will become easier and easier.

Unlike in the past, we now have a great many texts translated into English. So much hard work by so many people has been done to make the teachings available in English. We are able to read. We have the intelligence to pick up these books, to read them through and to go back and forth to compare what it says earlier in the book with what it says later and so on. Thus we definitely have the means to improve our understanding.

It is well worth getting, and spending time on reliable books such as those written or based on teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Other books by certain extraordinary beings are also worth buying and reading and if one cannot judge for oneself it is worth asking around and finding out other people’s recommendations.

Having reflected on the advantages of emptiness, do not think it unimportant to meditate on love, compassion and bodhicitta and so on. On the contrary, you should also maintain efforts to understand and practise these.

**Khensur Jampa Tekchog Rinpoche**

*Saraswati Buddhist Group, Somerset, England 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> August 2007*

*Edited by Andy Wistreich*

**The Root Text:**

**Essence of Wisdom**

Thus I have heard: at one time, the Lord was sitting on Vulture's Peak, near the city of Rajgir. He was accompanied by a large community of monks, as well as a large community of bodhisattvas. On that occasion, the Lord was absorbed in a particular concentration called the profound appearance. Meanwhile the bodhisattva, the great being, the noble Avalokitesvara was contemplating the profound discipline of the perfection of wisdom. He came to see that the five aggregates were empty of any inherent nature of their own.

Through the power of the Buddha, the venerable Sariputra approached the noble Avalokitesvara and asked him, "How should a son of the noble lineage proceed when he wants to train in the profound discipline of the perfection of wisdom?"

The noble Avalokitesvara replied to the venerable Sariputra, "Whatever son or daughter of the noble lineage wants to train in the profound discipline of the perfection of wisdom should consider things in the following way. First, he or she should clearly and thoroughly comprehend that the five aggregates are empty of any inherent nature of their own. Form is empty, but voidness is form. Emptiness is not other than forms and forms are not other than emptiness. Similarly, feelings, discernments, formative elements and consciousness are also emptiness. Likewise, Sariputra, are all phenomena empty. They have no defining characteristics; they are unproduced; they do not cease; they are undefiled, yet they are not separate from defilement; they do not decrease, yet they do not increase. This being the case, Sariputra, in terms of emptiness there exist no forms, no feelings, no discernments, no formative elements, no consciousness; no eyes, no ears, no noses, no tongues, no bodies, no minds; no visual forms, no sounds, no smells, no tastes, no tactile sensations, no mental objects. There exist no visual elements, no mental elements, and no elements of mental consciousness. There exist no ignorance, no ageing and death and no exhaustion of ageing and death. In the same way there exist no suffering, no origin of suffering, no cessation, no path, no wisdom, no attainment and no lack of attainment.

"Therefore, Sariputra, since bodhisattvas have no attainment, they depend upon and dwell in the perfection of wisdom; their minds are unobstructed and unafraid. They transcend all error and finally reach the endpoint: nirvana.

"All the buddhas of the past, present and future have depended, do and will depend upon the perfection of wisdom. Thereby they became, are becoming and will become unsurpassably, perfectly and completely awakened buddhas.

“Therefore the mantra of the perfection of wisdom is a mantra of great knowledge; it is an unsurpassable mantra; it is a mantra that is comparable to the incomparable; it is a mantra that totally pacifies all suffering. It will not deceive you; therefore know it to be true! I proclaim the mantra of the perfection of wisdom: *tayatha gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*. Sariputra, it is in this way that the great bodhisattvas train themselves in the profound perfection of wisdom.”

At that moment the Lord arose from his concentration and said to the noble Avalokitesvara, “Well said, well said. That is just how it is, my son, just how it is. The profound perfection of wisdom should be practised exactly as you have explained it. Then the tathagatas will be truly delighted.”

When the Lord had spoken these words, the venerable Sariputra and the bodhisattva, the great being, the noble Avalokitesvara, and the entire gathering of gods, humans, asuras and gandharvas were overjoyed, and they praised what the Lord had said.