

Commentary on selected Verses From Nagarjuna's Sixty Stanzas of Reasonings

Nagarjuna — *DIALECTICAL* · Nagarjuna

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Comments on selected Verses From Nagarjuna's Sixty Stanzas of Reasonings (Yuktisastika)

Realizing the Profound Truth of Emptiness.

By The Very Venerable Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche

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Selected Verses From Nagarjuna's Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness

Entities do not exist

In their causes, in their conditions,

In aggregations of many things, or in individual things.

Therefore, all entities are empty. (3)

Because it already exists, that which exists does not arise.

Because it does not exist, that which does not exist does not arise.

Because they contradict each other, existence and nonexistence do not
[arise] together

Since there is no arising, there is no remaining or cessation either. (4)

Without one there are not many, and

Without many there is not one.

Therefore, dependently arisen entities [like these]

Have no characteristics. (7)

[In the true nature] there is neither permanence nor impermanence,

Neither self nor nonself, neither clean nor unclean

And neither happiness nor suffering.

Therefore, the [four] mistaken views do not exist. (9)

Without a father there is no son, and without a son there is no father. (i.e. like cause &
effect)

These two do not exist without depending on each other.

Neither do they exist simultaneously.

The twelve links are exactly the same. (13)

Composite and uncomposite [phenomena]

Are not many, are not one,

Are not existent, are not nonexistent, [and] are not both existent and nonexistent.
These words apply to all phenomena [without exception]. (32)

[Defiled] actions have afflictions as their cause,
And the afflictions themselves arise due to [defiled] actions.
The body [also] has [defiled] actions as its cause,
So all three are empty of essence. (37)

All formations are like unreal cities in the sky,
Illusions, mirages, falling hairs,
Foam, bubbles, phantoms,
Dreams and wheels of fire—
They have absolutely no core or substance to them. (66)

The unequaled Thus Gone One
Explicitly taught that
Since all entities are empty of any inherent nature,
All phenomena are dependently arisen. (68)

When one understands that “this arose from those conditions,”
The net of wrong views is lifted.
One abandons desire, ignorance and aversion,
And attains the undefiled state of nirvana. (73)

Realizing the Profound Truth of Emptiness.
By The Very Venerable Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche

In June of 1997 in Seattle, Washington, The Very Venerable Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche gave a series of eleven teachings on realizing emptiness, based on the commentaries of Nagarjuna and the songs of Gyalwa Götsangpa and Jetsun Milarepa. The following is an edited transcript of that teaching from the first evening, June 17. Rinpoche's translator was Ari Goldfield.

Before we listen to these teachings, Rinpoche asks that we all give rise to the precious attitude of bodhicitta, the awakening mind, which means that not only for our own benefit, but rather for the benefit of all sentient beings, who are limitless in number as space is vast in extent, we aspire to attain the precious state of buddhahood, which abides neither in the cycle of existence (samsara), nor in some one-sided cessation of suffering or some kind of individual peace (nirvana). In order to attain the precious rank of buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings, we must generate in our hearts great enthusiasm. We must generate the attitude that we will listen to, reflect upon, and meditate upon the teachings of the genuine dharma with all of the diligence and enthusiasm that we can muster.

At this time, when we have attained this precious human body, endowed with the wonderful qualities of faith, diligence, and intelligence, it is very important for us to use our time well. And the way to do that is to listen to, reflect upon, and then meditate on the genuine dharma.

When we are studying and reflecting on the meaning of the dharma, what are very important

are the explanations of how the cycle of existence and nirvana - the transcendence of that cycle of existence - appear, and how they really are - what is their true nature. Along those lines, tonight Rinpoche will explain, from all of the vast array of topics of the genuine dharma, some verses from a text by the noble bodhisattva and protector Nagarjuna, called the Sixty Stanzas of Reasonings. [See Page 6 for complete text.]

In the first verse, Nagarjuna prostrates to the Buddha, because the Buddha is the one who taught the truth of dependent arising. Because the Buddha taught that, Nagarjuna prostrates to him.

This verse reads:

###

I prostrate to the Mighty One
Who has taught about dependent arising,
The principle by which
Arising and disintegration are abandoned. (Homage)

If we can understand what dependent arising means, if we can understand the truth of dependent arising and how it is that all phenomena are dependently arisen, then we can abandon our attachment to arising and disintegration. And since that is true, then Nagarjuna prostrates to the Buddha, because the Buddha is the one who taught this most important truth. The Buddha is the one who taught us this method by which we can give up this type of attachment.

The next verse, which is the first verse after the homage reads:

###

Those whose intelligence has gone beyond existence and nonexistence
And who do not abide [in any extremes]
Have realized the meaning of dependent arising,
The profound and unobservable [truth of emptiness]. (1)

Those whose intelligence has gone beyond existence and nonexistence refers to those who desire liberation, who desire to be liberated with their intelligence. Have gone beyond existence and nonexistence means that they are no longer attached to the idea that phenomena truly exist, that there is some substantial existence to things; nor do they believe that nothing exists, that reality is a complete nothingness or an absence of anything whatsoever.

They have gone beyond both of these different extremes of view, because they have realized the meaning of dependent arising. If one realizes this meaning, then one will no longer be attached to either of these extremes.

Moreover, at the same time that one realizes the truth of dependent arising, one will realize the truth of emptiness, which is at the same time very profound and yet unobservable.

Meaning that it can't be fixed or located by saying "this is it" or "this is emptiness" or "that is emptiness." It is beyond all our ideas about what it might be. The profound truth of emptiness is not something we can describe or pinpoint with some type of idea or description. Realizing that truth is what is meant by "realizing the truth of emptiness."

(i.e. The true nature of everything, including the mind, is beyond the four extremes of existence / realism, non-existence / nihilism / idealism, dualism and monism. It is inconceivable, beyond all description / conceptualization, beyond causality space and time, beyond all dualities, beyond all karma formation. It is even beyond the conventional truths of dependent origination and of emptiness, beyond this duality. It is called The Union of The Two Truths, the inseparability of appearances and emptiness. It transcends all. -- The Two Truths, like dependent origination and emptiness, are not different, not the same.)

-- If we still believe in existence, if we have some type of belief in something substantial, if we think that there is something that truly exists, whatever it might be, then we are said to fall into the extreme called eternalism or permanence. And if we fall into that extreme, we will not realize the true nature of reality.

-- On the other hand, if we propound a view saying nothing exists, "there's absolutely nothing," that the truth is some kind of nothingness or vacuum, then that too is an extreme. That's called the extreme of nihilism. And if we fall into that extreme, we will also not realize the truth of emptiness.

-- The reason for that is that the truth of emptiness, or what is actual reality, is something which is beyond any and all of our descriptions of it or conceptions about it. So whatever our conceptions are, they would necessarily fall into one of these two extremes. And so, by definition, one will not realize the true nature.

For example, let's take the appearance of a flower in a dream. This flower is not something that exists, that truly exists, because it's just a dream appearance - there's no real flower there whatsoever. On the other hand, you can't say there's absolutely nothing, because there is the mere appearance of a flower - but just a mere appearance, that's it. That is its nature in terms of how it exists in the world of appearances. There's nothing really there but there is this mere appearance. In a dream there's nothing substantial but there is the mere appearance of something substantial. Thus, its true nature transcends both existence and nonexistence. Its true nature is not something we can describe with these kinds of terms, because it is beyond any type of thing we might be able to think up about it. And so, just like a flower that appears in a dream, all phenomena that appear, wherever they appear, are the same. They all appear in terms of being a mere appearance. There is nothing substantial to them, and their true nature transcends both existence and non-existence - and any other idea.

All phenomena that appear to us in this life are exactly the same. None of them truly exists, nor do they have any substance; but neither are they completely nonexistent, because there is the mere appearance of them. In terms of true reality, true reality is something which cannot be described by terms such as "exist" or "not exist" or by any other terms. True reality is beyond all of our concepts about it; it is inconceivable.

As examples of what this inseparability of appearance and emptiness, that characterizes all phenomena, is like, the next verse reads:

###

Those who see with their intelligence
That existence is like a mirage and an illusion
Are not corrupted by believing in

The extremes of earlier and later. (17)

Existence here refers to samsara, cyclic existence that ignorant beings go around and around in, again and again. Yet, even though beings are continually going around and around in samsara, everything in it is merely inseparable appearance and emptiness. It appears but it has no substantial nature. In that way, it is like a mirage or an illusion. When a magician creates an illusion of something, or when you see a mirage in the desert that looks like water, these are things that appear to exist, but in reality have no substantial existence at all. That is the characteristic of all appearances in cyclic existence.

Those who see with their eye of intelligence that that is how all these appearances truly are, are not corrupted by believing in the extremes of earlier and later. Earlier and later refers to how you view past and future lives.

-- Here, you could fall into the extreme of thinking that past and future lives were things that truly existed, that were somehow real and had some substance to them. That would be falling into the extreme of permanence.

-- On the other hand, you could fall into the extreme of thinking that past and future lives absolutely didn't exist, that there was nothing whatsoever. That would be falling into the extreme of nihilism.

-- However, by realizing that appearances appear and yet are empty of any true existence, you avoid falling into these extremes.

In the next verse we are introduced to a gradual way of beginning to understand emptiness. It says:

###

By understanding arising, disintegration is understood.

By understanding disintegration, impermanence is understood.

By understanding impermanence

The truth of the genuine dharma is realized. (22)

-- The first thing that we need to understand, that we can notice and think about, is arising, or birth - how it is that phenomena or things in cyclic existence come into being. For example, this flower. This flower was not just created by one cause or one thing or one condition, but rather it came into being because of the coming together of a great many different causes and conditions. And just like this flower, so are all phenomena in cyclic existence. They don't rely on one cause or condition; they are dependent for their existence on a coming together of a group of causes and conditions.

-- If we can understand that, which is the truth of arising, then what follows is cessation. Everything that is born has to die. There's nothing that ever is born or comes into being that does not cease to be. We know this just by our own observation and by our own experience. Now we understand birth and death.

-- And if we understand birth and death, then we also necessarily understand that phenomena are impermanent. Because "impermanent" means that things don't stay the same forever. That which is born and that which dies go through changes. So all phenomena are impermanent.

---- There are two different types of impermanence. One type is called gross impermanence,

and that is the impermanence that you can see with your eyes or experience with your other senses. When a house is destroyed by an earthquake, you can actually see this type of impermanence happen right before your eyes.

---- The second type is called subtle impermanence. Subtle impermanence describes the fact that all phenomena are changing moment by moment. From moment to moment, no phenomena stay the same. Causes and conditions are continually acting on all phenomena in cyclic existence, and so none of them ever stays the same from one moment to the next. For example [Rinpoche snaps his fingers], even within one finger snap there are how many different parts? How many different instants are there? Hundreds and thousands and millions - you can keep dividing and find smaller and smaller instants, and no two instants are the same. So even such a tiny, minute phenomenon is constantly changing, and never stays the same.

-- Realizing that is realizing emptiness, which is to realize that no phenomenon has any substantial, permanent nature.

The next verse reads:

###

Without a stable focus or location,
Not remaining and without root,
Arisen totally as a result of ignorance,
Without beginning, middle, or end . . . (26)

What is being described here is cyclic existence, and cyclic existence has no fixed location. It doesn't have a location that is in any way truly existent. How can we know this to be true? We all live on this planet Earth, and we might think that we can find some location here. But this Earth is just suspended in space. And space is without any direction or location to it. So, if this Earth is just floating around in space without direction or location, how can we then say that we have any direction or fixed location? It doesn't make any sense. That is something we can think about and understand pretty easily.

If we think about direction and location just on this Earth, another reason why we can say that there is no location or direction is that everybody on this Earth thinks that they are right side up. [Laughter] Everybody thinks that they are right side up; nobody thinks that they are upside down. But you can't really have "right side up" without "upside down." These two depend on each other. So really, there is no right side up or upside down on this earth. If we analyze carefully, we can see that this is true.

Without a stable focus: No matter how hard we try to make cyclic existence into something that truly exists, we can't do it. There's no way to make cyclic existence into something stable, into something that will not change, into something dependable. By nature, it's none of those things. It is constantly changing and has no substance to it. And so all of our attempts to solidify it in any way are completely in vain. No matter what phenomena you try to use or try to analyze to make it into something stable and fixed, you just can't do it.

The next line says that it is without root, which means that there is nothing grounding cyclic existence. To give an example that can be analyzed, take this Earth. We think that Earth is made up of atoms of substantial matter. That is the ground. That is what we are rooted to, that is our foundation. When we analyze these atoms, however, we really can't find anything, because, as you examine more finely, you find smaller and smaller particles.

And every new particle, no matter how small, is just a collection or mass of smaller particles. And so, if you try to find the smallest truly existent particle, you can't find it.

In this way it is demonstrated that there really is nothing substantial there. There really is no such thing as matter. There really is no such thing as some kind of solid foundation. It doesn't exist.

So what is the real root of cyclic existence? It is ignorance, and it is clinging to a belief in a self - in a truly existent self of the individual, and in some substantial existence to phenomena. But these two also have no true existence; if we analyze them, they are not substantial, truly existent things. And since we can see that the cycle of existence springs from the erroneous belief in a truly existent self and truly existent phenomena, then it follows that cyclic existence is also not a substantially existent thing. So cyclic existence has no root.

Then the next verse says not remaining; these phenomena don't remain. They are just like phenomena that appear in a dream. Whatever appears in a dream never really comes into being, even though it looks as if it does. And it never really goes out of existence, even though it looks as if it does. So how could there be anything to remain or have duration? Nothing ever really arises, nothing ever really goes away, and nothing ever really remains in cyclic existence. All appearances are exactly the same in that way. These appearances in a dream, if they were really to abide or remain, would first have to come into existence. But since they never really come into existence, they can never remain, and they can never go away. That's how we should think about this.

Then the third line says that the real cause of cyclic existence is ignorance. Cyclic existence arises totally as a result of ignorance. So what does that mean? How does that work?

-- First we are ignorant of the true nature of phenomena; we think that they really exist.
-- As a result, we develop the other afflictions or kleshas.
-- We get attached to the phenomena that we like and want them; and there are other phenomena that we don't like, so we try to push them away. In this way we develop attachment and aversion,
as a result of which we take all different kinds of actions. These kinds of actions are said to be defiled actions because, when we act out of attachment and aversion, our actions are governed and motivated by our ignorance.
-- These kinds of actions produce suffering as their result, and so we just go around and around in the cycle of existence.

Since the cause of cyclic existence is ignorance, we might think that it had some fixed point of beginning and some point where it might end. But really, it's not that way; it's just like a dream, in that things in a dream really have no beginning, middle, or end.

The next verse reads:

###

Without core, like a banana tree.
Like an unreal city in the sky,
The suffering world - the lands of confusion -

Manifests in this way - like an illusion. (27)

This verse starts out by saying that cyclic existence is without core, like a banana tree. When you peel a banana tree, you peel it and peel it and it has more and more peels to it. You look at this thing and it looks like something really solid and truly existent, but if you take off all the layers, there's no core. That's it, there's nothing left. In India the example of a banana tree was used to show that cyclic existence is without any core. It has no essence.

Then the cycle of existence is compared to an unreal city in the sky. This is a reference to the city of the gandharvas. The literal translation of their name is "smell eaters," which they are called because [Rinpoche laughs] they are formless beings who subsist by eating odors. The Buddha talked about them, otherwise we wouldn't know too much about them, because most people can't see them [more laughter]. But some people can see them, and what they see is a big city where all these smell eaters live. They live just as we do and they do all different kinds of things. But even if you could ever see this place, if you could be there, you wouldn't be able to use anything there, because it's just like a phantom place. You could see many different things, but you couldn't make use of anything, or take part in anything, or talk to anybody, because gandharvas are just like phantoms. This is another example illustrating the true nature of cyclic existence.

The verse goes on to say that this is the suffering world. These are the lands of confusion, and the beings in this world suffer. Why? We suffer because we take things to be truly existent because we are confused about the nature of these appearances. We think these appearances are something real. But they are really not. Therefore, we suffer. And yet, all of this suffering in cyclic existence, what is it like? It's just an illusion. The suffering in cyclic existence appears, and all the beings in this world appear, simply because of the coming together of causes and conditions, which produce their appearance. And yet all the beings in this world and everything in cyclic existence is merely inseparable appearance and emptiness. It is appearance that has no substantial nature.

None of us seems to have had any experience with this city of the smell eaters, though it is said that, in past lives, we too were smell eaters. But we don't really remember that [Rinpoche laughs], so it doesn't do us too much good to think about it. But what we can relate to, in terms of our own experience, are examples like dreams and dream cities. In dreams we can experience appearances of very large and busy cities.

There is not one thing that exists really in those cities; they are mere appearance. We can go to a movie and in the movie see a very big city with all types of things happening in it. But again that's just a mere appearance. There's nothing real to it.

The next verse suggests a stage-by-stage approach to gaining an understanding of emptiness, or true nature:

###

To those students in search of suchness
At first teachers should say, "Everything exists."
Then after they realize the meaning of this and abandon desire,
They will gain perfect transcendence. (30)

How should beginning students of the dharma - students in search of suchness, who want to

realize the true nature - be introduced to things? First, teachers should say that things exist. They should explain things in terms of existence, which means that they should talk about past lives and future lives as being existent.

And why? Because they are an integral aspect of the principle of cause and effect, of the law of karma which is that good actions lead to happiness, and bad or harmful actions, negative actions towards other sentient beings, lead to suffering. This is an important principle, and we should be taught that it is true and potent, so that we will have faith in it and live by it.

We should also be taught that the three jewels really exist, that there is the Buddha, the Buddha's teachings called the dharma, and the community of dharma practitioners called the sangha. The three jewels can provide us with a genuine refuge from cyclic existence and can lead us out of it. We should also be taught to be wary of cyclic existence, to feel disgust for it, because it is of the nature of suffering - especially the lower realms like the hell realms, where beings go who commit the most negative actions. We should be taught about all these things at first as being things which are real. As a result, we will, if we understand the meaning of this, abandon desire. If we understand the meaning of all of this, we will no longer seek happiness from cyclic existence. We will no longer seek happiness by trying to fulfill the needs of this "I," by trying to make this "I" happy. And so we will no longer be caught in thinking that somewhere out there there can be something that can bring happiness. We won't have any more desire for anything in the cycle of existence, and what that will lead to is an understanding of emptiness, which is here described as perfect transcendence.

The next verse reads:

###

Those who realize that all entities are dependently arisen,
And just like a moon that appears in a pool of water,
Are neither true nor false,
Are not carried away by philosophical dogmas. (45)

Beings who with their intelligence understand dependent arising will understand that all phenomena are just like a moon that appears in a pool of water. That moon is something that is neither truly substantially existent, nor is it something completely nonexistent. There is an appearance of it, and that is also the nature of all phenomena. By realizing this, one will not be carried away by beliefs in extreme views or extreme types of philosophical dogmas.

This verse teaches that the true nature of everything in cyclic existence and of cyclic existence itself transcends both being true and being false. They are neither true nor false, just like the moon that appears in a pool of water. When you look at the moon that appears in a pool of water, there's absolutely no way to tell that it's not a real moon. If there's a moon and it's a clear night, and the water is not moving, and you look down and you see the moon there, what is to say that it is not the moon? There is a mere appearance of a moon, and yet there's absolutely nothing substantial to it. Once you put your hand in the water, then you realize that the moon you have been seeing is absolutely insubstantial.

That's the way it really is with all phenomena. If you analyze carefully, even the tiniest particle can be shown not to exist, because even the tiniest particle has parts that it's

made of.* There really is no such thing as a truly existent piece of matter. And by the extension of that analysis we learn that all phenomena that we see, all appearances, are of this nature. They have no true existence.

*Editor's note: To be "truly existent" something must be unitary, i.e. indivisible, unchanging, and independent of causes and conditions for its existence. Any particle of substantial matter, regardless of how small it is, can theoretically be made to touch another particle of matter. When these two particles touch each other, the right side of one touches the left side of the other. Therefore, each of them has both a left and a right side and, consequently, each can be divided in half. In fact, they are infinitely divisible. By this logic it is demonstrated that matter cannot, in fact, exist substantially as we know it.

They have no substance, and yet they can not be said to be nonexistent either. You cannot say that everything is nothing or everything is fake. Because if you say that everything is fake or false, then that turns falsity into something truly existent. That reifies falsity into something substantial.

Furthermore, if there is really nothing true, then there can't be anything really false. There can be no falsity, because the concept of falsity is dependent on the concept of truth. First you have to have truth in order to be able to have falsity, because false means not true. So if there is no "true," then you cannot have "not true." These are just ideas that are dependently existent on each other. Knowing this helps us to understand how it is that the true nature of cyclic existence transcends all these different kinds of ideas.

We live on this planet. On this planet there's no up and down. This planet is suspended in space which has neither center nor edge, neither a middle point nor boundaries. And our existence transcends ideas of true and false. This Earth is neither true nor false, but like the moon that appears in a pool of water, and the many different sentient beings going about their business on it are also neither true nor false. We are all just mere appearances, just like the moon that appears in a pool of water.

So how is it that we take things to be real? The next verse reads:

###

Children are tricked by reflections
Because they take them to be real.
In the very same way, because of their ignorance,
Beings are imprisoned in the cages of their [conceptual] objects. (53)

Children can be tricked by a reflection in a mirror or by a magic trick, or by something in a movie, and they think that all of those things are real and actually have some real ability to do things. Everybody else knows that there is nothing real there. But we who are still ignorant are in the exact same situation. Because of ignorance, we are imprisoned in a cage made up of all of the objects which we conceptualize to be real. So we are imprisoned by that. And we are blocked from realizing our true potential because we take all of these things to be real, because we conceptualize these things to be real when really they are not, when really they are just like reflections or magic tricks that can fool children.

The next verse reads:

###

The great ones, who with the eyes of primordial awareness
See that entities are just like reflections,
Do not get caught in the mire
Of so-called "objects." (54)

The great and noble bodhisattvas, who have realized the truth of emptiness, who, with the eyes of primordial awareness, see that entities are just like reflections, do not get caught in the mire of so called objects. Great ones refers to noble bodhisattvas. With the eyes of primordial awareness means awareness that has really been present from the beginning, which is inherent in the true nature of mind. You could also say, with the eyes of their wisdom. They see that all of the entities within the cycle of existence are just like reflections in a pool of water, or just like reflections in a mirror, that they are mere appearances without any substantial existence. They see that entities don't truly exist, and, because of that, they don't get caught in the mud and mire as everybody else does, which is the mire of taking all of this to be true. Taking everything to be true is like a trap, of which they are free.

There is a story about the great bodhisattvayogini of Tibet, Machig Lapdrön. Machig Lapdrön had the incredible ability to read the sutras at a very, very fast rate. Once, during an entire month, she read all twelve volumes of the one hundred thousand line version of the Sutra of Transcendent Perfection of Wisdom every day. Every day she read all twelve volumes. In those sutras it talks about how form has no color - it's neither yellow nor red nor white nor blue. Nor does it have any shape - it's not round or rectangular. Nor is it hard or soft. None of these characteristics, or any other characteristics, truly exists.

By reading that sutra every day, at the end of a month Machig Lapdrön had directly realized emptiness. As a result of that she was able to see that all phenomena are just mere appearances, are just like reflections, and so she did not get caught in the mire of clinging to objects as being true.

Machig Lapdrön was quite special. Most siddhas, most great spiritual masters of Tibet and India, attained realization through the practice of vajrayana, through the practice of tantra. Machig Lapdrön, on the other hand, attained realization through studying, contemplating, and meditating on the teachings of the second turning of the wheel of dharma, the Prajnaparamita sutras, the sutras of The Transcendent Perfection of Wisdom.

When she passed into nirvana, they built a funeral pyre for her. When it was burning, her son, who was also a great master, named Gyalwa Döndrup, sang praises to her at each door of her cremation shrine. In one of these praises he sang, "Mother, you are the great Prajnaparamita siddha. You are the great master of The Transcendent Perfection of Wisdom."

It is important for us to realize how profound and how important this view being taught here in texts like Nagarjuna's Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning is, because, if you know this view well, if you understand emptiness through this view, then you also can attain the great powers of realization.

The next verse reads:

###

The immature are attached to form.
The moderate are free from attachment to [the sense objects],
And those endowed with supreme intelligence
Know the true nature of form and [by so knowing] are liberated. (55)

The immature here refers to those who are not bodhisattvas, who are still in cyclic existence. And the reason that they are still in cyclic existence is that they are still attached to form as being something real. As a consequence, they still have desire for certain kinds of forms and aversion for other kinds of forms, and this keeps them going around in the cycle of existence.

The moderate are free from attachment to sense objects; this refers to beings in the formless gods' realms of the cycle of existence, who have dispensed with the kind of attachment and clinging to objects of form that we have but are still attached to a sort of blank meditation state. Even though they are free of attachment to sense objects, they are not completely free from the cycle of existence. Who is free from the cycle of existence?

Those endowed with the supreme intelligence that knows the true nature of form, who know form to be empty, who know form to be nothing more than inseparable appearance and emptiness. By knowing that, they are liberated.

The next verse reads:

###

The awful ocean of existence
Is filled with the tormenting snakes of the afflictions.
But those whose minds are not moved even by thoughts of voidness
Have safely crossed over [its dangers]. (59)

What is the method by which we can attain the transcendence of suffering, by which we can attain nirvana? It is by our minds' not being moved even by thoughts of voidness. What this means is that, even though thinking that everything is empty is quite a subtle thought, still, if we are attached to that thought, then we are reifying emptiness into something real. We are attached to emptiness as being something truly existent, and that's still not quite realizing the true nature of reality, which is beyond all conceptions about what it might be. But those whose minds are not moved even by thoughts of emptiness have safely crossed over the dangers of the awful ocean of existence, which is filled with the tormenting snakes of all of the afflictive mental states. These afflictive mental states constantly plague all those who are still going around in cyclic existence.

Those whose minds are not moved even by thoughts of emptiness have crossed over this ocean of suffering and have attained nirvana, the transcendence of suffering.

The last verse is the dedication of merit:

###

By the power of the virtue performed here
May all beings perfect the accumulations of merit and wisdom,
And from this merit and wisdom,

May they attain the twin dimensions of genuine [enlightenment]. (60)

This is the dedication that Nagarjuna wrote. When he talks about the power of the virtue performed here, he is talking about the power of his virtue accumulated by writing this text. But for us, it's the power of the virtue of listening to and thinking about the explanations of the text. By that virtue, we should think, may all beings perfect the accumulations of merit and wisdom. Merit and wisdom are the two causes of enlightenment.

-- The perfection of the accumulation of merit is essentially the perfection of doing good for others in terms of apparent reality.

-- The accumulation of wisdom is the perfection of realizing the true nature, which is beyond all conception.

-- From this merit and wisdom, may sentient beings attain the twin dimensions of genuine enlightenment, which refers to the two kayas, the dharmakaya and the rupakaya, sometimes translated as the truth body and the form body.

---- The truth body refers to the actual mind of the buddha, the pure awareness of the buddha, and that body is the result of the perfection of the accumulation of wisdom of the true nature of reality.

---- The form body of the buddha is what everybody can see, and what benefits beings.* It is the result of the perfection of the accumulation of merit. So by the power of the virtue performed here, may all beings perfect the accumulations of merit and wisdom. And from this merit and wisdom, may they attain the twin dimensions of genuine enlightenment.

*Editor's note: Traditionally the rupakaya is used to stand for both the sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya. The nirmanakaya is, indeed, what can be seen by the eyes of sentient beings in the human realm. The sambhogakaya is another form body, imperceptible to ordinary beings, but perceptible to enlightened bodhisattvas, which also exists for the benefit of beings.

This has been a brief explanation of some very important verses from Nagarjuna's Sixty Stanzas of Reasonings. In this day and age, we all have a lot of work to do and we have a lot of other things to study, so we don't have time to study the entire text in all of its detail. Since that is the case, then it's very good to look at the important verses and understand their meaning. That is something that we can do in a brief period of time, so that's why we have explained it in this fashion.

This is a good selection of verses because at the beginning there is the homage, and at the end there is the dedication of merit, which rounds everything out. In between are the important verses, so it's a good collection of verses to have.

When we are meditating on emptiness, if we pick one verse and recite it, think about it, and meditate on its meaning, and then move to another verse, recite it, think about it, and meditate on its meaning, and continue on in that vein, then that's a very good way to meditate.

If you are curious why we recite these verses with even timing and in a level tone of voice, the idea is to let the mind rest in a peaceful way. But of course, when you are by yourself, you may say it any way with which you feel comfortable.

Question: [unintelligible, but probably:] Why does the accumulation of merit lead to a form body, and the accumulation of wisdom lead to the truth body?

Rinpoche: The form body is all of the great qualities of the buddha, like the protrusion on

the head, the radiant body, and things like that, including the thirty-two major and eighty minor signs of physical perfection. Why does the accumulation of merit lead to the attainment of such a body? This actual body of the buddha is what we as deluded sentient beings can see and what helps beings. From that standpoint, it is something existent. The accumulation of merit is actually helping beings and doing good things for beings in terms of the existent. And so this is something, from that standpoint of being existent, that has a result which is also something existent.

If we take this house as an example, the walls and the paint and the colors are things that we can see, so they are all existent things, and they have existent causes. The space inside of the house is something nonexistent that has causes which are also nonexistent. So it's like that.

So just as the space inside of this house is something nonexistent and, therefore, can't have an existent cause, similarly the truth body or dharmakaya, which is the complete freedom from all elaborations, also requires as its cause the meditation on emptiness, which is also free from all elaboration.

Question: [questioner seems to ask about nirmanakaya and sambhogakaya] Rinpoche: The sambhogakaya or the enjoyment body is also a form body. It is of the nature of light - that's how it's described. It includes, for example, Vajrasattva, or the five buddhas of the five buddha families. These are forms which ordinary beings can not perceive. Only bodhisattvas can perceive them. In short, the sambhogakaya is the enjoyment body which is enjoyed by all bodhisattvas.

The emanation body, the nirmanakaya, on the other hand, is made of flesh and blood, is born from a womb, and can be seen by all ordinary beings. It's not really of the nature of flesh and blood, but that's how it appears to us.

Question: Why are the form and truth body referred to as "twin" bodies?

Translator: It's twin meaning two, not twin like twins, but twin like two. I just thought it sounded nice. [laughter] Question: Could Rinpoche explain the extremes of earlier and later again?

Rinpoche: Earlier and later refer to past and future lives. In Buddhism it is taught that there are past and future lives. As for past lives, there was never a first one, for there is no beginning to the succession of them. As for future lives, so long as we are ignorant, then there will be no end to them. If we think that these lives are things that are truly existent, that they have some substantial existence, then we fall into the extreme of permanence, of eternalism. And if we believe, on the other hand, that there is absolutely no such thing whatsoever, that there are not even the mere appearances of past and future lives, then we fall into the extreme of nihilism. But if we realize that this existence is like a mirage and an illusion, in the sense that it is something that appears but has no true existence, then we won't fall into either of these extremes.

So it's good if we understand what is a mirage and an illusion. All of our suffering is just a mirage and an illusion. All of our afflictive mental states are just mirages and illusions. And all the difficult and adverse circumstances that we run into are just mirages and illusions. They are just mere appearances without any substantial nature.

We should think about the suffering in a dream. If we dream of bad things happening which entail suffering, and if we don't know that we are dreaming, then there is absolutely no

difference between the suffering we experience in the dream and the suffering we have during the day. Absolutely no difference. Now from the perspective of the waking state, there is nothing really happening in a dream. It is a mere appearance.

There is no reason to suffer. The only reason that we suffer is that we take these dream appearances to be true. It is only because we are obscured by our ignorance that we think these dreams are real, and we suffer as a result of it.

What is the true nature of a dream? It is just openness and spaciousness. What we need to do to be liberated from suffering is to realize that all appearances are of the same nature. We need to realize that our suffering does not come from these appearances, but from our taking these appearances to be real. If we realize this, then we will experience the true nature of everything that is, which is openness and spaciousness also.

When we first learn about emptiness, it appears that emptiness has to do with outer phenomena, that outer phenomena are empty of true existence. But really and truly, true emptiness, the true nature of reality, is the true nature of our mind, the true nature of this very present and ever present mind. And the true nature of this very present mind is openness, spaciousness, complete freedom from all thoughts, complete freedom from all ideas about the way things are or are not. Openness, spaciousness, and relaxedness.

Question: You were talking about the extremes of earlier and later, past and future lives, permanence versus nihilism. I guess I'm getting confused about how you equate these. I've heard existence versus nihilism, but how can you say that existence is permanent? Maybe in that moment that I'm totally caught in something I think it's permanent, but if I step back I realize it's not permanent. But I still think it exists. So even though I don't think it's permanent, I still think it exists.

Translator: Permanence is a literal translation of the word in Tibetan, takba, but I can ask Rinpoche to explain it a little bit more.

Rinpoche: There are lots of different extremes of view that we can fall into. The point is not to think about just being free from the view of permanence, but also from the extremes of thinking either that things exist or thinking that things do not exist; of thinking that things are permanent or thinking that they are impermanent, of thinking that they appear or thinking that they do not appear, of thinking that they are empty or thinking that they are not empty - all of these sets of extremes are thoughts, are different concepts that we impute to reality. But the true nature of reality is beyond all extremes of thought, beyond all the different kinds of thoughts that we have about it. That's the point of teaching about these extremes. It's just to show us that these are different ideas and thoughts that we can have about how things are.

The Consequence Middle Way school, the Prasangika Madhyamika, doesn't make any assertions about anything. They have no views, because any view is regarded as an extreme. Any view is a superimposition onto the true nature of reality. And so they don't have anything to say about the nature of reality except to refute other people's views.

In order to understand this, the best thing to do in the beginning is to think about dreams. You can't say that dream appearances, the things in a dream, are existent, but you can't say that they're completely nonexistent. You can't say that they fall into the extreme of permanence, but you can't say that they fall into the extreme of nihilism either. You can't say that they are entities, but you can't say that they're not entities. You can't say

really anything about them. Nothing really can accurately describe what they are. Thinking in this way we can understand the true nature of reality.

In the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way, Nagarjuna wrote a verse which says, "Permanence, impermanence, and so forth, these four, where are they in the expanse of peace?" Permanence, impermanence, both permanence and impermanence, neither permanence nor impermanence - any kind of idea you want to make up - where is it in the expanse of the true nature of reality? Where is it in the expanse of peace? You can't find it, because the true nature is beyond all of these concepts.

Comments on selected Verses From Nagarjuna's Sixty Stanzas of Reasonings (Yuktisastika)

From : Shenpen Osel

(The Clear Light of the Buddha's Teachings Which Benefits All Beings)

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(i.e. RÉSUMÉ - SEEKING THE REAL NATURE OF EVERYTHING

-- Transcending origination and cessation (and attachments) by understanding dependent origination.

-- Transcending existence and non-existence by realizing dependent origination, the real nature of everything, beyond all extremes.

-- Transcending eternalism and nihilism (in relation to the self) by seeing that existence is an illusion.

-- A gradual way to understand emptiness: studying dependent origination, cessation, gross impermanence, subtle impermanence, emptiness, the real nature.

-- Cyclic existence, has no substantiality, the real cause of samsara / everything is ignorance, the belief in a truly existent self and truly existent phenomena. We create the causes of our own suffering in a cascade of confusion. But, everything is empty (not existent, not non-existent, not both, not neither), the inseparability of appearances and emptiness. The real nature of the mind, of everything, of dependent origination, of emptiness, is beyond existence and non-existence. it is beyond any description, beyond all extremes, beyond conceptualization, beyond all dualities, inconceivable. We may call it dharmadhatu, or the inseparability of appearance and emptiness, or anything else, but it is beyond all of this.

-- Using a gradual path. Using inherent existence as a skilful means. First we use a path based on real causality, a real samsara, real Three Jewels, until we generate enough renunciation. Then emptiness and transcendence of the tools of the path.

-- Transcending all appearances, all dualities / oppositions, all views. The Middle Way: not accepting, not rejecting; not discrimination, not non-discriminating. Any view is a superimposition onto the true nature of reality.

-- Because of ignorance we get trapped by our own created objects / illusions / concepts. Not knowing the real nature of everything (ignorance), beings are fooled by their own created illusions and continue to cycle in samsara.

-- Transcending the traps of those objects by self-awareness / Mahamudra, by seeking and directly knowing the real nature of the mind, the real nature of everything. Understanding and directly seeing dependent origination is the key to seeing the emptiness of inherent

existence of everything, and be liberated from any attachment and suffering. We all have the potential to directly see this and be totally free from samsara. All we have to do is to purify the mind, seek its real nature, remove the veils of ignorance, let the primordial awareness shine through.

-- Transcending attachment and non-attachment by knowing the real nature of everything, and thus being completely liberated.

-- Transcending even emptiness and dependent origination. Transcending The Two Truths. Realizing the Union of The Two Truths.

-- Dedication: by this may all beings perfect the two accumulations of merit and wisdom and gain the two kayas of a Buddha.)

###

I prostrate to the Mighty One
Who has taught about dependent arising,
The principle by which
Arising and disintegration are abandoned. (Homage)

(i.e. PRAISE - TRANSCENDING ORIGINATION AND CESSATION BY SEEING DEPENDENT ORIGINATION: In

the first verse, Nagarjuna prostrates to the Buddha, because the Buddha is the one who taught the truth of dependent arising. If we can understand what dependent arising means, if we can understand the truth of dependent arising and how it is that all phenomena are dependently arisen, then we can abandon our attachment to arising and disintegration, and be free from all of those illusions. And since that is true, then Nagarjuna prostrates to the Buddha, because the Buddha is the one who taught this most important truth. The Buddha is the one who taught us this method by which we can give up this type of attachment.

I think it means that the path is to try to understand dependent origination, to try to understand how our own mind works, creating those illusions, how karma conditions the next set of the five aggregates, how the cycle of samsara works. Once we understand dependent origination, once we see the real nature of the mind, we then see the real nature of everything, emptiness. We see them both together. That is the goal of the path. We then have the Union of the Two truths, the Union of Dependent origination and Emptiness.

So what is called "the truth of dependent origination" is not the simple theory of dependent origination but the perfection of it, the real nature of dependent origination, its inseparability with emptiness. And that is beyond description. And it is the same thing for the expression "the truth of emptiness".)

1.

Those whose intelligence has gone beyond existence and nonexistence
And who do not abide [in any extremes]
Have realized the meaning of dependent arising,
The profound and unobservable [truth of emptiness]. (1)

(i.e. TRANSCENDING EXISTENCE AND NON-EXISTENCE / THE INSEPARABILITY OF APPEARANCE AND

EMPTINESS / THE UNION OF THE TWO TRUTHS : When one really understands dependent origination,

then one transcends all extremes, like existence and non-existence. Because, the true nature of everything, including the mind, is beyond the four extremes of existence / realism, non-existence / nihilism / idealism, dualism and monism. It is inconceivable, beyond all description / conceptualization, beyond causality space and time, beyond all dualities, beyond all karma formation. It is even beyond the conventional truths of dependent origination and of emptiness, beyond this duality. It is called The Union of The Two Truths, the inseparability of appearances and emptiness. It transcends all. -- The Two Truths, like dependent origination and emptiness, are not different, not the same.)

17.

Those who see with their intelligence
That existence is like a mirage and an illusion
Are not corrupted by believing in
The extremes of earlier and later. (17)

(i.e. TRANSCENDING ETERNALISM AND NIHILISM: When one really understands the real nature of everything, then one transcends the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Earlier and later refers to how you view past and future lives. The two extremes are: thinking those lives are truly real, or truly non-existent.)

22.

By understanding arising, disintegration is understood.
By understanding disintegration, impermanence is understood.
By understanding impermanence
The truth of the genuine dharma is realized. (22)

(i.e. A GRADUAL WAY TO UNDERSTAND EMPTINESS: first studying the dependent arising of things, then the necessary consequence of death for everything that is born, then the universality of impermanence, then the subtle impermanence, the ever changing nature of everything, then the emptiness of everything, then the Union of The Two Truths.)

26.

Without a stable focus or location,
Not remaining and without root,
Arisen totally as a result of ignorance,
Without beginning, middle, or end . . . (26)

(i.e. NO SUBSTANTIALITY / THE REAL ROOT CAUSE OF CYCLIC EXISTENCE IS IGNORANCE: Cyclic existence has no fixed location. No solid absolute space. No universal frame of reference. Everything is continually changing, empty. Without root. No solid foundation. No primary causes, no elementary elements that would explain everything. So cyclic existence has no root but this ignorance. The root cause of cyclic existence is ignorance. There is no beginning to this. So what is the real root of cyclic existence? It is ignorance, and it is clinging to a belief in a self—in a truly existent self of the individual, and in some substantial existence to phenomena. But these two also have no true existence; if we analyze

them, they are not substantial, truly existent things. And since we can see that the cycle of existence springs from the erroneous belief in a truly existent self and truly existent phenomena, then it follows that cyclic existence is also not a substantially existent thing. So cyclic existence has no root.

Nothing last even for an infinitesimal moment; no real origination, no real duration, no real cessation.

Everything is empty of inherent existence: space, time, causality, objects, phenomena, beings, samsara, Nirvana.)

27.

Without core, like a banana tree.

Like an unreal city in the sky,

The suffering world—the lands of confusion—

Manifests in this way—like an illusion. (27)

(i.e. NO SUBSTANTIALITY / JUST A CASCADE OF ILLUSIONS CAUSING ATTACHMENT AND SUFFERING:

Cyclic existence has no core, no essence. We suffer because we think those things are really existent, but they are empty of inherent existence: not existent, not non-existent. And yet all the beings in this world and everything in cyclic existence is merely inseparable appearance and emptiness. It is appearance that has no substantial nature.)

30.

To those students in search of suchness

At first teachers should say, “Everything exists.”

Then after they realize the meaning of this and abandon desire,

They will gain perfect transcendence. (30)

(i.e. TRANSCENDING THE PATH - A STAGE BY STAGE APPROACH to gaining an understanding of emptiness, or true nature: first that things exist, real causality, rebirths, real consequences of karma formation, ..., real Three Jewels, real samsara and Nirvana, real six realms, ==> desire to escape the cycle of samsara, renunciation, ..., then emptiness... then transcendence.

So it is not through rejecting everything right from the start, but by first understanding dukkha (the First Noble Truth), its cause, then creating the desire to abandon these causes and to get liberated.)

45.

Those who realize that all entities are dependently arisen,

And just like a moon that appears in a pool of water,

Are neither true nor false,

Are not carried away by philosophical dogmas. (45)

(i.e. TRANSCENDING ALL APPEARANCES, ALL DUALITIES, ALL VIEWS : When one really understands

dependent origination, then one transcends all oppositions, all views. By understanding dependent origination, or the real nature of the mind, one understands the real nature of

everything, their emptiness of inherent existence, the absence of real characteristics, the relativity of all discrimination, the flawness of all views. Nothing is absolute. There is no real opposition, no real dualities. The two poles are interdependent; they cannot exist without the other.

That does not mean that all things are non-existent completely. Not accepting, not rejecting; the Middle Way. Not discriminating thinking in terms of absolute characteristics, not non-discrimination either, because everything can be a skilful means. The inseparability of appearance and emptiness.)

53.

Children are tricked by reflections
Because they take them to be real.
In the very same way, because of their ignorance,
Beings are imprisoned in the cages of their [conceptual] objects. (53)

(i.e. BECAUSE OF IGNORANCE WE GET TRAPPED BY OUR OWN CREATED ILLUSIONS : Because of ignorance, we are imprisoned in a cage made up of all of the objects which we conceptualize to be real...

Conceptualizing things is one way to see the problem. but the real problem is not just conceptualization but karma formation. Even sentient beings without any capacity for conceptualization, as we usually define it, do build karma and are stuck in the cycle of samsara. The elementary unit of karma seems to be the elementary "This-That", the elementary association. It is the building of karma based on this that is the cause of suffering, because no association, not even the most elementary one, is ever absolute.)

54.

The great ones, who with the eyes of primordial awareness
See that entities are just like reflections,
Do not get caught in the mire
Of so-called "objects." (54)

(i.e. TRANSCENDING THE TRAPS OF THOSE OBJECTS BY BEING SELF-AWARE / MAHAMUDRA: But we have

the potential, like the great Bodhisattvas, to transcend all of those illusions and be free from them. Purification of the mind, perceiving both simultaneously the conventional truths and their Ultimate Nature, is possible using the potential, the primordial awareness, the constant self awareness, the knowing of the real nature of the mind and, thus, the real nature of everything. By seeing the real nature of the mind and thus of everything, one does not get attached to those illusions, knowing that they are originating in dependence of the mind and thus empty of inherent existence.

"Seeing with the eyes of primordial awareness", means seeing without the veils of ignorance, means seeing without falling for the illusions, means knowing that those things and phenomenon are empty of inherent existence, means the inseparability of appearance and emptiness. It does not mean that there are some primitive pure eyes, and direct pure perception, or something like that.

The real nature of the mind, this primordial awareness, is inconceivable. It is the same

real nature of everything.)

55.

The immature are attached to form.
The moderate are free from attachment to [the sense objects],
And those endowed with supreme intelligence
Know the true nature of form and [by so knowing] are liberated. (55)

(i.e. TRANSCENDING ATTCHMENT AND NON-ATTACHMENT - A PROGRESSION OF WISDOM:
from ignorance /
attachment, to letting-go / non-attachment, to total transcendence and complete liberation.)

###59.

The awful ocean of existence
Is filled with the tormenting snakes of the afflictions.
But those whose minds are not moved even by thoughts of voidness
Have safely crossed over [its dangers]. (59)

(i.e. TRANSCENDING EMPTINESS ITSELF: Emptiness itself is empty; it is merely an antidote to realism. The absolute truth, the dharmadhatu, is not conventional truths (existence, dependent origination, causality space and time, realism, etc.), not the Ultimate truth (emptiness, non-existence, idealism, nihilism), not both (dualism, accepting dualities), not neither (monism, rejecting dualities). It is beyond any description, beyond any opposition, beyond discrimination and non-discrimination, beyond using concepts and not using concepts, beyond accepting views or rejecting views, beyond karma formation or no karma formation.)

60.

By the power of the virtue performed here
May all beings perfect the accumulations of merit and wisdom,
And from this merit and wisdom,
May they attain the twin dimensions of genuine [enlightenment]. (60)

(i.e. THE TWO CAUSES OF THE TWO KAYAS. In the Middle Way, the Mahayana, we need both method
and wisdom. We need both conventional truths (a gradual path, dependent origination, causality space time ...) and the Ultimate truth (knowing that all the conventional truths are empty of inherent existence).

The result, the twin dimensions of genuine enlightenment, is the Union of The Two truths. The inseparability of appearance and emptiness. Transcending both existence (realism) and non-existence (nihilism), and dualism, and monism also. It means seeing and using skilful means (conventional truths) and knowing their Ultimate Nature (emptiness) at the same moment. Because when one sees the real nature of the mind, one sees the real nature of everything. When one sees how those illusions are dependently arisen because of past karma (and the actual five aggregates), then one is free from any attachments to those illusions, and free from any suffering because of them.)

Under the guidance of Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, adapted by Ari Goldfield from a translation in Nagarjuna: Studies in the Writings and Philosophy of Nagarjuna, Christian Lindtner, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 100-120. May 17, 1997.

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[End]

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