**TBLC Sunday Class, Sept. 11, 2011**

**Geshe Yeshe Thabkhe Teaching**

**Aryadeva’s *400 Stanzas on the Middle Way***

**Joshua Cutler translating**

Natalie Hauptman transcribing

(Audio file #16 on labsum.org Resources page)

**Introduction**

Chandragomin (from *Pabongka’s Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand)* p.283

*Like a calf that craves a few mouthfuls of grass growing at the mouth of a deep well only to fall into the abyss without getting any, such is the desire of the living world for pleasure.*

Chandragominis giving an example of an elephant calf on the edge of a precipice and who is going to eat the grass and then falling off and undergoing great suffering for a very small thing. This is an example of how we in our lives pursue small pleasures relatively speaking and then doing a lot of harm to others, and then in our future lives we fall into the abyss of the miserable realms and undergo much suffering for a long period of time.

To sustain our life, we have to get food and so forth, but then it is not a great purpose here. But then in order to do that, if we get involved in jealousy and competitiveness and pride and harm others, then as a result of that—if we are bringing harm to others in this life, the result of that is our own suffering in a future lifetime. The importance of what he is saying here is that is better to think of others, to develop a sense of empathy where we understand —just like I want happiness and don’t want suffering, so do these other beings want happiness and not want suffering—acting out of that kind of empathy, to not harm then and to do what we can to help them.

So then basically we have to avoid committing sin to the best of our ability. When we have the opportunity as human beings, we have a good intelligence and we should use that intelligence to at least avoid harming others , and if we can seeking our own liberation from suffering or to attain the high state of a completely perfect buddha for the sake of all sentient beings. Then we are using our life wisely just like Candrakirti said.

Candrakirti Verse:

*Now I have independence and favorable conditions if I do not take full advantage of this time, I will plunge into the abyss and fall under the control of others. Who will lift me out?*

Now that we have that time the opportunity we have to take full advantage of it as a human being.

We can think in accordance with the initial level of practitioner of Buddhism: “I have to do the best I can to avoid the consequences of being reborn in miserable realms in my future life and to be reborn in a happy life as a human or a deity. I have to avoid harmful actions, sin, and do what I can to be helpful.”

Also in accord with intermediate level of practice, we have to think: “I will do whatever I can to avoid afflictions, to overcome attachment and hostility, the misconception of self and develop the impartial attitude that comes from overcoming attachment and hostility, and thereby reach to liberation.”

Or if we have the advanced level of motivation, then we have to think: “I will do whatever I can to change my orientation to being self-preoccupied and do what I can to be preoccupied with others, working for their benefit, and by doing that attain the highest enlightenment of a buddha.”

So to do these practices we have to motivate ourselves, and when we are studying here the *400 Verses* [by Aryadeva], we need to think: “For any of these three reasons, I will engage in study, reflection and meditation, that is, practice. For any one of these goals, that is what I am going to do here today, when I listen to and study Aryadeva’s *400 Verses on the Middle Way.*”

So then, as I have mentioned in previous classes, the verses that we are reading are for somebody who is trying to overcome this misconception of self, sometimes translated as grasping at a self, which lies at the basis of our hostility, and our competitiveness and our jealousy and attachment, greed and so forth—all these. We’re trying to oppose that. So we are investigating selflessness, emptiness, this teaching on how to eliminate this grasping at the misconception of self.

So when we are talking about selflessness in this chapter, it is getting to the subtleties of reflecting on selflessness or meditating on selflessness. But we don’t have to take it at that. At least do what we can to reduce our own involvement with this misconception of self, and this means a selfish attitude where we are only thinking about ourselves and it doesn’t matter what we do to others. If I hurt them it is okay, as long as it is for my purpose, where we are always preoccupied with the self.

Instead, think: “I should do what I can to reduce that selfish attitude and try to think of others—just as I want happiness and don’t want suffering so they want happiness and don’t want suffering—and do whatever I can to not to harm others, to be helpful to others.” If you reduce your selfish attitude in that way, then you will be peaceful and calm yourself. And you won’t bring harm to others. At least you can take the teachings on selflessness at that level as well.

In our teachings there is a lot of discussion about impermanence and suffering. What is the purpose behind these kind of teachings? When we become involved in our lives, we think now we are happy, and we get some kind of pride, and think, “I’ve gotten this kind of pleasure or wonder out of doing such and such a thing.” And when we have difficult things happen, we think, this is the worst thing. We tend to exaggerate and blow them out of proportion. And when good things happen we tend to blow those out of proportion. So the Buddha is saying (this is the teaching on impermanence) this is going to change, don’t get so involved, don’t think this is it, you’ve attained something, you’ve attained happiness. In our lives in this world, happiness is not real happiness, in fact, it is a relief from a difficult situation or suffering. Real happiness should be lasting, it doesn’t change. So we should not exaggerate any harms or difficulties. In that way we will become more tolerant, more accepting of our situation and be more balanced and realistic.

So then in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* Shantideva says verses like that-- anything that happens to me, may my mind not be disturbed. We have to be balanced whenever anything happens and then not react with a lot of exaggeration, and instead keep everything in perspective. In that way we will become peaceful ourselves.

**Aryadeva’s *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way***

So then with a good motivation, thinking I will listen to the teachings now, we will start explaining v. 288 on p. 245.

*There is no other door to peace,*

*And it destroys wrong views.*

*That which is the object of*

*All Buddhas is called selflessness*.

So look at the outline v. 288—“Recognizing the fundamental mode of existence,” under the heading “Recognizing Suchness.” Suchness is reality. What is the real nature of all things, what is the fundamental mode of existence?

“There is no other door to peace.” Peace here means where you are quieting the afflictions. So there is no other way of eliminating afflictions. And it says that “it destroys wrong views/ That which is the object /All Buddhas is called selflessness.”

Selflessness here does not mean there is no person or no self completely, a complete non-existence of self. It is talking about self in a special context, like being the essential nature of things, or some kind of independent nature at the center of ourselves or other things. So the self that exists in that sense does not exist.

So it’s that kind of selflessness that is the object of all the Buddhas—whether self-enlightened ones, or the perfect buddhas, there are different references to buddhas, or any of the noble beings on the advanced level of the path—this kind of selflessness is the one that destroys wrong views and is the only door to peace.

31:30

So we have this way of viewing things, whether it is ourselves or other people, we think of them in a certain way. They seem to somehow exist from their own side—this means that they seem to be out there and coming towards us, or are in here and coming out. The self is like that. We never see them as how they really are—which is as just an aggregation of different components. Things coming together and then we’re imputing chair etc. as that, and we don’t see them in that way. And this mistaken way of looking is at the basis of happiness and suffering or any of the afflictions, pride and competitiveness, selfishness. All our difficulties are arising from that.

So then if we examine how our body is, a conglomeration or aggregation of many different components like blood, many different cells, anatomical parts of our body, genes— there are so many things that come together—then all that... we ascribe, impute to that— “body.” It is the same with anything else, they exist with all these components coming together. And then we are imputing to that whatever we have decided to call that particular object, or whatever we are thinking about it. Its existence is actually complete with just that, with its being imputedly existent, but for us we are not satisfied with that, we think that it has to be there, there has to be something there that is it, but if we actually looked among all those components to find the thing that is there, we can’t come up with anything that actually is the thing, we come up with just this component or that component, all the various components. So then what we are talking about here is that things don’t have that kind of existence that they seem to have, that we are ascribing to them. They seem to say “I am here,” they seem to be telling us “This is me,” whether it’s ourselves, persons or other things. But when we go to look there is nothing we can find. But it’s enough that it has that kind of... that we experience suffering and happiness based upon their being imputed there by our minds. That’s enough. Okay. That’s enough for them to exist. It is just that we ascribe more existence to them than actually is there.

So we have to, whenever we can, we have to bring to mind dependent-arising and emptiness. In the scriptures they give the example of a chariot , maybe nowadays the vehicle of choice is an airplane. If we think about an airplane—it is made of thousands of parts or if we think about the outside of the airplane, thousands of atoms, and people get into them and it flies and they fly, and it works. It is all these things coming together. It is able to perform a function, it is able to work we say—the name we give to that—all these different components coming together—is dependent arising and that is how things work. But if we look for something that is the actual airplane among those various components, atoms, parts, we can’t come up with anything that is the actual airplane. That’s what emptiness means, it means not being able to find the object. This is true of ourselves and every other thing; there is not something that can be found that is the object. But all of these things come together and work together, and function perfectly well, within being empty of any findable essence. So the two of these—emptiness and dependent arising—work together in that way.

So then when we are thinking of emptiness or selflessness, there is no essential self that exists from its own side, in its own right, right here. There is no such self. If we look for it we cannot find it. Still the self functions when we understand that it exists as a dependent arising. There are all these various components coming together; we can operate as a self, things can operate. Things can function in that way. But when we are talking about selflessness, there is no self that exists from its own side, some kind of essential self.

44.37 So then if we analyze how the self works, or are looking for the self or airplane, we have two choices: either the airplane is the parts or it is not the parts, like yellow and blue. If it is the same as the parts, that means it is the parts, we should be able to come up with something that is identical with the parts, one of those parts that is the airplane. But we can’t. There is nothing, whether it is in the fuselage or in the engine inside or among all the other parts— the screws or the nuts and bolts and so forth. There is nothing you can come up with that is the airplane. So then it must be other than the parts. There must be something that is the airplane that is totally separate, over there, totally different, categorically different, like blue and yellow or a cow and chicken. Just two totally different things. But we can’t come up with something that is totally different that is the airplane, i.e. that is totally different from these parts. So we can’t find anything that is the airplane, but still the airplane functions perfectly well. You can get into it and take off and fly. And that is because it functions as a dependent arising in terms of all these different components coming together, functioning together. And also dependent arising in a deeper sense, that we can impute to that airplane all these different parts coming together and say “airplane.” That’s enough for it to exist–as a dependent designation, dependent imputation. It doesn’t have any existence from its own side. You can’t find anything that is it, either that is the same as or different from those parts. But it still functions as a dependent designation.

So if look for it, if we think “Oh it exists there from its own side,” if we look for, search for what is it, we don’t find it. This not finding is its emptiness. Even though it does not have this ability to be found, it still functions perfectly well—what we call a dependent arising—all the different components coming together and working together, and it can function—and at the same time [there is] the emptiness of any kind of findability. So then, this is way emptiness and dependent arising work together.

So then it is important to add to that the idea of everything existing like a magician’s illusion. Everything we look at, whether it be ourselves or things around us, seems to exist from its own side, in its own right it seems that way. But then if we look for it we can’t find it. That means it is existing like a magician’s illusion. A magician is able to conjure up an image of a horse or an elephant. We think it is really there, but when we look to find it, actually there is no real horse or elephant there. So then we have to understand that things appear to us like a magician’s illusion.

So then we have to think about everything in that way, whether it is birth or death or aging, all of these things, whatever happens, whatever exists in our lives, in that way all of them are like a magician’s illusion.

54:--

(Back to verse 288 commentary)

Then if we look at the commentary on the verse 288 on p. 245

*“One must definitely understand suchness to reach enlightenment in any of the three vehicles.”*

So when we are talking about the three vehicles we are talking about what is translated here as the Hearer, Solitary Realizer or the Bodhisattva. The Hearer or Sravaka (Disciples), [another Sanskrit word] we say that that person are hearing the teaching and striving for their own liberation for a shorter period of time, than the next one who are the Solitary Realizers or the Pratyekabuddhas who are again striving for their own liberation but they rely on more extensive practices of cultivating wisdom or method, compassion, for a longer time to reach their goal. We are referring to how they reach their goal, their practices. And finally the Bodhisattvas, who are trying to totally reorient themselves from being preoccupied with self to be preoccupied with others, who engage in these practices of method and wisdom for extremely long periods of time in order to highest Enlightenment for sake of all beings. All these must understand emptiness, suchness, which means selflessness, that is, basically what we are talking about is, the ultimate mode or the final way that things exist. We think we see the final way that things exist. But in fact the final way we are not seeing. In that sense it is the final mode of existence.

“*Since the root of worldly existence cannot be cut without understanding emptiness, there is no other door to peace.”*  When we are talking about worldly existence here, we are talking about being under the influence of our former contaminated actions or afflictions—we are constantly under those—and root of those then is holding onto a self that exists in some kind of false way of seeming to be existing in its own right, having an independent existence. So then understanding the emptiness that is a negation of that is the only way or the only door to peace—this means to completely eliminating these afflictions. And (the Tibetan verse goes to last line of the commentary paragraph) “*Understanding it destroys wrong views holding to extremes.”* Here in the verse it says “*it destroys wrong views*.” The two extremes of eternalism and nihilism, where nihilism means that if they don’t have this existence from their own side they don’t exist at all. Emptiness gets rid of that extreme. And also the extreme of thinking that things have this kind of self existence, or existence in their own right, a findable existence there [i.e. eternalism], is totally destroyed realizing that things lack this kind of findability.

So Geshela took that direction in the beginning [of this talk] as we have to have some kind of understanding of what selflessness is in order to understand this verse. That’s why he explained what selflessness meant.

1:03:03

So when we are talking here about the Hearer, Solitary Realizer, Buddha i.e. bodhisattva practitioner—the ones who are aiming at Buddhahood—there is a way of referring to their practices as the Hinayana and Mahayana. All of these have ways of similar practices of impartiality, meditating on emptiness and compassion and so forth. But in comparing these two, we can call them in translation the modest vehicle and the great vehicle. The modest vehicle is seeking the objectives of oneself, only thinking of achieving one’s own goal of liberation. Then there is the liberation of others as well—the great vehicle, the Mahayana. They make the liberation of others more important than their own liberation. That is how you get these two different approaches.

These are not derogatory terms, they are given from the viewpoint of the people who have actually entered the path, the Hinayana or Mahayana. It is not a comparison of how the Buddhist teachings in Thailand, Burma or Sri Lanka are somehow less than the Buddhism of Tibet or other Mahayana cultures. That’s not what is being said. It is really talking about the [difference between the modest vehicle practitioners and] the great vehicle bodhisattvas, who enter the Mahayana, either they are aiming at their own goal or trying to fulfill the aims of others. So then we who are Mahayana practitioners have an equal respect for those who are following the Theravada/Hinayana.

So it is better, to avoid that confusion, to avoid using the term Hinayana, it sounds like less, not as good. We use the word “Theravada,” followers of the way of the elders. So it is better to refer to the practitioners in those countries as those who are Theravada.

Then the Buddha is not like us. The way we teach is that we think “Oh this is a good teaching” and try to explain it to everyone in the class, every listener , but we don’t know if they understand or don’t understand. Whereas the Buddha taught many teachings—Tantric teachings, the Mahayana teachings, Hinayana teachings—and teachings about selflessness and Buddha also taught that a self exists in the sense that the self is existing in its own right or could be found.

This kind of varied approach was because Buddha had this ability to see, he could understand each person—what they were thinking, what their dispositions were, what their inclinations were—he could understand and teach, e.g. that the self exists, as he was only thinking about what is helpful to each person in the short and long run. He was able to determine that. So he would teach that the self exists, or you have to abstain from the ten non-virtuous actions and cultivate the ten virtuous actions, if they were at that level. If they were at a more advanced level he would teach them the methods to attain liberation from cyclic existence completely, and to those who were more advanced than that he could see that they could hear the teachings on how to totally reorient themselves to only thinking of others, totally preoccupied with others, so he taught each person in accord with what level they were on.

So at the end of his teachings, it turned out that there were fewer on the advanced levels on the Mahayana path, and more of those on these other stages, so after he died there was this great controversy on whether the Mahayana was actually taught by the Buddha, where they said this or that could not be the view of the Buddha. But anyway you have to bear in mind that the Buddha was not a teacher like ourselves.

1:15:49

So then we have to bear in mind that the Buddha was teaching individuals exactly according to what they needed. So they would then react to that, “Oh that is just what I need to do.” And then they would just put into practice what the Buddha taught them, they wouldn’t think about Oh the Buddha taught this or that other teaching. They didn’t have distinguish among all these other teachings. They just would practice just what the Buddha put before them, what appealed to them. But we can’t teach like that. We are not taught in that way. We are given all these different teachings. Buddha taught so many different kinds of teachings: impermanence, and he would teach for someone who was very proud how to cultivate humility, or for the very jealous how to cultivate welcoming or admiring others’ good deeds, and for someone who was very angry he would teach patience. So he gave all these different teachings. So if you think of it like medicine, there are all these different medicines and we have to decide—this is what works for me. We have to make that decision out of all these teachings, we have to think of them all as something we can put into practice according to our ability to practice and not discriminate among them thinking, “Oh that is a good teaching, that is not a good teaching.” We should not have any discrimination against any of the teachings.

So then to finish this one sentence in the commentary on verse 288:

“*Dependent arising’s lack of inherent existence is called the fundamental mode of existence, ultimate truth, emptiness and selflessness, and is the object of Hearer and Solitary Realizer Exalted Ones and of all Exhalted Buddhas.*”

Q&A

Q.*Fred:* Is there any difference in how a Hearer, Solitary Realizer or Bodhisattva experiences emptiness?

GYT: It depends on what tenet system, Buddhist school of thought, you are looking at. Some will say the way that emptiness is understood between a Solitary Realizer or Bodhisattva is that a Solitary Realizer’s is more coarse, and a Bodhisattva experiences a more subtle understanding of emptiness. But if take the Prasangika-Madhyamika view, the Buddha’s own view or the final tenet system, there is no difference between subtle and coarse. Also this is the view of Je Tsongkhapa. There is really only a difference in the vastness, the breadth of understanding. The Hearers and Solitary Realizers focus mainly on the selflessness of persons, and use the various reasonings for establishing that kind of selflessness, but the Bodhisattvas don’t look at just the person. They are looking at everything, the person’s going or coming, all the different actions of the person. If you look at Nagarjuna’s *Treatise on the Middle Way*, the *Root Wisdom, the Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* that text has so many reasons for establishing emptiness. So it is from the viewpoint of breadth that the Bodhisattva’s understanding is much more broad.

But bear in mind if you look at the teaching from Sri Lanka and Thailand, they wouldn’t be explaining emptiness. They just talk about selflessness in terms of the person. So when they see the Mahayana teaching on the self doesn’t exist and the eyes don’t exist, the ears don’t exist, the tongue doesn’t exist and so forth they say that is not the Buddha’s teaching, that is nihilism. They don’t analyze things other than the self as having self or not.

Q. Karen: When thinking about emptiness, is it possible not to be under the influence of an affliction, e.g. is there a time when doing good karma can you come to emptiness and not be under the influence of an affliction?

A. So with the practice of any kind of virtue –we are always involved in some kind of attachment toward our self, “I,” “ I,” and so we are motivated by this kind of attachment. And then if we are involved in a sin harming others that is sin motivated by attachment to ourselves. If in cultivating virtue we are thinking “I don’t want to meet with harmful results of those actions,” so still we are always thinking about ourselves, thinking “I,” “I,” “me,” “me.” But then we are cultivating virtue, doing things that are helpful to others. So that is called contaminated virtuous action, as it is a contaminated by attachment to the self, that is an affliction. But there is uncontaminated virtue where you wouldn’t be motivated by attachment to yourself.

Only by attachment are you going to cultivate virtue. We are not talking about the other afflictions like jealousy and anger and so forth. You are not able to do any kind of virtuous actions with those kind of motivations.

Q. Karen (cont.): Can you repeat again what kind of attachment that is?

A. First of all you are apprehending “self” and then you are attached to the “self.” You are apprehending the self as existing in its own right. And then you become attached to that self. And then in that way that is the kind of attachment we are talking about. Then out of that motivation you do virtuous deeds that are helpful to others.

Q. Mar: So our objective should be to try to achieve selflessness. But we might be mentally unstable and not feed ourselves. Sometimes you have to help yourself first in order to help others, e.g. put the oxygen mask first on yourself, then on others. To what degree should we try to pursue that? Is it a contradiction? You cannot help others unless you help yourself?

A. If we have this question what about ourselves, we have to do what we are capable of, what we are comfortable doing. For instance, we are at the level of the intermediate practitioner where you have to take care of yourself, your own interests. But for someone like a bodhisattva, then they see a bunch of hungry people they never think about themselves. It doesn’t bother them at all. But if you are feeding others, and then you think “I am really hungry, I really should eat something,” you have to feed yourself. You have to do what you are capable of. There is no sin actually here in doing for yourself, if you decide, I think I will split ½ for yourself or ½ for the other person. You have to bear that in mind.

[Dedication prayer.] 1:41:21