

The Importance of the Text

Lama Tsongkhapa's *In Praise of Dependent Origination* is an outstanding and profound poem that explains the deep meaning of dependent origination and emptiness. When His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche¹ was alive, he often spoke highly of the brilliance of this poem. His opinion was that, "As a follower of the Buddha, even if one is unable to extensively study all of Lama Tsongkhapa's supreme writings, one should at least study his short and pithy treatises, such as *In Praise of Dependent Origination* and *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*²."

Over the course of Buddhist history, there have been many other renowned Buddhist practitioners who have attached great importance to *In Praise of Dependent Origination* as well. An excellent example of these is the great Tibetan scholar Gendün Chöphel³, who it is said, just before passing into nirvana, asked his attendant to read two poems to him, Lama Tsongkhapa's *In Praise of Dependent Origination* and Ju Mipham⁴ Rinpoche's *Prayer to the Indivisible Basis, Path, and Fruit of the Great Perfection of Manjushri*. After having listened to the words of these two poems, he was to have said, "Now I have totally understood the illusory essence of the world's manifestation. Everything has been perfectly achieved." The next day when the attendant arrived, he found that the great master had already passed into nirvana during the night.

It is said that on one occasion, while engaged in ascetic practice, Lama Tsongkhapa received a spiritual vision during which Manjushri appeared before him. Manjushri prophesized that Lama Tsongkhapa would attain enlightenment through the blessings of Nagarjuna⁵ and Aryadeva⁶, and that in addition, he would also bring enormous benefit to all living beings through his Dharma activities, however before this came to fruition, he must be diligent in accumulating merit. Later after having received this prophecy, Lama Tsongkhapa had a dream in which he saw five important Madhyamika commentators, Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Buddhapalita⁷, Chandrakirti⁸ and Bhavaviveka⁹, and in which Buddhapalita blessed him by placing *The Shastra of Buddhapalita* on his head. After waking from this dream, Lama Tsongkhapa immediately found this text and while reading the verse:

*External objects exist conventionally,
While ultimately lacking intrinsic existence,*

he achieved enlightenment.

(In another version, Lama Tsongkhapa achieved enlightenment as he was reading the

¹ http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Khenpo_Jikme_Phuntsok

² http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Three_Principal_Aspects_of_the_Path

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gend%C3%BCn_Ch%C3%B6phel

⁴ http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Mipham_Rinpoche

⁵ <http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Nagarjuna>

⁶ <http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Aryadeva>

⁷ <http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Buddhapalita>

⁸ <http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Chandrakirti>

⁹ <http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Bhavaviveka>

following verse in *The Root Stanzas on the Middle Way*¹⁰:

*If it were other than the aggregates,
It would not have the characteristics of the aggregates.)*

After his enlightenment, Lama Tsongkhapa developed an unsurpassable confidence in emptiness and an irreversible faith in Buddha Shakyamuni arose within him. As a result he composed the poem *In Praise of Dependent Origination*, which was his first writing after his enlightenment, and which, upon completion, became very popular.

Here is a story of how this poem, led Gyaltsab Je¹¹, who became one of Lama Tsongkhapa's two principle disciples, to rely on him as his root guru. One day, Gyaltsab Je overheard a monk reading a poem outside a temple. It was so beautifully written, and he became so joyful upon hearing its content, that he believed that a poem this wonderful must have been composed by either Chandrakirti or Nagarjuna, as it was his belief at that time, that no Tibetan was capable of composing a poem this beautiful. When he discovered that it had been composed by Lama Tsongkhapa, it caused him to develop such great faith in Lama Tsongkhapa's enlightenment, that he came to rely on him, with the three ways of pleasing¹², as his root guru.

Being aware of the poem's supreme value, many great masters from all over the world, have given it special attention and have taught it widely to their students. Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche first translated this poem from Tibetan into Chinese in 2004, adding some corrections to his translation in 2007, however it was not until 2010 that Khenpo Sodargye was able to give teachings on this poem. As he said, "All things are like this, including Dharma teaching; without the coming together of proper causes and conditions, things will not happen."

Khenpo has also said that by learning this great text, he is certain that followers of the Dharma will develop great faith in Buddha Shakyamuni and gain a deep understanding of the Dharma teachings. As long as one listens to the teachings properly, reflects on their meaning carefully, and meditates on them diligently, one will be able to attain a certain level of realization.

A1. Opening

B1. Title

The title, *In Praise of Dependent Origination*, does not mean that it is the intention of the author to solely praise the teaching of dependent origination. Actually, in this poem the author directly praises Buddha Shakyamuni, and indirectly praises the teaching on emptiness and appearance.

Why? It is well known that Buddha Shakyamuni, in the beginning, aroused bodhichitta, in the middle, accumulated incredible merit for three great eons, and in the end, achieved

¹⁰ <http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Mulamadhyamaka-karika>

¹¹ http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Gyaltsab_Darma_Rinchen

¹² http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Three_ways_of_pleasing_or_serving_the_teacher

Buddhahood. After his awakening, the Buddha taught the 84,000 paths of Dharma practice to living beings. Among all of his teachings, the Buddha taught the most profound principles of dependent origination and emptiness, with the supreme wisdom of his own enlightenment. This is a unique teaching that cannot be taught by any other great scholar or person of wisdom from any of the other schools of philosophy. Therefore, Lama Tsongkhapa praises the Buddha in a way that acknowledges that apart from Buddha Shakyamuni, no one else in this world had attained the realization of dependent origination and given these enlightened teachings. It is for this reason that one should praise the Buddha with great gratitude.

As we know, every living being in this world wants to pursue happiness. However, in spite of this wish, most of the time, living beings end up experiencing the pain of suffering. How then, can we break away from the cycle of suffering? It is through learning and realizing the truth of dependent origination. Who discovered and first taught this truth? It was Buddha Shakyamuni. Therefore, as a follower of the Buddha, Lama Tsongkhapa praises the Buddha in this way.

B2. Homage

C1. Homage in General

Homage to (my) Guru, Manjughosha.

Right at the beginning of this poem, Lama Tsongkhapa pays homage to his guru and Manjushri. This is the homage in general, which indicates that this text belongs to Abhidharma within the category of the three pitakas (Vinaya, Sutras, Abhidharma)¹³.

C2. Homage in Particular

Verse 1

*He who speaks on the basis of seeing,
This makes him a knower and a teacher unexcelled,
I bow to you, O Conqueror, you who saw
Dependent origination and taught it.¹⁴*

I bow to (you) the Triumphant (Buddha), who has seen and taught dependent arising, which to see (makes you) a knower, and to speak of (makes you) an unsurpassable instructor.¹⁵

a. The wisdom of the Buddha

This is the homage to Buddha Shakyamuni. The Buddha saw and realized the truth of dependent origination through his own enlightenment and furthermore taught this truth to his followers. Because of seeing, he is a great knower; and because of having taught it, he is an unsurpassable teacher. Therefore, the author, with all his reverence, bows to the Buddha. Essentially speaking, the unexcelled wisdom of the Buddha is exactly the full realization of emptiness and dependent origination. It is because of this that the Buddha is also called the

¹³ http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Three_pitakas

¹⁴ Translated by Geshe Thupten Jinpa

¹⁵ Translated by Dr. Alexander Berzin in studybuddhism.com

Conqueror in this world.

Dependent origination has both a relative level and an ultimate level. The relative level of dependent origination means that the arising of all phenomena depends on proper causes and conditions; there are no phenomena that arise independently or that do not arise when the proper causes and conditions come together. The ultimate level of dependent origination means that the appearance of all phenomena by nature is beyond the four extremes¹⁶ or the eight kinds of elaborations¹⁷; this is the nature of all phenomena.

The Buddha perceived the ultimate truth of emptiness and the relative truth of appearance, and furthermore, he directly taught this truth to all living beings. As such, the Buddha, his wisdom and his teachings can be said to be unsurpassed in this world. Therefore, Lama Tsongkhapa pays homage to the Buddha with reverence and respect.

b. The way of paying homage

This is a wonderful method of paying homage that we should remember. As a matter of fact, in many great treatises, the authors pay homage in this manner. For example, at the beginning of *The Root Stanzas on the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna says,

*To him who taught that things arise dependently,
Not ceasing, not arising,
Not annihilated nor yet permanent,
Not coming, not departing,
Not different, not the same,
The stilling of all thought, and perfect peace:
To him, the best of teachers, perfect Buddha,
I bow down.*

At the end of the text, again Nagarjuna says,

*To him who in compassionate wisdom
Taught the Sacred Dharma
For the shunning of all views,
To him, to Gautama, I bow.*

These stanzas explain how the Buddha taught the principle of dependent origination to all sentient beings to eradicate their wrong views, delusions and ignorance. Hence, Nagarjuna respectfully pays homage to him.

At the beginning of *The Commentary on the Ornament of the Middle Way*¹⁸, Ju Mipham Rinpoche also praises Buddha Shakyamuni for his unexcelled teachings of dependent origination:

*To you, O peerless one, who spoke supremely well
Discursing on the wondrous path: dependent co-arising,
Which looses all the strings and fetters of samsara,
To you, Lord, Loin of the Shakyas, I bow down.*

As followers, we should praise and pay homage to the Buddha in this way because the

¹⁶ http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Four_extremes

¹⁷ http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Eight_extremes

¹⁸ http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Ornament_of_the_Middle_Way

Buddha is unique and differs from all other wise people of this world. Worldly intelligent people can only make contributions to society in a certain field, but the Buddha can solve the mental problems of all living beings by teaching dependent origination and emptiness. Accordingly, in the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*¹⁹, the Buddha is paid homage to in the following way:

*“I pay homage to the king of doctors,
As you are good at solving mental problems;
Although you are far away from us,
Your teachings can inspire us to be wise.”*

A2. Main Text

B1. Praise the Buddha for Teaching the Theory of Dependent Origination

C1. The Seeing of Dependent Origination Can Eradicate the Root of Samsara

Verse 2

*Whatever degenerations there are in the world,
The root of all these is ignorance;
You taught that it is dependent origination,
The seeing of which will undo this ignorance.*

Unawareness is the root of as much torment as there is in the world. Thus, you spoke of dependent arising, which, if seen, turns that back.

a. The Root of Samsara

In this world, all afflictions, sufferings, degenerations, destructions and so on, are fundamentally caused by ignorance. The Buddha taught us that the root of all of these sufferings and degenerations in samsara can be eradicated by the recognition of dependent origination. Why is that? It is because all sufferings of living beings are directly caused by mental afflictions such as desire, hatred and jealousy, which are in turn caused by ignorance.

What are we ignorant of? Every living being is, in fact, the combination of five aggregates. In spite of this, people regard that theirs as an independent existence with an intrinsic nature. Starting from this misunderstanding, ordinary people have attachment to self and to the things that belong to self. This results in suffering from sickness, old age and death, or from the loss of, or failure in the seeking after of desirable things. Furthermore, the root cause of wars between countries and conflicts between families and individuals are also due to self-attachment. In other words, suffering and restlessness in this world are the result of the ignorance of ordinary people who strongly believe that this illusory world has a solid existence. As the Buddha said, if one can destroy ignorance, then all the other eleven links of dependent origination can be destroyed, and that is the end of samsara.

b. The Indication of Dependent Origination

It is said in *The Play in Full*²⁰, that the Bodhisattva perceives the truth of dependent

¹⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mulasarvastivada>

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lalitavistara_S%C5%ABtra

origination and realizes the true nature of the world. In the *Vimalakirti Sutra*²¹ it also directs the reader to “profoundly enter into the teaching of dependent origination and eliminate all wrong views”. It suggests that all wrong views, ignorance, afflictions and sufferings are due to the lack of understanding of the law of dependent origination, which, if one were to truly understand it, he or she would no longer become attached to anything or experience any kind of suffering. For example, people always pursue high position, but in fact, social position is nothing more than a fabricated phenomenon that is dependent on related causes and conditions.

In the *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*²², the last verse says that by seeing that internal and external phenomena arise from causes and conditions, one eliminates the whole network of wrong views. As a result, one abandons desire, hatred and ignorance, and thereby attains nirvana unstained by wrong views.

It is also said in the *Lankavatara Sutra*²³, that ordinary and ignorant people regard phenomena that arises from causes and conditions as true existence. Due to this delusion, they fail to recognize the true nature of the three samsaric worlds. This is the current situation of ordinary beings. However, once they realize the truth of dependent origination, their ignorance will be eliminated and as a consequence, all corresponding suffering will vanish.

C2. The Path of Dependent Origination Is the Essence of the Dharma

Verse 3

*So how can an intelligent person
Not comprehend that this path
Of dependent origination is
The essential point of your teaching?*

At that time, how could those with intelligence not have comprehended the path of dependent arising as being the essential point of your teachings?

- a. The essential point of the Buddha’s teaching

If we understand that realizing the principle of dependent origination can eliminate ignorance and cut through all kinds of suffering, then we can naturally understand that the path of dependent origination is the essence of the Buddha’s teaching. In other words, the essential teaching of all 84,000 paths of liberation can be summed up as the path of dependent origination. Therefore, an intelligent person should comprehend that this path is the fundamental and essential point of the Buddha’s teaching.

This is also the reason that Nagarjuna composed *The Root Stanzas on the Middle Way*, in which he employed the principle of dependent origination to support the conclusion that the ultimate nature of all phenomena is beyond all extremes of conceptual thought. Nagarjuna's manifestation in this world, was prophesied by Buddha Shakyamuni himself and after the Buddha entered parinirvana. Nagarjuna was regarded as the second Buddha and his

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vimalakirti_Sutra

²² http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Seventy_Stanzas_on_Emptiness

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La%E1%B9%85k%C4%81vat%C4%81ra_S%C5%ABtra

work, *The Root Stanzas on the Middle Way*, brings temporary and ultimate benefit to countless living beings. Intelligent people must understand that the truth of dependent origination is the single most essential teaching in Buddhism, and is the one that all serious practitioners must come to understand and to fully realize.

There is a story of Sariputra²⁴ and Maudgalyayana²⁵ and how they became disciples of the Buddha. Once, Sariputra saw a Bhikkhu named Assaji²⁶ who was begging for alms in Rajagaha. Being impressed by Assaji's demeanor, Sariputra followed him until he had finished his alms round. When Assaji sat down, Sariputra asked him about his teacher and the teachings he followed. Assaji said that his teacher was Buddha Shakyamuni and he had been taught the unexcelled Dharma, but could not offer more explanation due to his lack of experience. Upon the further urging of Sariputra, Assaji spoke this short verse:

*All dharmas originate from causes.
The Tathagata has taught these causes,
And also that which puts a stop to these causes—
This too has been taught by the Great Shramana.*

Sariputra was able to comprehend this teaching and thus gained sotapanna²⁷, the first stage of arhathood. Sariputra immediately went off to share what he had learned with Maudgalyayana. Maudgalyayana, on hearing it, also attained the state of sotapanna. Thereafter, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana and their 250 disciples took refuge in the Buddha.

b. Visualization is a way of dependent origination

Thus, intelligent people must know and understand that the teaching of dependent origination is the supreme and ultimate nectar in all the teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni. In the *Buddhabhumi Sutra Shastra* it is said that, if one sees the truth of dependent origination, one sees the nature of all phenomena; and if one sees the nature of all phenomena, one sees all the Buddhas. People usually think that seeing the Buddha means seeing his marvelous appearance. In fact, the real Buddha is the truth of dependent origination and the nature of all phenomena.

In both the Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings, it is said that at that moment that one visualizes Amitabha, one becomes Amitabha; alternately, when one visualizes Padmasambhava, one becomes Padmasambhava and no other Padmasambhava exists anywhere else in the world. The appearance of Padmasambhava in the mind as a visualization is the relative Padmasambhava, and the ultimate Padmasambhava is the nature of mind that is beyond all extremes and elaborations. This is the perfect union of emptiness and appearance. Other than this, there is nothing else that can be called dependent origination.

In other words, with the coming together of causes and conditions, there is both emptiness and appearance. For ordinary living beings, what they see is the appearance of all phenomena arising from causes and conditions, however for enlightened beings, what they

²⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sariputta>

²⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maudgalyayana>

²⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assaji>

²⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sot%C4%81panna>

perceive is emptiness, which is the real nature of all phenomena. This is exactly why the Buddha says that everything comes from dependent origination.

C3. To Praise the Buddha for Having Taught Dependent Origination Is the Best Way of Praising

Verse 4

*This being so, who will find, O Savior,
A more wonderful way to praise you
Than [to praise you] for having taught
This origination through dependence.*

*As that is so, how could anyone find as a gateway for praising you, O Guardian,
anything more wondrous than your statements about dependent arising?*

a. The Way of Praising

The Buddha has been praised by numerous beings in a variety of ways. Yet, of all the various ways of giving praise, the most supreme and wondrous is to offer praise for his teaching on dependent origination.

As we know, followers of different traditions also praise their teachers for certain aspects of their qualities or their teachings; however, the aspects or features of these teachers are not unique or special. For example, some may praise their teacher for their ability to enter Samadhi or manifest miraculous powers, or it may be for aspects of their personality, such as their compassion to other human beings. All of these are actually fairly common within the context of different spiritual traditions. The teaching on dependent origination, however, makes Buddha Shakyamuni the most supreme and unsurpassable teacher, because in all of the world, it is only the Buddha who has taught living beings the truth of all phenomena and guided his followers on the path of liberation. Therefore, to praise his unique teaching is the most wonderful way that there is of praising the Buddha.

b. The Best Way of Praising

As we can see, to praise someone also requires wisdom. Without wisdom, one may not truly recognize the qualities of the person being praised. Even worse, praise without wisdom may be taken as slander. In this poem, we can see that Lama Tsongkhapa had realized the supreme teaching on dependent origination and created this composition from the perspective of his enlightened wisdom. It is because he himself perceived the true nature of all phenomena, that Lama Tsongkhapa highly praised Buddha Shakyamuni for this unexcelled teaching. As followers of the Buddha, it is our great fortune to be able to study and practice the path of dependent origination. Therefore, we should each make the aspiration to follow in the footsteps of all enlightened masters and attain personal realization of the truth of dependent origination.