

## C2. Establish the Authenticity of the Buddha's Guidance for Those Who Seek Liberation

### D1. Point out the Difference between the Buddha and Teachers of Other Doctrines

#### Verse 31

*You who speak excellently by seeing as it is,  
For those who train in your footsteps,  
All degenerations will become remote;  
For the root of all faults will be undone.*

*In training, in your footsteps, in what you have said so well, after you saw in accord with fact, one puts all one's troubles far away, because one turns back the root of all one's faults.*

#### Verse 32

*But those who turn away from your teaching,  
Though they may struggle with hardship for a long time,  
Faults increase ever more as if being called forth;  
For they make firm the view of self.*

*(On the other hand,) those who face away from your teachings, even should they devote themselves wearily for a long time, are like inviting one mistake after the next, because of their firm view of identity natures.*

#### a. The difference in results between Buddhist and non-Buddhist practice

The first verse explains why the Buddha is so extraordinary. It is because the Buddha alone, without any hindrance, has clearly seen the un-obscured truth of the reality of all phenomena. Furthermore, because of his unconditioned compassion, the Buddha most excellently speaks of this truth to all living beings.

The term "speak excellently" indicates that it is from his great compassion and wisdom that the Buddha offers these excellent teachings, which are, without exception, of great benefit to all living beings. As a result, people who sincerely follow and train in the Buddha's teachings will surely avoid degenerations of all kinds.

Here "degenerations" means both the degeneration of an Arhat's one-sided nirvana and the degeneration of an ordinary being's samsara. Why is it that Mahayana practitioners are able to avoid these types of degenerations? It is because they are able to turn back the root of all faults, which is the attachment to self and phenomena that is driven by ignorance of the nature of emptiness.

As stated in *The Great Jewel-Heap Sutra*, "The intrinsic nature of all phenomena is emptiness; which can be said to be without either characteristics or essence. In all of the various phenomena in the world, there is no essential essence that can be found." Hence, when viewing the true nature of reality, nothing exists, no I or mine, no afflictions or ignorance. When one is aware of this true reality and uproots the attachments of self and phenomena, all degenerations become remote. It is only the Buddha, who has had the wisdom and compassion to convey this excellent and authentic teaching to us.

However, for those who practice religions other than Buddhism, as well as for those who have outright refused to accept the Buddha's teachings, their firm view of self may cause mental afflictions, such as desire and anger, to become even stronger. Even if they have diligently undergone many years of ascetic practices, these methods, in the end, will bring them no benefit. In the sutra of *The Play in Full*, the Buddha clearly explains that, "Those adherents to other traditions practice asceticism diligently, but end up with nothing. They firmly cling to delusive phenomena instead of letting them go. They hold wrong views throughout their lives, and will fall into the lower realms after they die." Therefore, if one's spiritual practice does not reduce or eradicate the firm attachment to self or to a belief in intrinsic existence, it is of no benefit at all.

b. The Buddhist practice of asceticism

It is important to differentiate beneficial practice from un-beneficial practice. Some people may think that like other religions, Buddhism encourages ascetic practices. In support of this, the Buddha is known to have engaged in asceticism in his early life, and past and present Buddhist practice suggests that serious practitioners should have only one meal a day, and that that meal should be eaten before noon. These same practitioners are urged to pay homage to the Buddha by performing full-body prostrations. As all of these practices are guided by the correct view of emptiness and karmic law, they are considered to be beneficial to one's current and future lives.

Lama Tsongkhapa is a great example of a dedicated practitioner who carried out ascetic practices. He walked round and around stupas and temples until his bare feet were a mass of festering wounds. He made daily mandala offerings until his palms were red and raw. During the time when Lama Tsongkhapa was studying *The Shastra of Buddhapalitrutti*, he performed extraordinary ascetic practices for the benefit of all living beings and for the flourishing of dharma activities. Through his ascetic practices, Lama Tsongkhapa not only achieved personal enlightenment, but also composed great works, and left a body of great teachings to his many followers.

During the time that Gendün Chöphel spent in India, his many interactions with non-Buddhist practitioners caused him to feel that the more one searches for the truth, the more one comes to appreciate how extraordinary the Buddha was. In his plain way of speaking, he once said, "Some religions gain dominance through bloody wars; Buddhism is spread all over the world by monks who wouldn't even kill an insect." Indeed, the spirit of not killing any living being is so profound that most other traditions find it too difficult to put into practice. For this reason, even when judged solely on the basis of compassion alone, it is clear that Buddhism can be seen to surpass most other traditions. In Lama Tsongkhapa's poetic verses, his primary focus is on the way that Buddhism's unique education offers people a way to see the world through the perspective of wisdom.

## D2. Cultivate Reverence for the Buddha by Being Aware of the Difference

### Verse 33

*Aha! When the wise comprehend*

*The differences between these two,  
Why would they not at that point  
Revere you from the depths of their being?*

*How wondrous! How could any learned person, when he has comprehended the difference between these two, not develop, at that time, respect for you from the depth of his heart?*

a. How wondrous is the Buddha

Here “Aha” means how wondrous, and expresses Lama Tsongkhapa’s strong feeling of reverence. For those people of wisdom who have fully comprehended the principle of dependent arising and emptiness, and have recognized the value of the Four Immeasurables, as well as for those who have a complete understanding of the difference between Buddhist and non-Buddhist teaching, how could they not develop sincere respect for the Buddha from the depths of their hearts? Indeed, one who truly understands the Buddha’s unparalleled wisdom or his unconditioned compassion will surely develop an unshakable faith in Buddha Shakyamuni, the fundamental teacher.

In Han Buddhism, there is a text known as *The One Hundred and Fifty Praises of the Buddha*, in which one can find this verse: “The light of the Buddha’s wisdom can dispel the darkness of all living beings’ ignorance. It is so wondrous and peerless that it is stronger than the light of one thousand suns and has the power to destroy all wrong views.” Since the Buddha sees and teaches the true reality of all phenomena, the light of such truth can never be blocked by anybody in any way. When one understands the Buddhist philosophy of compassion and wisdom, a deep and sincere faith toward the Buddha will certainly arise in one’s heart.

**Verse 34**

*Let alone your numerous teachings,  
Even in the meaning of a small part,  
Those who find ascertainment in a cursory way,  
This brings supreme bliss to them as well.*

*What need to mention many of your statements, when finding merely a rough certainty about even only the meaning of a single portion bestows supreme bliss.*

b. The vastness of the Buddha’s teaching

The Buddha has given numerous teachings to his followers; taken together they are as vast as the ocean. Even today, we have threefold canons (Tripitaka), twelve categories of scriptures, four principal tantras, and eighty-four thousand Dharma approaches; taken all together they are too numerous to count. The following story can be found in Chapter 15 of the *Connected Discourses*<sup>1</sup>.

One day in the Bamboo Grove Monastery<sup>2</sup>, the Buddha grabbed a handful of leaves from the ground beneath a tree. He then turned to his disciples and asked, “Are there more

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%80gama\\_%28Buddhism%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%80gama_%28Buddhism%29)

<sup>2</sup> Bamboo Grove: Pali: Veluvana; Sanskrit: Venuvana, the first monastery (Bodhi-Mandala) in Buddhism located in Rajagaha. It was donated by the elder Kalanda and built by King Bimbisara of Magadha.

leaves in this entire grove than these that I hold in my hand?” All of the monks answered in a unified voice, “Of course, the amount of leaves in your hand is much less than that can be found in the entire grove.” Then Buddha then said, “The number of Dharma teachings you have heard from me is like the amount of leaves in my hand, however, the knowledge that I possess is like that of all of the leaves in the entire grove.” The Buddha continued, “Why is this? The reason is that, to achieve liberation from samsara, living beings need only the amount of teachings that equal the number of leaves that I hold in my hand.”

Even so, the Buddha has given countless number of teachings; these include not only his teachings to human beings, but also his teachings in the God Realm and in the Dragon’s Palace. Even in different places of the human world, different teachings have been recorded. For example, the Tibetan version of the Tripitaka is different from its Chinese version, etc. Given how numerous teachings these teachings are, it is impossible to gain a thorough understanding of each and every one of them. However, if we have a true understanding of even a few words, or if we gain a general understanding of just a few verses, it is sufficient for us to achieve extraordinary peace and bliss.

Khenpo Sodargye has mentioned in the past that he knows some people who, in spite of not being very learned about the Dharma, have been greatly benefited by having heard just a couple of teachings, such as “abstain from unvirtuous deeds, and conduct all the virtuous ones”. That’s why here Lama Tsongkhapa says,

*Even in the meaning of a small part,  
Those who find ascertainment in a cursory way,  
This brings supreme bliss to them as well.*

In *The Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, it is said,

*Those with little merit  
Do not even doubt this teaching.  
Entertaining just a doubt  
Tears to tatters worldly existence.*

Therefore, if in our minds, we hold a reasonable doubt about emptiness, and wonder whether the true nature of all phenomena is really empty or not, we will be able to destroy samsara. Just as a seed that has rotted due to high temperatures will never give birth to a seedling, a reasonable doubt about the true nature of all phenomena will eventually destroy the three existences. In some sutras it is said that, the merit of understanding only one verse of emptiness, surpasses that of offering numerous buddhas seven types of jewels.

### D3. Understanding the Difference Evokes the Author’s Reverent Faith in the Buddha

#### Verse 35

*Alas! My mind was defeated by ignorance;  
Though I’ve sought refuge for a long time,  
In such an embodiment of excellence,  
I possess not a fraction of his qualities.*

*Alas! My mind is so overwhelmed with being muddled that although I've long taken safe direction from (you, who are) a mass of excellent qualities like this, I cannot show even a tiny speck of good qualities (in myself).*

**Verse 36**

*Nonetheless, before the stream of this life  
Flowing towards death has come to cease  
That I have found slight faith in you --  
Even this I think is fortunate.*

*But until the flow of my life-force toward the direction of the mouth of the Lord of Death comes to an end, I shall consider myself fortunate even in just this: the slight amount of confident belief (I've developed) in you.*

a. Lama Tsongkhapa's manifestation

In this portion of the poem, Lama Tsongkhapa, explains in a humble manner how he developed faith in the Buddha through understanding the principle of dependent arising. The verse begins with the word, "Alas", which the lama uses to express his feeling of great sadness. But why does this great man feel so sad? It is because since beginningless time, due to karmic obscurations, his mind has been overwhelmed by ignorance. He bemoans the fact that, even though he has been seeking refuge for a long time, he does not possess even a tiny fraction of the Buddha's qualities. But the great news is that within this lifetime, before he enters into the mouth of the Lord of Death, as a result of his understanding of the teaching on dependent arising, he has developed a small but meaningful amount of faith in the Buddha, for which, he considers himself fortunate.

This is a perfect manifestation of how Lama Tsongkhapa manifests himself to ordinary beings. As Buddhist followers, this should also be our true feeling: Although we took refuge in Buddhism long ago, and in spite of the fact that we also know that the Buddha and his teachings have incredible qualities, our negative karma still prevents us from achieving any enlightenment in our spiritual practice. What makes us joyful, however, is our great good fortune to be able to receive these wonderful teachings before we go to our death. When viewed from either the perspective of theoretical philosophy, or from the perspective of actual realization, Buddha Shakyamuni is the best teacher in this world.

b. Develop a conviction on the Buddha

*The Great Collection Sutra* states, "It is only the Buddha who can eradicate all mental afflictions; it is only the Buddha who can guide all living beings toward liberation; it is only the Buddha who can light the lamp of the noble Dharma for all living beings; and it is only the Buddha that I take refuge in, as my savior in the three realms." Therefore, as followers of the Buddha, we should feel extremely fortunate.

Even if one does not take refuge in the Buddha, a Vajra seed of liberation becomes rooted deep in one's mind just upon hearing the great teaching of dependent arising. As the Buddha said in *The Great Jewel-Heap Sutra*, "In the degenerated times of the future, if someone has the opportunity to hear this sublime Dharma, it indicates that this person must have accumulated a huge amount of merit over a long period of time."

If by learning the teaching on dependent arising and emptiness, we can develop a conviction that the Buddha is the only one in this world who can teach valid cognition and who can guide us across the ocean of samsara toward liberation, then we will not turn away from him regardless of what kind of adversities we encounter in our lives. This irreversible faith is indeed, in itself, a kind of precious enlightenment. Without enlightenment such as this, we may spend lifetimes wandering aimlessly here and there, all the while deviating further and further from the right path of liberation. Therefore, an irreversible faith is so essential for each of us that we should really spend every effort to work on it. The verses of this poem reminds us of how important it is that we all try our best to gain a clear understanding of dependent arising and emptiness.

#### D4. Conclusively Establish the Buddha as the Only Holder of Truth and the Dharma as the Only Valid Knowledge

##### Verse 37

*Among teachers, the teacher of dependent origination,  
Amongst wisdoms, the knowledge of dependent origination –  
You, who are most excellent like the kings of the world,  
Know this perfectly well, not others.*

*Like a commander of the triumphant in the worldly realms, your omniscient mind has no other (match) in its magnificence and excellence. Among teachers, you are the one who shares the knowledge of dependent arising, and among those with the most discriminating awareness, you alone have an awareness of dependent arising.*

##### a. The most wonderful teacher and the most excellent wisdom

In this world, of the numerous teachers who have each proclaimed their own philosophies, the most excellent is the one who taught dependent arising, this in part, is because of all of the different types of knowledge, the most wonderful is the knowledge of dependent arising. The one who possesses the two supreme qualities, that of gaining the knowledge of dependent arising and that of teaching the knowledge of dependent arising, is like a worldly king who is revered and honored by all of his people. It is the Buddha alone who fully possesses these two qualities, and in this way is distinguished from ordinary people who could not, on their own, understand the value and significance of the principle of dependent arising.

In the beginning of *The Root Stanzas on the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna says,

*To he 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.*

On an ultimate level, all things transcend the eight extremes: not ceasing, not arising,

not annihilated, not permanent, not coming, not departing, not different, and not the same. On a relative level, all things arise dependently due to causes and conditions. This sublime teaching can only be taught by the Buddha, and so, for this reason, Nagarjuna sincerely pays homage to him.

Similarly, in Bhavaviveka's *Wisdom Lamp*<sup>3</sup>, there is a verse that praises the principle of dependent arising. It states,

*Not different, not the same,  
Not annihilated, not permanent,  
This is the essential nectar of the Dharma  
Taught by all Conquerors.*

The Buddha proclaimed the teaching of emptiness that is beyond distinction and identity, annihilation and permanence. In this world, only the Buddha possesses the wisdom to bestow such unexcelled teaching, which is the sole nectar that is capable of pacifying all mental afflictions. If we comprehend the meaning of dependent origination and emptiness, we will be able to cut through all mental fabrications and afflictions, and let go of any kind of attachment. In this way, we can eventually lead happy and easygoing lives, and enjoy the ultimate freedom possessed by the great enlightened masters of history.

As the Buddha is the best teacher in the history of the world, and his teaching on dependent arising the most sublime, as his followers, we should appreciate his unique qualities. Without a clear awareness of the Buddha's extraordinary qualities, our confidence and devotion in him may too easily crumble over time. As Nagarjuna wrote in *Letter to a Friend*<sup>4</sup>,

*Within the treasury of Buddha's words  
There's none so precious, so profound as this.  
And those who see that things dependently arise  
Do see the Buddha, perfect knower of the truth.*

Therefore, as we aspire to realize the utmost truth, we must diligently strive to comprehend and practice the teaching of dependent arising, for in this world there is no greater or more important teaching.

b. Spread the teaching of dependent arising and emptiness

Although there are many specific teachings and practices in both the Vajrayana and Mahayana traditions, the true reality of all phenomena is the only one that represents the inseparable union of dependent arising and emptiness. Whether as a speaker or as a listener, one must understand how significant the meaning of dependent arising is. As some of the time, the mind of renunciation is emphasized, and at other times the mind of bodhicitta is emphasized, one may wonder, which of these is the most essential? Although differing in their points of view, each of these teachings is crucial. Nevertheless, in order to achieve liberation from samsara, one must realize the ultimate truth of dependent arising and emptiness. That is why in his *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, Lama Tsongkhapa said,

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bh%C4%81viveka>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Letter\\_to\\_a\\_Friend](http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Letter_to_a_Friend)

*Without the wisdom realizing ultimate reality,  
Even though you have generated renunciation and the mind of enlightenment,  
You cannot cut the root cause of circling.  
Therefore, attempt the method to realize dependent arising.*

Through the principle of dependent arising and emptiness, we'll come to appreciate the unparalleled quality of the Buddha's compassion and wisdom. Without having gained a definite conviction in this valuable knowledge, we may not be able to develop a genuine faith in the Buddha and believe that he is the only incomparable one in the world, who has unfailingly taught the valid knowledge of everything. It is precisely because he has declared the principle of dependent arising and emptiness that we should arouse within ourselves sincere faith in the Buddha and his teachings.

Nowadays, many people are mired in confusion and mistaken concepts. While on the surface, these people may appear to be intelligent and have a basis in theoretical knowledge, in fact, they are caught up in their own thoughts and ideas. Those who are educated in worldly philosophies are especially inflexible to change, as they never doubt their own deeply ingrained concepts and ideas. If it is our aspiration to seek to understand the most profound principle in the world, we must turn our attention to the teaching on dependent arising, and if it is our desire to convey to others the most meaningful and beneficial knowledge, then this must be the subject of our choosing.

It is quite natural that some will be receptive to this teaching, and that others will not. This has something to do with one's previous lives. Those who, in past lifetimes had deep karmic links to the teaching of emptiness or the related Mahayana teachings, will, upon hearing the teaching on dependent arising in this life, feel joyful and embrace it completely. On the other hand, those who had been in the lower realms for a long time or who have defamed the Three Jewels in their previous lifetimes, instead of having their faith aroused by it, will resent or turn away from this teaching, upon first hearing of it.

Generally speaking, there are two reasons why teaching dependent arising is advantageous. First, it can lead people to arouse an irreversible confidence in the teaching of emptiness and the law of causality. Second, it can lead people to develop an unwavering devotion towards the Buddha. Because they have generated the right faith and the right view people are naturally guided towards the path of liberation, which will certainly be followed by right practice and right conduction, and it is certain that they will progress on the path to liberation to achieve the ultimate happiness. For these reasons, it is of great benefit to spread the teaching of dependent arising and emptiness.