
Study Group – Aryadeva’s 400 Verses

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga
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As usual we will sit in a comfortable position and generate the positive motivation, ‘In order to liberate all sentient beings from suffering I need to achieve enlightenment, and for that purpose I will listen to the Dharma. Having done so may I use whatever wisdom I receive from listening to the Dharma to engage in the practice of subduing my own mind.

1.2.2. Inappropriateness of grieving only at others’ death while overlooking the disadvantages of not being free from fear of death oneself (cont.)

1.2.2.1. A brief explanation (cont.)

Qualm: It is appropriate to grieve over a loved one’s death, such as one’s son, but I need not worry about my own death.

Answer: This is not acceptable.

Why do you grieve at death [12]
On account of your son and others?
When the one that laments is a victim
How is that not reprehensible?

In order to overcome this doubt the text explains that just as suffering is experienced when others die, it will be exactly the same for oneself when one faces death. Given the fact that one has engaged in negative deeds and non-virtuous activities, there will be great suffering at the time of death. Therefore it is erroneous to think that one need not worry about one’s own death; in fact one should be concerned about one’s own death.

In terms of putting it into practice, the main point of the teaching is that we need to be concerned about our own death, and generate a fear of death now, so that it becomes an impetus for us to engage in the practice of Dharma. Then there will be no grief or suffering at the actual time of our own death. In other words, having fear and concern now about our own death serves as preparation for our own future death.

How does one prepare for one’s own death? So that we will not have to experience suffering and grief at the time of death, we can prepare by purifying the negative karmas that we have already accumulated in the past, and by further engaging in accumulating virtuous karmas. In reality we are preparing not only for our immediate death in this lifetime, but we are preparing for what happens after death.

The fear that the teachings talk about is specifically the fear of the lower realms in the future life; it is not so much the fear of the actual experience of death itself, but what will happen after death. If one has not purified negative karmas then that will be a cause to go to the lower realms, therefore that is the main fear that has to be generated. In relation to the death of others, one tries to overcome extreme grief by contemplating the fact that it is the nature of impermanence and samsara that others have to die. It is likewise with oneself; because one is in samsara and in the nature of being impermanent, one will have to experience death. Therefore one should contemplate the need to prepare for death now

As we contemplate the meaning of the teachings it becomes apparent that generating an awareness of impermanence is crucial for leading a good life. It is quite comforting, because when we contemplate and generate an awareness of impermanence, it actually brings a certain amount of calmness and peace to our mind. Maintaining an awareness of impermanence actually allows us to cope with a lot of difficulties in life, not getting too distressed or shocked when things go wrong. There are so many experiences we have during our life, the ups and downs, times when things go well and times when things don’t go well, but if we are able to maintain an awareness of impermanence one seems to be able to cope better with these ups and downs in one’s life. So this becomes the reason and necessity for gaining a good understanding, meditating and then generating the awareness of impermanence throughout our life.

1.2.2.2. The extensive explanation by answering objections

1.2.2.2.1. REFUTING THE APPROPRIATENESS OF GRIEF BECAUSE ONE’S SON WENT TO THE NEXT WORLD WITHOUT ASKING

This is subdivided into two.

1.2.2.2.1.1. The actual explanation

1.2.2.2.1.2. But for one’s own confusion implicitly he did not ask to go.

(The literal translation of the Tibetan word *te-muk*, translated here as confusion, is ignorance. So the heading means because of one’s ignorance implicitly he did not ask to go.)

1.2.2.2.1.1. The actual explanation

Qualm: Though it is improper to grieve over my own death,² it is nevertheless reasonable to grieve when the son whom one is attached to goes to the next world without asking. (So the doubt is, that because one has strong attachment for one’s own son, shouldn’t that be a good reason to grieve his loss?)

Answer: Even that is not reasonable.

If, unrequested, someone has [13]
Become your son, it is not

¹ Although not read out on the night this verse is included as a point of reference to the discussion that follows.

² Translator: I think there is a misprint here and it should read as improper to grieve about dying rather than the ‘proper’ used in the text.

*Unreasonable if he leaves
Without having asked.*

The reason why it is not reasonable or suitable to grieve over a son's death if he leaves without asking, because of the fact that the son came into this world without having been asked. Because he came without having been asked, the natural consequence is that he will go without asking to leave. If you can accept the fact that the son came into this world without have been asked for, then one should be able to accept the fact that he will leave without having asked to leave, which is a natural outcome. So there is no reason to feel astonished, or shocked and grieve about it.

The main point is to see the absurdity of the extremes where one is extremely pleased when a son is born without having been asked, and then extremely sad and grief-stricken when the son leaves without having asked. If a son came without having been asked to come, then it should be natural to accept that he will leave without asking to go. One must train one's mind to be free from the extreme emotions of being overly excited and pleased when a son is born, and being extremely sad and grief-stricken when the son dies. One needs to contemplate the nature of impermanence in which things come into existence and then cease to exist. It is the natural outcome for life and other phenomenon as well.

There is also the example given in *Yogic Deeds of the Bodhisattvas*.

1.2.2.2.1.2. But for one's own confusion, implicitly he did ask to go

Because of ignorance or confusion one does not realise it, but in fact the son implicitly did ask to go. Though it seems the son leaves without having asked, in reality you have failed to notice the many signs indicating his passing over to the next life.

*Only because of your confusion [14]
You did not notice your son's [indications].
His enthusiasm to go
Is shown by his growing old.*

A more literal translation could be willingness instead of enthusiasm. So the meaning of the verse is, the son's willingness to go to the next life is actually shown through various signs of ageing, such as the hair turning white, wrinkles starting to form on the forehead and so forth. These are signs indicating that the son is preparing to go into the next life, and the fact that these signs have not been understood, is only because of your ignorance.

1.2.2.2.2. INAPPROPRIATENESS OF BEING VERY ATTACHED TO ONE'S SON

This outline comes from the story that Geshe-la told last week. In the story the loss is illustrated with a son, but in fact it relates to a son, daughter, any relatives or loved and dear friends.

There are three sub-divisions:

1.2.2.2.2.1. Reasons for the inappropriateness of extreme attachment to one's son

1.2.2.2.2.2. Inappropriateness of attachment whether he is obedient or disobedient

1.2.2.2.2.3. Unfeasibility of a father's attachment to his son being steadfast without depending on the other factors.

The explanation of the following verses relates to the theme of attachment, which is mixed with what we call love in worldly terms. These verses are actually indicating what we call love for a son or a daughter or any loved or dear one is actually an attachment that is combined with love.

1.2.2.2.2.1. Reasons for the inappropriateness of extreme attachment to one's son

Qualm: Although my son shows willingness to go to the next life, because of my great attachment to my son it causes me grief.

Answer: Attachment to one's son is not appropriate.

*A son does not love (his father) [15]
As much as his father loves him.
People in the world go down;
Thus, a high rebirth is hard to find.*

In fact the doubt indicates its own absurdity. 'Even though I accept that my son showed all the signs of ageing and so forth preparatory to going into the next life, I still feel grief and therefore I suffer, because I have so much attachment to my son.' Using this as a reason for it being appropriate to experience suffering actually shows how strong attachment to a loved one, or son, becomes a cause for the misery and suffering that is experienced later on.

Furthermore when we relate this to our own experience it becomes quite clear that the stronger the attachment that we have to an animate or inanimate object the more suffering we experience when we have to give that object up. The amount of anguish in one's mind is dependant on how attached we are to the object, so therefore it becomes clear that if we don't wish to experience anguish or misery in our mind then we have to lessen that attachment and practise detachment.

In order to overcome the doubt about whether it is appropriate to experience great misery and suffering because of one's attachment, the answer is explained in the verse by way of explaining how one should overcome one's attachment to one's son. The attachment one has to one's son is very much one-sided: one feels he is so precious, loving and good, but in fact this same attitude is not returned from the son. The same amount of what we call love, which is in fact love mixed with attachment, is not shown to the father from the son's side, therefore the relationship is very much one-sided and unbalanced.

In relation to other kinds of relationships, when we feel a very strong attachment to someone, and when they say, 'I am very attached to another person' that initial strong attachment should become less, when we realise that the other person does not love us, or is not attached to us as much. We often do hear people complaining, 'Oh I really do love that person so much, but I don't feel any love or response from them' and that then starts to make them feel uncomfortable.

A further explanation of this verse is that continuously being attached to one's son is similar to the situation where people engage in so many inappropriate activities because of their attachment to their loved ones. They try to prove their love or attachment to the other, and engage in creating negative karma, so their attachment to the loved ones becomes a cause to fall to the lower realms. Because so many beings in the samsaric world are completely immersed in constantly creating the negative karma that makes them fall to the lower realms, it is very rare for beings to obtain a higher rebirth, let alone liberation.

Having understood that reality one should thus strive to overcome attachment and respect elders, both in lay society and towards one's Gurus and other enlightened beings. Respecting elders can refer in the worldly sense to one's parents, etc. and in the supermundane to one's teachers and enlightened beings. One must replace attachment with respect for one's loved ones and elders, and generate faith in one's teachers. This will overcome the contrary feelings of attachment and so forth.

1.2.2.2.2.2. Inappropriateness of attachment whether he is obedient or disobedient

Qualm: It is appropriate to show love and concern for the son because he is obedient and acts according to one's wishes.

Answer: That is inappropriate.

When he is disobedient [16]
No one will call him lovable.
In that case attachment is
Nothing but a transaction.

It is common amongst worldly beings that what we call love, which is strong attachment, is focused on a son or any child who is obedient and acts in accord with the parents' wishes, and that they express less love or attachment to those who are not obedient and who don't act in accordance with the parents' wishes. When we look into the situation closely this seems to be the reality of most worldly relations. If the other behaves or acts in accordance with one's wishes then one has a stronger love or attachment to that person, but as soon as they don't accord with one's wishes then the love and attachment decreases. That is, of course, inappropriate in terms of the relationship between the parents and children. It is more appropriate if the love is there regardless of whether they are obedient or not. However it seems that when we look into what we call love for a son or daughter, it is very much based on whether they are obedient or not.

Having attachment to a son or loved one who is obedient is inappropriate, as it is similar to using one's love or attachment as a trading object. If they are obedient then in return you show your love or attachment, which means if they were not obedient then you would not show your love. What we call love in the worldly sense is based on whether others are behaving in accordance to one's wishes. What we call attachment and love is very much like a transaction, something that is used like a

trading object; you are trading your love or attachment in return for their obedience.

1.2.2.2.2.3. Unfeasibility of a father's attachment to his son being steadfast without depending on the other factors

Qualm: A father's attachment to his son is steadfast, irrespective of whether he is obedient or disobedient.

The doubt that is indicted here is that attachment itself seems to be quite stable and strong, because whether the son is obedient or not there is still attachment. In other words, it may seem appropriate to have attachment to the son because attachment is actually very stable.

Answer: Attachment is actually not steadfast and stable.

Suffering caused by separation [17]
Is quickly gone from human hearts
See, too, attachment's instability,
Indicated by suffering's end.

I think the literal translation looks at attachment and its instability as indicated by the end of suffering.

The main indication here is overcoming the doubt that attachment is steadfast or stable. The suffering that is caused by separation from the object of one's attachment, in this case one's son, is actually not stable, because that attachment itself quickly passes from the hearts of human beings; attachment felt from the heart actually fades away very quickly.

The explanation of the last part of the verse is that if the bonds of attachment were not to loosen, then the result of attachment, which is suffering, would not cease. But in reality the suffering caused by attachment can be overcome and the suffering does stop. So if the suffering that is a result of attachment ceases, then the causes of the suffering, which is attachment, must also cease. Therefore attachment is not stable.

The main point here is that since suffering is a result of attachment, and suffering can be overcome, then it is natural that the cause of that suffering, which is attachment, can also cease. To clarify this point there is an analogy given in the commentary which Geshe-la feels would be good to relate.

Once a king was crossing the river with some ministers, and at a certain point some sort of evil spirit caused havoc and capsized the boat. One of the ministers had his son with him and fearing that everyone including his son might die, he gave himself up to the spirit as a token to let the others go. He entrusted his son to the king, asking the king to look after his son and take care of his wellbeing.

When the king and the others reached the opposite shore safely, the son initially felt great grief on account of his father's death. However the king took great care of the late minister's son looking after him well, and he grew up to be very strong and intelligent lad. Eventually, the son not only overcame his grief over his father's death, but in fact began to see it almost as an advantage. It was because of his father's death that he was put into the king's care, which meant he received a better education,

and everything worked out very well for him. So what was once a loss later turned into an advantage.

We may have similar cases here in Australia, when rich parents pass away then the children, who may have not been doing so well financially, receive wealth as an inheritance. They might initially feel some grief, but then later may feel happy that they inherited quite a lot of wealth. It is possible that people think in that way.

1.2.2.2.3. INAPPROPRIATENESS OF GRIEVING OVER A DEAD PERSON (IN THIS CASE A SON) IN FRONT OF OTHER PEOPLE

What this sub-division indicates is that in some cultures, and it might also be the same here in the west, when a very close member of the family dies (either one's spouse or one's parents) then for a certain period of time after their death the family have to wear certain clothing to indicate their grief. Sometimes in Tibet they would have to put their hair in a certain position as an indication that someone has died in the family, and wear a certain kind of clothing. This is something that is practised in many cultures to conform to worldly customs and traditions.

Qualm: It is inappropriate to grieve a loved one's death, such as one's sons, but, 'In order to conform with worldly tradition and so forth I still have to indicate that I am grieving and that should be appropriate'.

Answer: It is inappropriate.

Knowing it is of no benefit, [18]
Still you have injured yourself.
Your make yourself a hypocrite,
Which also is improper.

The qualm that is raised is that though it is inappropriate to grieve in one's heart over a dead son or any other relative, for the sake of convention and to conform with worldly views, one must beat one's heart and so forth. In some cultures like in Tibet and other eastern cultures when someone dies the surviving close relatives act quite frantically as if they have gone a bit mad, pulling their hair, beating on their chests and wailing loudly, all of which is to be a sign that they are really grieving a lot. What I have seen here at funerals, is people walking very slow and solemn, some are held by their arms on either side and need support just to walk.

The reason why many follow that custom over a long time is just to conform to the tradition, because if one was not to follow that tradition one may be seen as being insensitive or heartless. So just to conform with the views of others, one has to show the appearance of being really sad and so forth, when one may not really be feeling it inside.

The explanation in the verse uses an analogy of the extreme case when the mourners start pulling out their hair and beating their chest and wearing very solemn uncomfortable clothes, in some cases not eating for many days because of their grieving. When these sorts of traditions or customs are followed to that extreme the person who is doing so would actually know inside themselves that this is not really comfortable. They may think, 'If I could get away with not having to do this, I would rather do that'. They actually feel uncomfortable

with the custom, but still they go ahead and follow it. That is actually being hypocritical and they are deceiving themselves, because inside they know it is not comfortable, or useful, but still they outwardly go through all of that grieving process. In an extreme case it is putting up with a lot of suffering without really wanting or needing it, just to conform with the views of others. That is being like a hypocrite.

In Tibetan hypocrisy is called *yo-gyu*, which is one of the four wrong livelihoods - portraying a quality when in fact there is no quality within oneself. That is normally what we call hypocrisy. This case is similar to showing false qualities, because one is following a tradition and custom with which one does not feel really comfortable, just for the sake of pleasing others and in order not be blamed or criticised by them. Putting up with all of this is similar to pretending to have qualities one doesn't have, so in that sense it is hypocrisy.

Verses from *Yogic Deeds of Bodhisattvas* used with permission of Snow Lion Publications.

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