
Study Group – Aryadeva’s 400 Verses

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual it would be good to sit in an upright, comfortable position and generate a positive motivation such as, ‘In order to liberate all sentient beings from all suffering I need to attain the ultimate state of enlightenment, so therefore I will listen to the teachings as a means of receiving the methods for practising’.

1.1.2.1.2. CONSIDERING HOW SUFFERING FOLLOWS ONE THOUGH, ONE WANTS PLEASURE AND DOES NOT WANT SUFFERING (CONT)

It is really important to contemplate the meaning of what was explained under this heading, such as the fact that even though we wish for happiness we do not experience happiness, and even though we do not wish for suffering that is what we do experience, and how suffering follows us just as our shadow does. Having considered all these facts, when we look into our own experience in life we definitely see that whatever we do, suffering always follows. Having contemplated in such a way should help us to develop renunciation.

We should definitely put some effort into thinking about why this is so. Why is it that even though we wish for happiness and do not wish for suffering we experience suffering over and over again? Why is it that suffering follows us just like our shadow follows us? It is very important that we think about these questions over and over again, so that we really start to feel the reality of these facts and why they are so.

1.1.2.2. Considering how suffering comes easily without need of great effort

This is further sub-divided into two.

1.1.2.2.1. If one wishes for rare pleasure it is appropriate to fear plentiful suffering

1.1.2.2.2. Valuing the body out of attachment is like valuing a foe or an enemy.

1.1.2.2.1. IF ONE WISHES FOR RARE PLEASURE IT IS APPROPRIATE TO FEAR PLENTIFUL SUFFERING

*Suffering is found at will, [30]
But what pleasure is there at will?
Why do you value the rare
But do not fear the plentiful?*

‘Suffering is found at will’ indicates that suffering comes about very easily and pleasure does not. ‘What pleasure is there at will’ indicates that even though one wishes for pleasure it does not come about at will, it is neither plentiful nor bountiful, and it does not come about as easily as suffering.

An analogy given in the commentary is that in the daytime when there is very strong heat it is very rare to

feel coolness. That is how rare the experience of pleasure is. When we relate the meaning of this verse to our own experience we can definitely find that it is a fact that even though we wish for happiness it is rare for us to experience real happiness. At a physical level it is very rare that we have complete physical well-being. Even though we may feel that things are healthy we are bound to feel some kind of physical discomfort at a some point. In fact in our daily life during the course of even one day we find that we experience much more physical discomfort than we do well-being. Of course what we wish for is well-being, for things to go well, and to feel comfortable and pleasure and happiness. But the reality is that we end up experiencing much more physical discomfort and suffering than we do pleasure. When we contemplate on the earlier points in the teaching we can really begin to realise that the reason for this is because we have a contaminated body. It is because of the nature of our body, which is that it is a contaminated body, that we experience suffering so readily. Contemplating in this way should help our mind to further develop a sense of renunciation.

The main points that one needs to understand from the explanation of the teaching is the means of overcoming the erroneous or wrong view that we have that our bodies are pleasurable objects. As a result of that view we have an attachment to our bodies, because we see them as being pleasurable. But that is an erroneous view and the reality is that the body is contaminated and is in the nature of suffering. That understanding, however, does not come about easily. It is relatively easy to relate and understand the suffering of suffering, which is the first type of suffering. That suffering is actually called pain, and when we experience great pain related to our body then that is something which we can immediately identify with, and understand. But that does not give a very deep sense of understanding of how the body is a contaminated body.

We experience some pain in relation to the body but then we go back to experiencing some pleasure and forget about the reality of the body as being contaminated. When we go further into looking into the very reality of the body, and how the very nature of the body is actually in the nature of suffering, then that understanding should develop a deeper sense of wishing to renounce the body. When we develop a deeper sense of renunciation, wanting to abandon this body, then the wish to be liberated will become stronger. That is what we call the aspiration to achieve liberation. So in that sense the understanding of how to develop renunciation becomes much deeper and more profound.

Once we develop a strong sense of renunciation in relation to ourselves, that deeper understanding becomes an impetus to develop what we call love and compassion towards other beings. By understanding how other beings also have the same reality of having a contaminated body, and how their suffering is much deeper, the understanding of love and compassion becomes much more profound. When we consider how others cherish such a contaminated body that is actually

only a source of more suffering, isn't that what we call a real object of compassion?

A more obvious example or analogy of how we can develop love and compassion towards others is if we see someone who is very ill, or suffering from an illness, and who does not consult a doctor and just bears that illness. If they could be cured by consulting a doctor yet they do not consult a doctor and just bear that illness, then we would think that was very foolish wouldn't we? We would think, 'How foolish not to cure themselves from an illness that can be cured? How foolish to bear such a suffering unnecessarily?'. It is similar to not wishing to be liberated from our contaminated body.

Returning to the analogy again, if an illness, no matter how painful or how much suffering it causes, can be cured by consulting a skilled doctor, then the wisest thing for any one would be to consult a doctor and follow the prescribed treatment. That is exactly the reality of our own case, and we are extremely fortunate to have the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha is like a skilled doctor in that he prescribes the exact methods and techniques for overcoming the source of our suffering, our contaminated bodies and their causes. Therefore it would be wise for us to actually follow that advice as much as we can.

'Why do you value the rare but do not fear the plentiful?' Here the proper noun 'you' refers to worldly or ordinary beings, so the verse asks why do you ordinary beings value the rare, meaning the pleasurable experience, but do not fear the plentiful, which refers to the suffering.

'Why do you not fear the plentiful?' indicates that one should take that into consideration. The commentary reads, 'If you value rare and desired pleasure, it is appropriate to feel aversion for undesirable and plentiful suffering.' The main point here is that we value pleasure to the point of doing anything possible to obtain it, spending so much time and energy trying experience that contaminated pleasure, whereas if suffering comes we almost ignore it. We just try to deal with the suffering and do not put any effort into trying to abandon the causes for that suffering. The main point here is that we put so much time and energy into experiencing some temporary and fleeting pleasure, while not wanting any suffering. So why don't we spend more time and energy in engaging in the practice of abandoning the causes for our own suffering?

1.1.2.2.2. VALUING THE BODY OUT OF ATTACHMENT IS LIKE VALUING A FOE

Here valuing can also connote attachment, so having attachment to the body is like having attachment to a foe.

A comfortable body [31]
Is a container of suffering.
Thus valuing the body and
Valuing a foe both seem alike.

This very body that we have is what we consider a comfortable body, but in reality it is like a container of suffering. The analogy given is that the body is so fragile, with delicate skin like the skin of a baby so that even the prick of a small thorn causes suffering. In that sense it is

like a container of suffering because even a small thorn prick will cause so much suffering to the body.

Even though we consider the body a comfortable body, and we nourish and feed it and put so much time and energy into its upkeep, trying to make the body feel comfortable and at ease, the reality is that it is like a container of suffering where even a small discomfort can cause unease. That is what is to be contemplated.

Therefore since the reality is that our body is like a container of suffering, meaning that it is a condition for us to experience so much suffering, cherishing such a body is similar to cherishing a foe or an enemy.

One of the main points made in this verse is that no matter how much the body is nourished and cared for it still produces only suffering. The analogy that is given in the commentary relates to a story where a king saw a man asleep on the wooden planks of a chariot in the noon-day heat. The king felt sorry for this person so he provided him with very nice clothing and bedding, but as the person got quite used to that nice comfortable bed he was not even able to bear a small mustard seed lying in the bed. Where he had once been able to sleep on a bare chariot without any problem, he had become so spoilt with such a comfortable bed that he could not even bear the unease of a mustard seed in his bed. This analogy shows how when we think that we are going to take care of this body and nourish it and cherish it to make it feel comfortable, in fact it just becomes a further source for the experience of more suffering. Because it is a contaminated body even what we call very small suffering could become quite unbearable if we keep cherishing this body.

1.1.2.3. Considering how the body does not transcend its suffering nature

The body, however long one spends, [32]
Will not in itself become pleasurable.
To say its nature can be overruled
By other factors is improper.

What this verse relates is that no matter how much care is given to such a body with comforts and so forth, and no matter how long a time one spends doing that, it will not itself become pleasurable, and the reason is because the nature of the body is suffering.

To explain the verse further, it would be improper to consider that even though the body is in the nature of suffering, that nature can be overcome by other external factors. It is not appropriate to think that the body's very nature of suffering could be overcome by outside factors.

The analogy that is given in the commentary to illustrate this is that no matter how much a mother crow nurtures a cuckoo fledgling, the fledgling will always be a cuckoo and never a crow. A cuckoo fledgling will never turn into a crow no matter how long the mother crow nourishes it or looks after it. Asserting that the body by nature is pleasurable is like that. Pampering our body with clothing and making it feel pleasurable from other external sources and conditions will never change the fact that the body is by its very nature in the nature of suffering. In other words, pampering and clothing and

nourishing the body will never change the fact of its suffering state; it will not change the reality that it will experience suffering.

This is actually quite easy to understand, but we should not leave it at that thinking, 'Oh this makes a lot of sense and it's easy to understand'. We have to try to apply it to our practice; we have to try to really contemplate this fact, and the more we contemplate it the more it becomes a real reality for ourselves, and the stronger our deep sense of renunciation will become. The main thing is that not trusting such a contaminated body will develop our sense of renunciation, and then we can progress slowly in our practice. It helps our mind. Therefore it is important to bring our mind inward into this topic, meaning relating it to ourselves, our experience and really contemplating and using it in our meditation.

1.1.2.4. Considering how suffering causes harm

Doubt: The body's nature cannot be suffering, for those who are wealthy, such as kings with many attendants have nothing but pleasurable feelings from birth to death.

This heading deals with a particular doubt which may arise in our mind. In the earlier verses the emphasis was on how the body is a contaminated body, meaning that it is in the nature of suffering, which indicates that whoever has a contaminated body will be under the influence of suffering. However the doubt that may arise in the mind is that there are those who seem to experience great pleasure such as great kings or rich people and so forth. They have everything at their disposal and it may seem that they experience so much pleasure. Because they are very influential they have many people around them doing things for them, they have money to spend and they seem to be able to obtain whatever object they desire. So we may think, 'Oh they are really well-off, and they don't have to go through any difficulties or suffering'. Thinking in that way, however, is of course incorrect. What is being mentioned in the text is as long as they do not escape the contaminated body, which is in the nature of suffering, they will definitely experience mental suffering as well. This is a very important point being made in the teachings for us to really meditate on again and again. It also helps to further develop our compassion for beings who seem to be well off, rich and influential, and understand that they also go through sufferings.

The next verse serves as an answer to the doubt, which is quite easy to understand literally.

*The high have mental suffering; [33]
For the common it comes from the body.
Day by day, both kinds of suffering
Overwhelm people in the world.*

First of all, the sufferings of kings and other great beings may not be obvious at a physical level because they have so much material wealth at their disposal. They may appear to have quite a comfortable life but that is mainly on the physical level. On the mental level they have a great fear of a decline of their own prosperity, they fear that they may lose their wealth or that they may not be able to maintain their wealth. They suffer from the fear of

others taking away their wealth and so forth, and also experience unbearable suffering over the prosperity of others, which comes out of jealousy. It is not sufficient that they have wealth themselves - when they see other's wealth, it brings suffering to their mind, because they are not able to bear seeing other's experiencing the same amount of wealth. As it indicates here, so much mental suffering is experienced by beings who have high status and great wealth.

For common people who lack the necessities of life the experience of suffering arises from the body. Because they lack sufficient necessities to keep the physical body comfortable, such as protection from heat and cold and hunger, ordinary beings experience suffering more on a physical level.

In such a way rich and poor alike are overwhelmed by mental and physical sufferings on a daily basis.

The Seventh Dalai Lama, Kelsang Gyatso, mentioned in one of his texts that, 'No matter who it may be, what their status, or where they come from, all beings are alike in having to experience so much suffering'. This statement is very true.

1.1.2.5. Considering how very powerful pain or suffering is

Doubt: Though these two kinds of suffering exist, one does not notice them, because great pleasure makes them insignificant.

Answer:

*Pleasure is governed by thoughts; [34]
Thoughts are governed by pain.
Thus there is nothing anywhere
More powerful than pain.*

The thought may arise, 'Even though there is harm to the body, it can still be overcome by the pleasure, so it is appropriate to consider what we call pleasure as being something desirable'. The answer is that it is not appropriate.

To further explain the doubt, if one thinks, 'Yes I can accept that there are both physical and mental sufferings, but experiencing great pleasure can overcome both sufferings so there is no need to consider the body as being in the nature of suffering'. The answer is that this is not the case, as it is not possible for pleasure to completely overcome our sufferings.

When we relate this doubt to our own experience we find that it's true that we often feel, 'Oh yes I have a lot of suffering and it is difficult, but there is always some way to get out of it. If I am sick I can go to the doctor, or if I am unhappy I can do something about it'. So we always feel that we have a solution, which usually consists of trying to gain some temporary pleasure to overcome the suffering. We think that as long as we have that temporary solution to overcome our suffering then things should be fine, and it is that illusion which keeps us going in samsara. The fact is, as mentioned here, pleasure cannot really overcome suffering, because suffering is more powerful.

As an answer to this doubt the explanation in the verse is

that the reason why pleasure cannot overcome real suffering is because pleasure is nothing much more than a thought. What we call pleasure is actually governed by our thoughts, meaning that pleasure is actually a conceptual thought. To further explain this point, the analogy given is of a benefactor who engages in a generous act of giving something to others. That act of giving can produce a certain amount of comfort in the mind feeling, 'I have done something good', and a certain amount of happiness is felt from that. However in that elated state of mind the thought arises, 'Oh but if I continue to engage in this generous act my resources and wealth might come to an end'. When that thought arises the earlier thoughts of happiness and feeling quite good about one's generous act are completely overridden by the fear of losing one's wealth, and that brings suffering to the mind.

This shows very clearly what we call pleasure and suffering are just mental conceptual attitudes that we have in the mind. Therefore, even when we engage in an act that brings us pleasure it can so easily be overcome by suffering, just by a change of attitude. Feelings are not really stable, because they are just dependent upon conceptual states of mind. Therefore what we call 'pleasurable' or 'comfortable' feelings are not really stable, but are governed by our conceptual thoughts, which in turn are governed by the painful attitudes of mind.

As the commentary further explains, 'The arising and the cessation of pleasure are governed by thoughts, and since pleasurable thoughts are destroyed by pain, they are governed by pain. Therefore nowhere in the world is there pleasure more powerful than pain'.

As we have mentioned before it is important to contemplate these points made in the teaching.

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Edited Version*

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