
Study Group – Aryadeva’s 400 Verses

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual we will generate a positive motivation for receiving the teachings, such as thinking, ‘By listening to the teachings, may I be able to put them into practice so that I can create the causes to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, in order to alleviate their suffering’.

1.1.3.4. Ordinary people think of the feeling of satisfaction from alleviated pain as real pleasure

Assertion: ‘Pleasure caused by the alleviation of pain does exist’.

Answer:

Thinking the alleviation [46]
Of pain is pleasure
Is like someone who feels delight
Vomiting into a gold pot

The explanation of the verse is given in the following analogy: if a rich man vomits into a gold pot and sees his servant vomit into a clay pot, whether rich or lowly the actual unpleasant sensation of vomiting is the same. In reality, while there is no difference in the actual unpleasant feeling of vomiting (for both a rich person vomiting into a gold pot or a lowly servant person vomiting into a normal clay pot), the rich person may have the mistaken feeling of satisfaction, knowing that he is vomiting into a gold pot. That sort of pompous feeling may arise in the mind of a rich person.

In our circumstances this analogy is used to show how ordinary beings feel a pleasant sensation when a type of suffering, such as moving from extreme heat or extreme cold to the opposite, is alleviated. The immediate sensation is one of pleasure. However, any pleasurable feeling that we experience is, in reality, in the nature of suffering. When we experience different pleasures in our samsaric world, we have a sense of joy or pride, just like the rich person has some sort of pride in vomiting into a gold pot. In reality, the rich person is actually experiencing discomfort and unease, but, because of a notion that he is vomiting into a gold pot he may develop some pride. Likewise ordinary beings develop a sense of pride and joy in the pleasures they experience, when in reality they are actually suffering.

Yet another example is given of how suffering is actually experienced as a satisfaction or pleasure. If someone, who is experiencing unease or pain from being out in the sun, moves out of the scorching sun and into the shade, that first moment of coolness when they move into the shade is experienced as pleasure, and that particular pleasure is called a pleasure of alleviated pain. In fact it is not real pleasure, as it is just a removal of pain, but it is

experienced as pleasure because the earlier extreme, unpleasant sensation of feeling too hot has been removed.

Although the alleviation of the suffering of extreme heat, achieved by moving into the shade, is experienced as being pleasure, it is, in reality, not real pleasure; in fact, it is in the nature of suffering. That is because from that first moment of coolness the suffering of cold begins. The suffering of cold is experienced as a pleasure only because the unpleasant feeling of heat has been diminished. Actually, if that person remains in the shade for too long, and the experience of cold increases it too will turn into the unpleasant sensation of being too cold.

So the suffering of cold is actually there from the very beginning, as soon as the person steps into the shade, but it is not experienced as a suffering yet. So as the text mentions: ‘Thus there is no pleasurable sensation entirely free from discomfort’. All pleasurable sensations are actually based on a discomfort or suffering. As the text further mentions: ‘Since ordinary people’s pain does not require even a weak pleasurable feeling as a basis in relation to which it is established, it is said that ordinary people have real suffering but no real pleasure’.

When we look into reality this is actually very true. For any pleasurable experience that we have, there seems to be a basis of suffering; however experiencing suffering does not have to be based on an initial experience of pleasure. Every pleasurable feeling is based on a subtle suffering, which will then be experienced as extreme suffering later on. For those reasons it is explained that for ordinary beings there is no real pleasure, only real suffering. Of course for Arya (noble) beings, there is the absence of suffering and real pleasure.

It is however incorrect to assert that pleasure does not exist nominally or relatively, for to deny that would be to deny the fact that pleasure exists at all. This can be understood with the analogy that when blue and yellow are juxtaposed, or placed side-by-side, then the perception that sees blue sees it as blue and not as yellow, and the perception that sees yellow sees it as yellow and not as blue. That is because blue is nominally existent as blue, and yellow is nominally existent as yellow, and thus they have been perceived correctly.

If, however, you place something that is considered long beside another longer object, then you would see the first long object as being short. Therefore something that is first asserted as being long can later be perceived as being short. What this analogy indicates, is that what we perceive as being pleasure, is in fact only perceived as a pleasure because it is the moment of absence of an earlier intense suffering. But even though it is perceived as being pleasurable, in reality it actually has suffering in its nature. When we think about the pleasure and suffering that we experience, and actually look into how we experience it, then it becomes clear to our mind that what we call pleasure is not a real pleasure at all, as it obviously turns into a suffering later. The difference between pleasure and suffering is only in how we

interpret it, like in the analogy of the long and short objects.

1.1.3.5. Showing other reasons why there is no real pleasure

This has two sub-divisions.

1.1.3.5.1. Real pleasure's existence is not established by seeing slight incipient pain stop intense pain.

1.1.3.5.2. Common beings do not have pleasure that can effectively override pain.

1.1.3.5.1. REAL PLEASURE'S EXISTENCE IS NOT ESTABLISHED BY SEEING SLIGHT INCIPIENT PAIN STOP INTENSE PAIN

Assertion: 'Pleasure does exist because when one moves a load from one shoulder to the other, a sense of pleasure arises. If there was no pleasure, one would not move it.'

Answer:

*By beginning it stops the produced – [47]
How can pain that begins be pleasure?
It seems the Subduer therefore said
Both birth and cessation are suffering.*

The meaning of the verse is as described in the commentary:

When the discomfort of carrying a load on the right shoulder for a long time becomes intense and one moves it on to the left one, it is merely that a slight pain which is beginning stops the intense pain already produced...

This means that when one moves a heavy load from one shoulder to the other, the intense pain felt on the shoulder on which the load was first carried decreases. When you move the load to the other shoulder, it is initially experienced as a sensation of relief and pleasure. However the pain of being too heavy has already begun on the shoulder where the load has been moved onto. The discomfort or pain actually begins from the moment the load is placed on the other shoulder. Therefore as it says in the text: 'How can there be pleasure while a new and different pain is beginning [on one shoulder] or while intense pain is stopping [on the other shoulder?]'.

Although it is viewed as pleasure because pain is stopped or reduced, in fact a new pain is already starting. So in reality you cannot say that it is real pleasure, as it is, in fact, the beginning of another suffering. The main point is that even though it may be a fact that a particular type of suffering is ceasing, another type of suffering is starting. So one cannot use that as an assertion to say that there is real pleasure. Similarly:

Although when one takes birth some forms of suffering stop, it is inappropriate to regard that as pleasure.

Even though some types of sufferings stop when birth takes place, it is the beginning of a whole other cycle of more suffering. So in fact it is not real pleasure.

In the *Sutra of Advice to Katyayana* the Buddha mentions:

When Katyayana's [son] is born, only suffering is born.

Also when he ceases, only suffering ceases.

This is further explained in the *Sutra on Nanda Entering the Womb*. However the point being made here is that there is no real pleasure when a being is born. The meaning here seems to be that when a being is born, it is born amidst suffering (for the being itself, the mother who is giving birth and so forth), while during life there is suffering, and even at the very end when one experiences death, that is also experienced amidst suffering. That seems to be the main point.

Another point to be understood here is that when it is asserted that there is real suffering but no real pleasure, the 'real' should not be taken as being real in the sense of truly existent, because in that case, of course, both suffering and pleasure don't truly exist. That is not what is being negated here. Neither pleasure nor suffering exist truly or inherently. Here when it is talking about 'real', it is nominally real, in the sense of the experience of suffering and pleasure.

1.1.3.5.2. COMMON BEINGS DO NOT HAVE PLEASURE THAT CAN EFFECTIVELY OVERRIDE PAIN.

Assertion or doubt: 'Real suffering exists but is not apparent because pleasure conceals it'.

Answer:

*If common beings do not see suffering [48]
Because pleasure disguises it,
Why is there no pleasure
Which obscures suffering?*

The answer to this assertion or doubt is:

If real suffering exists but common beings do not notice it because pleasurable feelings disguise it, there should be pleasure which is stronger than suffering. Why is there no pleasure that can obscure suffering? Because ordinary people do not have real pleasure.

What it seems to assert here, is that there is a real pleasure which conceals suffering. If someone were to believe that real pleasure does exist because it is the pleasure which conceals suffering, then as an answer to that, the text mentions that in fact there is no real pleasure which conceals suffering. What pleasure is there that could actually conceal suffering?

The analogy that is given in the commentary is:

A man pursued by an elephant falls into an old well. He stops his fall halfway down by catching hold of some couch-grass at whose root a rat is gnawing. Below a large snake lies in wait and from the sides pythons writhe toward him. Meanwhile he is absorbed in tasting the honey which drips from above and thinks of that as pleasure.

The meaning of this analogy is:

When childish beings in cyclic existence, pursued by the elephant of death, fall into the well of old age, they stop their fall half way by catching hold of the couch-grass root of virtuous paths of action. Below the snake of bad rebirths lies in wait and pythons of disturbing emotions writhe toward them from all sides. While the rat of maturation is gnawing at the couch-grass root of life, they are

absorbed in tasting the honeyed drops of craving for attractive objects, but as an analogy, there is only suffering and not even the slightest real pleasure.

Visualise that you are the person who falls down a well, and halfway down you are able to catch hold of a piece of grass. That grass, of course, is not very strong and on top of that, there is a rat gnawing at the roots, so at any moment, the grass could snap and you could fall further down the well, at the bottom of which there is a huge snake opening its mouth ready to consume you; and at the side of the well there are other snakes about to attack you. If, in this critical situation with fear and dread all around, you opened your mouth and allowed some drips of honey to fall onto your tongue and were completely engrossed in that pleasure, that would be quite an absurd situation to be in. To enjoy that honey when, in fact, there is fear all around you is said to be the situation of ordinary beings in samsara.

To explain this analogy:

- The person who is being chased by the wild elephant relates to 'childish beings in cyclic existence, pursued by the elephant of death'. Beings in cyclic existence cannot escape death.
- In 'fall into the well of old age' the well is an analogy for old age.
- Stopping half way down the well is the situation where you are half-way towards death.
- Holding onto the grass is analogous to the ten virtuous deeds that we engage in, in whatever way we can.
- When we are experiencing the pleasures of this life, we are actually using up the merit that we have accumulated through the ten virtuous deeds.
- The rat gnawing at the root of the grass, making it snap at any moment, is like the situation where we are using up our good karma or the good merit accumulated by the ten virtuous deeds in our life. It is the karma that we have created in the past that is holding us up right now, but it is being exhausted.

Below the snake of bad rebirths lies in wait and pythons of disturbing emotions writhe toward them from all sides. While the rat of maturation is gnawing at the couch-grass root of life, they are absorbed in tasting the honeyed drops of craving for attractive objects...

When we think about the reality of our situation, it is very true that we are half-way through our life (or even further), and what keeps us going right now is the result of the ten virtuous deeds that we have accumulated in the past. But at any given moment, when that merit is exhausted, we will experience death. Given the fact that we have created a lot of negative karmas, we could fall down into the lower realms at any time. Therefore at this stage in our life, it is very important for us to recollect our own situation and be very, very grateful and thankful that we have had opportunity to accumulate the virtue in the past that sustains us right now. While we are

sustained right now, we should use every means possible to create more merit, and more virtue, so that we can save ourselves from falling into the pit of the lower realms in future lives, and to sustain us in those future lives. That is something to think about over and over again

1.2. The Teacher therefore spoke of meditating on the body as suffering

Assertion or doubt: If the body's nature were suffering, it would be unnecessary for the Teacher [Buddha] to say that the body is suffering, just as there is no need to point out that the sun is hot.

Answer:

*Common beings must be told, "You are not [49]
Free from attachment to suffering."
Certainly Tathagatas therefore have said
This is the worst confusion of all.*

The answer to this assertion is that there is no such fault, for although the body's nature is suffering, one does not realise it because of confusion or ignorance; and thinking of it as pleasurable one circles in the cyclic existence. As the verse indicates, what the Buddha has mentioned is that by mistaking suffering for pleasure, you are not free from attachment. Therefore common or ordinary beings need to be told this. Because of their ignorance, even suffering is seen as being pleasurable, therefore attachment to the objects that give pleasure develops. But in fact it is only due to confusion or ignorance that they are perceived in that way. Therefore it is necessary to be taught about ignorance; in fact there is a great need for the Tathagata to have proclaimed this. As the Tathagata has further said:

'Sister, the foremost of all obstructions is ignorance'. In other words, he has said that confusing real suffering with pleasure is the worst confusion [or ignorance] of all.

The main point made here is that the confusion which regards real suffering as pleasure is the worst kind of confusion of all. It is that confusion which leads one into being born into cyclic existence, over and over again. Therefore we need to know about suffering to emphasise that point, and there is great reason why the Buddha had taught that, which is to remove the confusion.

1.3. How to meditate on the pervasive suffering of conditioning

Amongst the sufferings all-pervasive suffering is said to be the most difficult to identify. All-pervasive suffering has different interpretations. 'All pervasive' can mean suffering pervading from the very peak of the cycle of existence in the god realms down to the hell realms. Another interpretation of pervasive suffering is that it pervades throughout every life – from the past life, into this one, and from this into the next life, suffering pervading through all lives. In this way, one can understand one's own contaminated body to be the basis of all pervasive suffering.

Therefore our own contaminated body is an example of pervasive suffering. At any time during the day or

during our life, there are times when without any particular obvious reason we may feel a sudden unpleasant state of mind. Without any apparent reason some sort of uncomfortable unease in our mind may come up. That is said to be proof of how our mind is intertwined with the contaminated aggregates, which is pervasive suffering. Pervasive suffering is said to be a very subtle type of suffering that is hard for us to identify, and as such it becomes one of the main obstacles to developing renunciation. It is said that of all the sufferings, all pervasive suffering is the hardest to recognise and identify.

Within the sensations it is hard to identify pleasurable sensation as being a suffering. An analogy given by the great master Vasubandhu is that although it would be difficult for us to feel a very small thin thread in our hand, it would be felt right away if it were to enter into the eye. All-pervasive suffering is similar: it is hard to identify, but it definitely harms. There will be further explanation about the contaminated aggregates and all-pervasive suffering in the next class.

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Edited Version*

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