
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 appropriate physical posture and make sure that the mind is not distracted, by distancing oneself from any distractions. Set your mind by keeping it focused on the teachings to be received, then generate a motivation such as, 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve the ultimate state of enlightenment. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice as best as I can'.

1.2.3.1.1.2. If ordinary people ever perceived it like this, they would immediately faint

*If childish people ever perceived
The suffering of cyclic existence,
At that moment both their mind
[And body] would completely fail.* 165

As the commentary explains:

If childish people ever directly perceived the suffering of cyclic existence as do the Exalted, their mind or heart and body would both completely fail...

Here 'Exalted' refers to the *arya bodhisattvas* who perceive the true nature of worldly existence - the environment and the beings who live within that environment - as a state of complete suffering and misery. That is because *aryas* directly perceive the actual nature of existence and reality. Thus when we refer to the truth, it is the *arya* view of truth, and when we talk about the four noble truths, each one is called a noble truth because it is a truth as seen by the noble or *arya* beings.

This shows that when ordinary beings perceive existence and phenomena they perceive it with a faulty state of mind. For ordinary beings things appear as being contrary to how they actually exist, like an illusion.

As the commentary explains, if childish people were ever to directly perceive the suffering of cyclic existence in the same way as *arya* noble beings, then their mind (or heart) and body would both completely fail. Ordinary beings would not be able to bear seeing cyclic existence in its entirety with all its sufferings.

And, as the commentary further explains:

...they continue as if they were happy.

What this is indicating is that ordinary beings remain happy in their state of denial, because they fail to see the actual reality of cyclic existence, or *samsara*, and because of their contrived way of perceiving *samsara* as being a pleasurable state.

This point was also explained in another text by Chandrakirti. He said that if ordinary beings were to perceive the reality of cyclic existence and thus understand its suffering nature, then that would instil such a great fear in their mind that there would be no choice but to develop a strong determination to be free

from cyclic existence. Thus they would be able to develop a strong determination to become entirely free from cyclic existence by achieving liberation. In this way the process of developing the determination to be free can be clearly understood.

These points have been explained previously, however it is worthwhile refreshing them. For as long as one does not realise the sufferings of cyclic existence and generate a fear of its pitfalls, one will not develop the determination to be free from that situation. It is similar to a prisoner who sees the confinement and sufferings of prison as an undesirable state to be in. The more they reflect on that, the stronger their determination to be free from prison will be. If ordinary beings in cyclic existence do not develop fear and clearly see the disadvantages, and in particular the sufferings, of cyclic existence they will not develop the determination to free themselves from it. Conversely, the stronger the fear that is generated in one's mind the stronger the determination to be free from it.

The analogy in the commentary is that

It is like *Indrabala*, who sacrificed his life out of desire to be chief...

Indrabala sacrificed his life to be a chief but then that became a cause to be reborn again as a chief.

1.2.3.1.2. RARITY OF GOING FROM HAPPINESS TO HAPPINESS

This will be clarified in detail later. Here, happiness refers to the happy state of being continually reborn in higher states, which is very rare.

This heading is subdivided into two

1.2.3.1.2.1. The actual meaning

1.2.3.1.2.2. Repudiating attachment to higher rebirths attained through abstaining from ill deeds

1.2.3.1.2.1. The actual meaning

*People without pride are rare,
And the proud have no compassion.
Thus it is said to be very rare
To go from light to light.* 166

This verse serves as an explanation to the normal way of thinking which is explained in the statement:

Though belonging to the best class and having the finest possession is known as happiness...

This refers to the worldly circumstances of having riches, the finest resources and a good sound body, which are considered as a happy state. The general assumption is that those who have riches or power or high status, such as kings or other leaders, must be very happy, as everything is going well for them. When a poor person looks upon a rich person they have the natural assumption that the rich, who have everything, must be the happiest people. However as the commentary explains:

...aversion even towards that is appropriate.

People of good caste and so forth who are not inflated with pride are rare.

What this indicates is that there are numberless beings who have a good sound body, all the resources, and who have knowledge and so forth, but it is very rare to find

amongst them those who do not have pride in their riches, high status and knowledge. This explanation is giving us very sound advice, so it is good to pay attention and really try to understand the main points.

The reason why such beings have pride is explained in the next few lines:

Moreover, since those who are conceited think themselves best and out of envy want to crush their equals and betters, they lack compassion.

Those who have riches, resources, knowledge and so forth generate a strong sense of pride and, because of their conceit in thinking that they have everything and are the best, they look down upon those who are inferior to themselves; they also develop a strong sense of competition with those they regard as equals; and they develop a sense of envy and jealousy towards those who are better than themselves. So their pride utterly poisons their mind and they lack any sense of compassion. The sutra called *Topics Of Instruction* explains that because they lack compassion it is very rare for such beings to go from light to light. When the sutra says 'go from light to light' this refers to being reborn from one higher rebirth into the another higher rebirth, and this is rare for beings who are filled with pride.

There is a direct relationship between possessing pride and conceit and a lack of compassion, and this is an obstacle to achieving higher rebirths. As explained earlier, when any being develops a strong sense of pride because of their status, or their wealth, or their knowledge, then due to that pride they develop a sense of superiority. They look down on those beings who are inferior wishing to crush them; they develop a sense of competitiveness towards those who are equal, and a sense of envy and jealousy towards those who are superior to them.

We can see how with an attitude of wanting to crush others there is definitely a sense of wishing them harm, and thus there is a lack of compassion. With equals, a sense of competitiveness means that you want to be better and will do whatever is necessary in order to compete with them. For this purpose one performs actions and deeds that harm them. Developing a sense of jealousy and envy towards superiors also means that one has an intention of not being able to bear their success and so forth, and thus one develops a negative intent and a lack of compassion towards them. With a lack of compassion one is not able to practice the basis of the causes for higher rebirth, which is ethical morality.

The very basis of the definition of morality is refraining from harming others, and practising non-violence. With an attitude of wishing to crush others, or be competitive with them, or envy, or jealousy, there is no room for a positive compassionate attitude of benefiting others. Rather one will create negative karma out of that lack of compassion and harm. Thus one destroys the causes for achieving a higher rebirth, and so it is said that it is very rare for such beings to achieve a higher rebirth.

What we take from this as personal advice is that when we enjoy good resources, or knowledge, or high status we must guard ourselves against falling into these categories of developing negative states of mind conceived by pride

and conceit. One must constantly guard oneself against looking down on others, or competitiveness, or being jealous, and appreciate what one has. One must guard oneself from falling into these negative states at all costs.

When we consider how having the very favourable conditions of good resources, wealth, knowledge or high status actually serve as a means to develop pride and conceit, then that is definitely a situation one would feel disgusted with, because these conditions are the cause to be reborn in the lower states rather than higher rebirths. Rather than these fortunate conditions being a source of envy and ambition, they can generate a sense of disgust because they destroy one's good rebirth. With such a result why would one want to achieve that state? Also, as mentioned earlier, beings in cyclic existence are constantly in the state of suffering, which can be summarised as physical sufferings and mental sufferings. Although those of high status in cyclic existence have good physical conditions they have a lot of mental suffering, whereas those who live in an impoverished state experience sufferings on the physical level, because of lacking nourishment and so forth. Whether existing in a high state or in a lowly state there is constant suffering. By reflecting on this we see that neither is a desirable state to be in.

Mental suffering in particular is very much related to the superstitious conceptual thoughts that we have in our mind, which create a lot of unwanted unnecessary sufferings for many sentient beings.

1.2.3.1.2.2. Repudiating attachment to higher rebirths attained through abstaining from ill deeds

One must remind oneself again that these outlines and explanations are all in relation to encouraging beings to strive to achieve liberation, and that they must be understood in that light.

Assertion: Though the proud are depreciable because they perform ill deeds, it is appropriate for those without pride to strive for high rebirth.

Answer:

*Whoever renounces them now
Will, it is said, obtain sense objects.
For what reason would such perverse
Practice be considered correct?*

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The assertion is that if one can understand that the proud are to be looked down upon because they perform ill deeds, it may then be appropriate for those without pride to strive for higher rebirth? The verse answers that such a view is also not appropriate. This assertion is along the lines of, on one hand it seems appropriate to strive for high status, but on another hand it is not appropriate.

As the commentary reads:

It is said that those who promise to be chaste in this life for the sake of high rebirth in the future and who renounce sense objects, having cultivated antipathy towards them...

Renouncing sense objects refers to renouncing the desirable sense objects of the eye, ear, nose and tongue and tactile senses. Those who see the faults of cyclic existence as a result of contemplating its sufferings and miseries, and who have come to a point of developing a

sense of disgust for cyclic existence. may begin to actually refrain from engaging in sensual objects and desires. As a result of refraining from engaging with sensual objects and practising morality and so forth, they will obtain a higher rebirth in the future life.

So what is being explained here is that having cultivated antipathy towards sensual objects they:

will, as a result of their practices, have whatever attractive objects they desire when they take a high rebirth. If...out of aversion one gives up the things one has, it is a perverse practice to seek them again.

One obtains a higher rebirth as a natural consequence of having given up sensual pleasures in a previous life. To then develop desire and indulge in that high status, and anticipate its pleasures would be perverse, because you have worked so hard in giving up sensual pleasures to obtain the higher rebirth. That would be seen by wise beings as being a completely absurd and perverse situation, because it is wasting and misusing one's good result for futile gains.

Another point that is being made here is the absurdity of giving away what one already has, and then finding it difficult to obtain it again in the future. This absurd situation can arise if one does not contemplate carefully why one is giving up the sensual pleasures. The example I like to use is that of the people who develop a sense of renunciation that we call an artificial renunciation, as it is not yet very firm. Because of that initial poorly established feeling of renunciation, they may even develop a wish to become ordained. So they give up their boyfriend or girlfriend to become a monk or a nun, but because that renunciation is not well established, it wears off after a while. Then they might again develop a strong longing to have a partner, but by that time they might have a hard time finding a another partner!

If the result of renouncing one's boyfriend or girlfriend is going to end up in it being very hard to find another partner, then it would have been much wiser to have kept one's partner initially, and maintained and enjoyed that relationship. I am not, of course, making jest of western attitudes, as the same is also very true in the east and in other places. There are those who have renounced worldly life after they become ordained, and even gone into solitary retreat for such long periods as ten or twelve years. But after having renounced that life they come back into a completely worldly life. This sort of situation is prevalent throughout the world. The main point is that renunciation must be cultivated gradually, and continually developed on a sound basis, otherwise these faults can occur.

The implication here is that those who have developed a good sound basis of renunciation, cultivating it gradually, and complementing it with a genuine sense of love and compassion towards others, have a sound basis for practising the Dharma continually. We can say such beings will be able see their practise all the way through to their goal.

1.2.3.1.3. A DETAILED REPUDIATION OF ACCUMULATING ACTIONS FOR THE SAKE OF HIGHER REBIRTHS

This is sub-divided into five.

- 1.2.3.1.3.1. Repudiating accumulation of actions for the sake of possessions
- 1.2.3.1.3.2. Repudiating their accumulation out of attachment to worldly practices
- 1.2.3.1.3.3. Repudiating their accumulation for the sake of attractive objects
- 1.2.3.1.3.4. Repudiating their accumulation for the sake of power and wealth
- 1.2.3.1.3.5. Repudiating accumulation of actions out of attachment to subsequent wealth

1.2.3.1.3.1. Repudiating accumulation of actions for the sake of possessions

Wealth, the result of merit, 168
Must be thoroughly protected from others.
How can that which must be constantly
Protected from others be one's own.

As the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

Even those with large resources should not be attached to them...

It is not appropriate for those who have wealth, resources and so forth to develop strong attachment to their wealth and resources.

...for wealth the result of meritorious actions like giving...

This indicates that the excellent resources one has now are actually a result of having previously engaged in acts of giving. However these resources:

...must constantly be protected from other factors such as robbers, thieves, fire, water and so forth.

This is very true. For any wealthy person there is a constant fear of losing their wealth. So they need to engage in measures to protect their wealth.

How can anything needing constant and diligent protection from other factors be one's own exclusive property over which one has control.

One has a notion that any wealth is one's own wealth, however the fact is that one has to protect and constantly guard it. One cannot enjoy wealth that is free from worries and the fear of losing it and so forth. There is nothing that is entirely and exclusively considered to be 'mine' and which is free from worries. The very fact that one needs to protect one's wealth indicates that that others have access to it, which means that it does not exclusively belong to oneself. So what point is there in striving to attain such wealth, which causes such worries and cannot be exclusively owned by oneself anyway? That is the point.

If one were to engage in acts of generosity with the intention of gaining more wealth then that is totally inappropriate, because the wealth that one gains from generosity is just another source of more suffering, fear of losing it, and having to protect it and so forth. It just produces mental strain. So, engaging in acts of generosity with such attachment is totally inappropriate. The fact that one can never be totally satisfied with one's own wealth is result of attachment towards it.

The next outline arises in response to a line of thought that this explanation may produce.

1.2.3.1.3.2. Repudiating their accumulation out of attachment to worldly practices

Assertion: If practices like giving are wrong one should follow conventionally accepted practices.

What this is indicating is that if Dharma practice, such as being generous and so forth, brings about the results that have just been explained, we might as well engage in some worldly practices.

Different social customs 169
Are termed "religious practices".
Thus it seems that society has
More influence that religious practices.

What one needs to understand from the explanation is that on face value it may seem that that the practice of generosity is wrong. Actually what one has to understand implicitly is that this refers to the practice of giving with attachment and the results that one gains from it. If it is imbued with attachment then it is wrong. It would be a misunderstanding if one were to come to the conclusion that since giving with attachment to obtain a result such as good resources, high status, wealth and so forth, which will in turn produce more attachment is wrong, it would be better to follow conventionally accepted practices. As the commentary explains, adherence to these is also improper.

The term "religious practice" is applied to different social customs like giving away and taking a bride.

What is implied here is that in some cultures secular customs such as giving away the bride, or the marriage itself, or wearing certain kinds of ornaments, headdress, or costume and so forth are considered as religious practices.

Such traditions are called religions but they change according to place and time.

This is referring to different types of headdress, costumes and so forth, which are considered as a religious practice in some cultures. However that changes from place to place and time to time.

It is therefore improper to be attached to society which, although it appears more influential than religion does not remain stable.

What is being indicated here is that the norms of a society which, as explained earlier, are sometimes seen as a religious practice, are actually cultural practices which change. There is nothing stable about them, and there are different levels of understanding about the actual customs and traditions. The happiness that one gains from such traditions is not stable either, and that is the main indication here. Though marriages and so on may be considered as firm and stable with mutual commitments and so forth, it is obvious that they are not necessarily stable and that there are many ups and downs. One experiences so much suffering, and so many difficulties in relation to tradition and social standing. In that sense it does not give a stable lasting good quality of happiness and so one cannot rely upon such traditions.

1.2.3.1.3.3. Repudiating their accumulation for the sake of attractive objects

Assertion: Pleasure does not occur without attractive sense objects since these are the results of merit it is

permissible to perform meritorious actions out of attachment to attractive objects in order to have pleasure.

Answer:

Through virtue there are attractive objects, 170
But such objects to are considered bad.
By giving them up one will be happy.
What need is there to acquire them.

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse;

Though attractive visual forms, sounds and other objects are obtained through virtues like giving, those who desire liberation disparage and consider even such sense objects bad...

The main point, which is clearly illustrated here, is that even though attractive sense objects are obtained through virtuous activities such as giving and so forth, they are to be discarded by those who aspire to achieve liberation.

As the commentary further explains, this is because:

...they are the root of futility and are constantly affected by suffering and permanence.

The reason why attractive objects are considered as objects to be abandoned, is because:

If one becomes happy and virtuous by giving up a source of faults, what need is there to acquire it?

What is being explained here is that although the pleasures that one obtains from the six sense objects are a result of virtuous actions, they are an obstacle for those who aspire to achieve liberation. That is because it is due to attachment to the sensual object that one creates further attachment, which will then bind one to cyclic existence. Therefore, even though there is some pleasure to be obtained from sensual objects, it is indicated that for those who are seeking liberation, one gives up attachment to the sensual pleasures. One gives up the pleasures that one gets from the sensual objects as a means to obtain one's goal, which is liberation. As it is explained here, one becomes happy and virtuous by giving up the source of faults, which is attachment to the sensual pleasures. If the result of giving up attachment to the sensual pleasures becomes a cause to attain a happy state then what need is there to acquire it? This rhetorical question indicates that one should not feel the need to acquire sensual objects, which are an obstacle to attaining one's ultimate goal of happiness, or liberation.

The main point is that it would be futile and absurd to be attached to sensual objects by thinking that they are a result of previously virtuous actions. In other words, the main doubt that is to be overcome is that it is appropriate to be attached to, and to indulge in, sensual pleasures because they are a result of previous virtuous actions.

Those seeking liberation understand that despite the fact that one has access to sensual objects as a result of previously accumulated virtuous actions, one need not indulge in sensual objects out of attachment, because that indulgence would be an obstacle to achieving one's goal of liberation. Therefore one sees it as meaningful to abstain from indulging in sensual pleasures, and being attachment to them.

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