
Study Group – *Aryadeva's 400 Verses*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As always, we will sit in an appropriate comfortable and relaxed posture, and then allow our mind to be free from external distractions. We then set our mind to focus on the teachings, and generate a positive motivation such as, 'In order to liberate all sentient beings from all suffering I need to achieve enlightenment. For that purpose I will listen to the teachings and try to put them into practice as best as I can'.

1.2.1.2. SHOWING THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND EMPTINESS IN ORDER TO ATTAIN LIBERATION

As we go through the text outlines, it is good to reflect on the actual meaning of each. Try to use whatever understanding you have gained so far to refer to the points in the text. For example, this outline refers to showing the need to understand emptiness. At that point, one reflects on whatever understanding one has of emptiness. The heading then refers to showing the need to understand emptiness in order to attain liberation. Again, one reflects on whatever one has understood about what liberation means. Reflecting on the actual meaning of what is presented in the text helps us to gain further understanding for our personal practice.

Question: Does one meditate on emptiness, although things are not empty, to free oneself from desire, or does one view them that way because they actually are empty of true existence?

Answer:

*One does not regard that which is not empty 182
As empty, thinking [thereby] to gain nirvana.
Tathagatas say that nirvana
Will not be attained through wrong views.*

The verse shows the need for gaining a really sound understanding of emptiness, which should be a really deep understanding and not be just a vague understanding. It was explained in the *Madhyamika* or the *Middle Way* text, which we have studied, that the view of the inherent existence of phenomena is like believing that an illusory woman conjured by a magician is an actual being. We view things as being inherently existent in a similar way. What is being implied is that phenomena are entirely free from inherent existence, but because they appear as being inherently existent, that is what we actually believe to be the case.

As the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

Once one has an understanding of that which is empty as empty, one familiarizes oneself with it.

Emptiness here refers to the emptiness of inherent existence. Therefore as a means to obtain liberation, one meditates on the emptiness of inherent existence. So negating inherent existence, and thus seeing things as being empty of inherent existence is the means to obtain

liberation. As the commentary says:

One who holds this view does not understand the emptiness of the person and aggregates but thinks of them as truly existent.

Meditating on emptiness by simply thinking that things are just empty will not achieve liberation. To hold the view that persons and aggregates are truly existent while at the same time implying emptiness is not a means of gaining liberation. As the commentary continues:

Tathagatas say one will not reach nirvana by means of wrong views misconceiving the fundamental nature of existence. The Teacher [the Buddha] said [in a sutra], "All phenomena are empty in that they do not exist inherently."

All phenomena can be categorised into living beings and other phenomena. Holding that phenomena (beings and the environment) are truly existent, while at the same time asserting that they are empty, is missing the point. If one holds to the view that things are truly existent, and also implies that they are empty, then one can come to the extreme and wrong conclusion that they might be empty of any existence.

The word 'empty' does not really get to the heart of the meaning of what it is empty of. To come to the actual understanding of emptiness, one needs to completely negate phenomena as being truly existent. One needs to understand that phenomena are empty of inherent existence. What things are empty of is inherent or true existence, and that is the understanding that one needs to gain with the explanation of emptiness. If one were to hold that things are truly existent, then, as the Buddha said, 'One will not reach nirvana with those wrong views'. As mentioned in the commentary the Teacher said that all things are empty of inherent existence. As the commentary concludes:

No matter which of the three states of nirvana one enters, one must become learned [skilled] in the meaning of emptiness.

As has been clearly explained, emptiness must be completely understood, and one must be skilled in understanding emptiness if one wishes to achieve one of the three states of nirvana.

1.2.1.3. SHOWING THE MEANS TO TURN AWAY FROM CYCLIC EXISTENCE

Question: If things are empty of inherent existence, it is appropriate to teach suchness. What is the use of teaching how the world of sentient beings and environments comes into existence?

This question clearly asks why, if the main understanding one needs to gain to achieve liberation is emptiness, did the Buddha not teach just on emptiness? Why did he teach about the environment and so forth? As the commentary explains the answer is that:

Emptiness cannot be understood without an explanation of how the world comes into being. Therefore explaining it is essential as a means for understanding suchness.

'Explaining it', refers to the explanation of how the world comes into being, but when the text mentions the world, the environment and so forth, it is specifically referring to

the relative truth (there being two truths, relative truth and ultimate truth). What is being explained here is that in order to understand ultimate truth, one first needs to have a good understanding of relative truth.

Whatever contains teaching 183
About the world speaks of engagement.
Whatever contains elucidation
Of the ultimate speaks of disengagement.

As the commentary explains:

Scriptures teaching about action caused by ignorance and so forth, the world of sentient beings and environments describe the stages by which one engages in cyclic existence. Their purpose is to refute belief in causeless production or production from incompatible causes, which is based on conceptions of true existence.

The Buddha's teachings on the environment, the world system and so forth are specifically to explain how things are not causeless, but are produced from compatible causes. Things are produced from causes but not incompatible causes. Thus the explanation of the twelve interdependent links is that from ignorance (which is the cause), actions or karma results. From this beginning the links are explained in sequence, and they show how things come into existence through compatible causes and conditions. Thus the Buddha explained clearly how the process of engaging in samsara takes place.

Through the explanation of the twelve interdependent links he showed how engagement in samsara is not without cause or from incompatible causes, but rather through the specific causes that bring about specific results. The first link of the twelve interdependent links, ignorance, is the cause of actions, and the actions that are produced from that leave imprints upon the consciousness, which is the third link and so forth. As the commentary explains:

They are thus a means for understanding suchness [or emptiness]. Those scriptures elucidating the ultimate, the emptiness of inherent existence of phenomena, describe the stages by which one disengages from cyclic existence.

It is explained clearly here that without understanding the basis, one cannot jump to the next step of understanding emptiness. Through the explanations given in the text, one comes to understand that we engage in samsara through the cause and effect sequence, which is basically an understanding of karma. Based on that understanding of the cause and effect sequence, one then further searches for how to be free from samsara, which is through the understanding of emptiness.

The next point that one gets from this explanation is how emptiness is the key to freeing oneself from samsara: without an understanding of emptiness, one cannot obtain liberation. That is the main point that one should derive from this explanation, which should be used in one's analytical meditation to further clarify one's understanding. There is a verse further on in the text that explains clearly how, for an understanding of emptiness, one needs to have a thorough understanding of relative truth, which serves as a basis to understand ultimate truth. By following this process, one can obtain ultimate

cessation.

As the teachings explain, an intelligent person gains an understanding of the teachings and progresses along the path by thoroughly analysing and investigating the process of how one comes into samsara. Then they know how to reverse that process and be free from samsara. That whole process must be thoroughly analysed. If an intelligent person, for example, was to experience unease and suffering from a headache, they would analyse in this way: 'Why do I experience a headache? There must be a cause for me to suffer in this way. So what is the cause of the suffering?'. By analysing in that way, and using the teachings as a means to analyse the process, they gain an understanding that, 'The underlying cause of the suffering that I experience from a headache is a result of the delusions and karma that have been created in the past'.

What is the main delusion which influences one to engage in the karma that brings about such suffering? As they investigate further, they come to understand and realise that it is the grasping one's self and other phenomena as being truly existent that is the main culprit. Then as the intelligent being investigates further, they check and analyse whether it is possible to overcome grasping at self and other phenomena.

Then, they come to the realisation that grasping at self is a misconception, and as such it has no sound basis. So there is no solid foundation for that mind-set to remain firm, because it is based on a faulty state of mind. As it is a misconception it is based on faulty states of mind and thus it can be overcome. There are reasons, techniques and methods to overcome that faulty state of mind and thus overcome that misconception.

Then they see that it is possible to gain the ultimate cessation of liberation, and the elimination of the causes of one's suffering, by completely eradicating and eliminating that misconception. That is how an intelligent being investigates and studies.

It is good to also follow on that line of reasoning and use it as much as possible in one's analytical meditation and investigation.

1.2.1.4. GIVING UP FEAR OF EMPTINESS

Objection: If all things are empty there are many unwanted consequences, since by denying the existence of objects, actions and agents, even liberation will not exist.

Answer:

Thinking, "Nothing exists, what is the use?" 184
You may be afraid.
But if actions did exist,
This teaching would not be a prevention.

This verse is the presentation of the unique point of the Prasangika Madhyamika or Consequentialists, which is that there is not even an atom of inherent existence in phenomena, and therefore phenomena is completely empty of inherent existence.

All other schools below the Prasangika present reality as having some inherent existence, or some existence from its own side. For example the school immediately below, the Svatantrika Madhyamika, present that there is some

inherent existence from the phenomena's side, as well as some conceptualisation or imputation from the mind. The schools below the Prasangika Madhyamika school assert that when one searches for a phenomenon, there should be some findability on the basis, and that one can find that there is some existence from its own side. If there was no inherent existence from its own side, they say, then things would not exist at all. 'How could one posit things to be existing?' they ask, 'because the doer, the actions and the results would not exist'.

It is only the Prasangika who say that there is not an atom of inherent existence, and that things are merely labelled by the mind. This is said to be a very fine point. Because it is such a subtle point, it is a very difficult point to grasp and understand. Thus it is only the highest Buddhist school which presents that point, and it can be understood only by intelligent beings who reach that fine point.

The Prasangika Madhyamika school asserts that there is not even an atom of inherent existence. Yet, even though there is no inherent existence, it does not contradict the existence of phenomena, it does not contradict that there is a doer, the action and the result. The schools below the Prasangika would say that if you search for something and cannot find something upon the basis, then that means that it cannot exist. Whereas the Prasangika Madhyamika school asserts that the very fact that you cannot find something when you search for it upon the basis shows that there is no true existence or inherent existence. The very fact that you don't find anything when you search upon the basis, means that there is no inherent existence.

The lower Buddhist schools would say that when you search on the aggregates of a person, you will find a person there. Whereas the Prasangika Madhyamika school say, that if you search for a person upon the basis, you will not find a person there, because neither the individual parts nor the combination of the aggregates is a person.

As the commentary explains the verse:

You who fear emptiness, may be frightened by thinking, "What is the use of striving for liberation, since things do not exist if they are empty of inherent existence?" But if actions existed ultimately, it would not be possible for anyone to prevent cyclic existence by understanding the teaching of emptiness, since actions and agents are not feasible in a context of inherent existence.

As explained here, one may imply that there is a fear of things being empty of inherent existence. However if things were to be ultimately existent, then one could not possibly overcome cyclic existence with the understanding of emptiness.

... since actions and agents are not feasible in a context of inherent existence.

This means that if the doer, the action itself and the results were to be inherently existent, then the teachings of emptiness and so forth could not overcome cyclic existence and allow the attainment of liberation.

Thinking the aggregates are truly existent is like thinking a mirage is water.

Believing a mirage to be water is the analogy used to illustrate how believing the aggregates to be truly existent is a total fabrication of the mind.

1.2.1.5. GIVING UP STRONG ATTACHMENT TO ONE'S OWN POSITION

This is an important point to keep in mind.

While attached to your own position 185
And disliking others' positions
You will not approach nirvana.
Neither [kind of] conduct will bring peace.

The main point being elucidated here is how it is extremely important to overcome a strong attachment to one's own view as being a superior view. It refers to those who are following a school of Madhyamika or Middle Way thought developing a strong attachment to the explanation of emptiness that is presented by that school. By holding that explanation as being superior and developing attachment towards it, one may develop an aversion toward the views that are presented in the lower Buddhist schools, as well as any other school that presents a view of true existence. Doing this will prevent any progress in one's spiritual development towards, achieving liberation as it will only become a cause to keep one longer in cyclic existence.

The main causes for keeping us in cyclic existence are attachment and aversion. These delusions keep us in cyclic existence, and thus developing attachment to one's own position, or to feel superior, and developing aversion towards other views, can only serve as a means to prolong one's existence in samsara.

As the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

Thinking the thesis of emptiness which stops cyclic existence is supreme and others are wrong, you may be strongly attached to your own position and antagonistic to others'. You will not approach the liberation of nirvana until you discard this strong attachment to your own thesis, emptiness, and your dislike for an antagonism toward others' theses. Peace can never be attained through conduct based on the idea that both adopting and discarding are truly existent.

This clearly illustrates that having a strong attachment to one's own thesis, in this case a thesis that is presenting emptiness clearly, considering it to be supreme, and having an aversion towards others' views, will prevent one from achieving liberation. The main advice here, which we can take as personal advice, is that for as long as you hold onto your own view as supreme and develop attachment towards it, and condemn others' views with aversion, you can never obtain liberation. So one must overcome such attitudes.

1.2.2. Advice to strive for liberation

This has seven sub-divisions:

1.2.2.1. With effort liberation is easy to attain

1.2.2.2. Impossibility of attaining liberation without cultivating aversion to cyclic existence

1.2.2.3. Appropriateness of striving for liberation because of the very great disadvantages of cyclic existence

1.2.2.4. Meaning of the fundamental mode of existence should not be taught from the outset

1.2.2.5. Stages by which to lead [a disciple]

1.2.2.6. Indistinguishability in entity with regard to the final mode of existence of things

1.2.2.7. Lack of contradiction in teaching the necessity of accumulating merit through giving and so forth

1.2.2.1. WITH EFFORT LIBERATION IS EASY TO ATTAIN

We can reflect on the main point of this sub-division, which is that while it is easy to obtain liberation, we won't do so unless we make an effort.

Assertion: We cannot attain the perfect happiness of nirvana, because it is extremely difficult to do so, but we enter cyclic existence because it is easy to acquire without effort.

Answer:

Not acting brings about nirvana; 186
Acting again brings worldly existence.
Thus, without complication, nirvana
Is easy to attain, but not the latter.

As the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

Understanding about not doing actions, whether they are virtuous or non-virtuous activities, brings about nirvana. Worldly existence is brought about by doing various virtuous and non-virtuous actions.

What one derives from the explanation from the commentary is that the process of acquiring the causes to achieve liberation is unlike worldly activities. One does not require needless physical and verbal exertion to acquire liberation, as it is mainly a mental task.

After gaining a certain understanding of emptiness, one goes into secluded retreat and meditates upon the understanding of emptiness. By first achieving the meditative state of calm abiding and developing that to acquire special insight, and then combining calm abiding with special insight, one further meditates on emptiness. That then becomes the cause for achieving liberation. In secluded retreat one completely refrains from worldly activities, such as engaging in the physical exertion in acquiring worldly things and so forth, or verbal activities. In contrast to the worldly activities, that is much less taxing on one's physical body and speech. It only requires mental stabilisation and completely removing oneself from all other activities.

'Worldly existence or existence in samsara is brought about by doing various virtuous and non-virtuous actions'. Any worldly activity, whether it be virtuous or non-virtuous, becomes a cause for us to be re-born in samsara. The virtuous activities that we engage in become causes for us to take a higher rebirth in cyclic existence. The non-virtuous activities that we engage in become the causes for rebirth in the lower realms. With a worldly motivation, when one engages in any virtuous or non-virtuous activity, it only becomes a cause to remain in samsara.

Going into seclusion to develop calm abiding followed by special insight and combining the two in contemplating emptiness is a means of refraining from any kind of worldly activity – virtuous or non-virtuous. One bases

one's practice in seclusion on the three trainings. In an ethical sense the very fact that one is in seclusion, is the training in morality. Meditating on calm abiding and special insight is the training of concentration and developing the wisdom of emptiness is the training of wisdom.

By refraining from any activity, virtuous or non-virtuous, and meditating upon emptiness based on the three trainings, liberation is easy to obtain. As mentioned in the text:

Thus by giving up the performance of all actions, nirvana is easy to attain without complication.

The Tibetan word that has been literally translated here as 'complication' could also mean 'without doubt'. So without complication or without doubt implies with ease.

On the other hand, the pleasures of cyclic existence are not easy to gain.

In contrast to being in seclusion and refraining from all activities, the pleasure of cyclic existence is not easy to gain. This implies that one has to exert a lot of effort to gain the pleasures in samsara.

The commentary summarises the main point in this way:

Therefore it is unreasonable for the wise to give up striving for nirvana, which is attained without the need for tiring exertion, and instead strive for cyclic existence, which is acquired through all kinds of tiring exertion.

As explained earlier, the causes for obtaining liberation require much less exertion, as they require being in seclusion and refraining from all physical and verbal activities and just engaging in peaceful meditation. In comparison this is much less work than having to engage in the causes to gain the pleasures of cyclic existence. So a wise person, someone who is intelligent, should not give up striving for nirvana which has so much profit, and so much gain. The very process of gaining nirvana is much easier and less tiring.

Whereas the results from the pleasures of samsara are not stable, and one has to exert oneself much more to obtain that result. It is much more tiring. What wise person would engage in that? The question implies that one should not. We can use ourselves as an example, reflecting on how tiring it is when we have to think about gaining worldly status, wealth and so forth. We have to go through so much effort and worry, thinking how best we can achieve our worldly goals.

The next session on 5th June, will be the discussion. There will be no teachings on 12 June and on 19 June it is the exam.

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Edited Version

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