

Study Group – Aryadeva's 400 Verses

༄༅། །བསྐྱབས་འཛིན་བཞེས་བརྒྱུ་བཞེས་བྱ་བའི་ཚོགས་ལཱུར་བྱས་པ་བཞུགས་སོ། །

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

3 July 2007

As always we will sit in a comfortable and relaxed position, We should also make sure that our motivation for receiving the teaching is not one that is focussed merely on personal benefit, but we should also generate a motivation with the intention to listen to the teachings and practise, as best as one can, to benefit all beings.

It is essential that we train our mind from the very outset to make sure that we are free from intentions that focus solely on personal benefit. That then helps to overcome the self-cherishing mind. If, from the very outset, we can familiarise our mind with seeing the faults of just cherishing oneself, then that will help us to overcome that attitude and generate a stronger and stronger attitude of wishing to benefit other sentient beings. This is also true for any practice in which we engage.

1.2.2.7. LACK OF CONTRADICTION IN TEACHING THE NECESSITY OF ACCUMULATING MERIT THROUGH GIVING AND SO FORTH

Question: If everything is to be given up because of being empty, why does sutra say that one should show respect and create merit?

This question indicates that some sutras explain that one should give up attachment to everything, because of the view that everything is merely empty. However there are other sutras which explain that engaging in such practices as showing respect to ordained Sangha and holy objects creates merit. The question indicates that there seems to be some contradiction there.

Answer: There is no contradiction.

*Tathagatas speak of attachment to practices 192
To those who want a high rebirth.
That is disparaged for those who want freedom –
What need to mention other [attachments]?*

To give a very literal explanation of the verse, what is indicated in the first two lines is that the tathagatas, or the buddhas, explain that practices involving attachment to certain goals are for those who wish to obtain a higher rebirth in the next lifetime. Here, attachment to practices refers to the practices that accumulate merit specifically to obtain a higher rebirth in the next lifetime. These practices are prescribed for those who have such an attachment.

The third line of the verse refers to these practices involving accumulating merit for a higher rebirth being disparaged by those who wish to obtain self-liberation. The last line says that if practices involving the accumulation of merit for higher rebirths are disparaged for those who wish for self-liberation, then there is no need to mention that they will be disparaged by those who wish to achieve enlightenment. As the commentary further explains:

To those who fear bad rebirths and want a high rebirth, and who are incapable of meditating on subtle production, disintegration and so forth, Tathagatas speak of attachment to practices like giving and [so forth]...

Some beings have the capacity of wishing for a higher rebirth but are incapable of meditating on 'subtle production, disintegration and so forth', which refers to subtle impermanence and emptiness. These people are not ready to hear about the immense sufferings of the lower realms, but when they hear of the results of a good rebirth in the next lifetime, they have a strong desire or wish to achieve that. For beings with such capacity, the practices such as giving and so forth are explained.

If such an aspiration for merely a high rebirth is disparaged in those who seek liberation ...

As mentioned earlier, there are beings of lower level capacity, who do not yet have the capacity to contemplate subtle phenomena such as emptiness and also the sufferings of the lower realms, but who do have the wish to achieve a good rebirth in the next lifetime. They believe in future lives and thus wish to achieve a good rebirth in the next lifetime. For such beings the practices involving giving generously and so forth are explained. However these practices are disparaged by those who seek liberation. That being the case, what need is there to mention attachment to wrongdoing. If even good meritorious actions are disparaged, then there is no need to mention actual negative deeds.

1.2.3. Stages leading to the meaning of the fundamental mode of existence

This is sub-divided into five:

- 1.2.3.1. Suchness should not be taught to the unreceptive
- 1.2.3.2. Means to understand suchness
- 1.2.3.3. Necessity of teaching it through various approaches
- 1.2.3.4. Advice to strive to understand suchness
- 1.2.3.5. Through familiarisation in this way, nirvana can definitely be attained

1.2.3.1. SUCHNESS SHOULD NOT BE TAUGHT TO THE UNRECEPTIVE [OR THE UNRIPE]

Assertion: If all suffering is stopped by understanding emptiness, it would be appropriate to teach only suchness [or emptiness].

Answer: That is not so [as] it depends upon differences in receptivity.

*Those who want merit should not 193
Always speak of emptiness.
Doesn't a medicinal compound
Turn to poison in the wrong case?*

As the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

If emptiness is explained to those who are not receptive, it will cause misfortune [or downfall].

One of the misfortunes or faults would be that they would reject emptiness. Another misfortune or fault would be that by misunderstanding emptiness to mean that everything is non-existent, they would go to bad transmigrations. As the commentary continues:

Therefore those with compassion who want the merit of caring for others should never speak about emptiness without first examining the recipient.

Those who have compassion for other sentient beings, and who wish to lead them to the right goals, should not be explaining emptiness at the very outset, when listeners are not suitable vessels or recipients, and would be liable to fall into the faults of either rejecting emptiness entirely, or misunderstand it, and come to the conclusion that everything is non-existent.

Doesn't even an appetizing and potent medicinal compound turn to poison when given to the wrong

patient? It is like giving someone who has not been poisoned an antidote to poison and thereby killing them.

Emptiness should not be taught to those who are unreceptive. Rather the practices that help to cultivate an understanding of emptiness should be presented first. As mentioned earlier, these are the practices of engaging generosity and so forth. The commentary also quotes from the text by Matrceta, which says:

[Only] unstained cloth [is good for] dyeing.
[Likewise] the mind must be properly developed
By first speaking of giving and so forth,
Then one should meditate on the teaching.

Matrceta is also known by his Tibetan name, Lopon Tayang. Initially, he was a non-Buddhist and was referred to as the great master with the melodious sound, as he had very elegant and melodious speech, and thus could really influence and convert others. Later, when he converted himself to Buddhism he was also known by other names. Even before he became Buddhist, he was known as Matrceta, which means one who is very reverent to his mother. He also had other names which referred to being very reverent to his father. So apparently he was known to be very respectful towards his parents. After he became a Buddhist, he was known as Lopon Pawo—the great courageous Pandit. He has since been revered as a great master and scholar, and he composed many texts.

As the verse from Matrceta indicates, only unstained cloth is good for dyeing. This relates to the procedure for removing stains from a cloth in order to make it suitable for dyeing. First one needs to remove the dirt from the cloth which, if it stained quite badly would involve washing it many times, and rinsing it and so forth until the very subtle stains are removed. Only then would it be suitable for dyeing.

Using that as an analogy, it is explained that the mind must be properly developed with the practices of generosity and so forth, before it is suitable to receive teachings on emptiness. According to the analogy of removing the stains from the cloth, the very gross stains are removed in the first washing, and only in the second and third attempt at washing can the stubborn stains be removed. Likewise in developing the mind, the very gross level of the delusions or faults of the mind, have to be dealt with first. When the gross levels of the delusions and so forth have been removed, one can then deal with the subtle delusions and faults of the mind. That is how the analogy is understood to be the meaning of how one engages in the practice.

One must examine the recipient.

In a very practical sense the main point being made here is that one must be skilled in speaking to others. One should not talk about profound or difficult things initially, and then scare people away. Rather, one should talk gently, about sensible things that they can understand and relate to. When you gain their confidence on practical and realistic things, then you can come to more difficult points, which they then would be able to accept.

1.2.3.2. MEANS TO UNDERSTAND SUCHNESS

At the outset one should teach in accordance with how ordinary people accept that things exist.

Just as a barbarian cannot be 194
Guided in a foreign language,
Ordinary people cannot be guided
Except by way of the ordinary.

This explains that the teaching on conventional phenomena

should be presented first, because ordinary beings can relate to phenomena in accord with their normal perceptions. From there ultimate phenomena can be introduced. That is how one should guide and lead others.

This will be explained further on in the commentary, however we can take a vase as an example. In order to introduce the ultimate phenomena within a vase, first the vase itself should be established in a conventional way. That is done, as the scriptures indicate, by first giving a definition of what a vase is and then establishing the attributes of a vase, how it is a functional phenomena, has a spout and so forth. When the phenomenon called vase is completely understood on a conventional level, then one goes into further explaining the non-inherent existence of a vase, showing that it does not exist inherently. Because the existence of a vase on a conventional level has been already established and understood, its non-inherent existence can be understood better.

The first two lines of the verse use the analogy of a barbarian, who can be defined as a person who comes from a remote, uncivilised place in relation to the arts, poetry and all of the normal studies that are done in a civilised city; people from remote areas, for example, have not mastered those skills. If you try to speak to them using civilised language, they will not be able to understand you. So in order to speak with people who come from uncivilised areas, one must use whatever language and norms they have in order to communicate with them. Thus the meaning here is that initial teachings should be in keeping with conventionally accepted things like generosity and so forth. As the commentary says:

Ordinary people cannot be guided to an understanding of ultimate truth unless they understand the ordinary, namely the explanation of how conventional things exist.

Prior to teaching the ultimate nature of things, one must first convey explanations of the conventional existence of phenomena, and based on that understanding, one can then guide them to understanding the ultimate nature of things. The reason for explaining conventional phenomena first is because an understanding of conventional phenomena serves as a basis for understanding the ultimate nature of phenomena. Thus conventional phenomena becomes the method for understanding the ultimate. Aryadeva then quotes Chandrakirti's *Supplement to the Middle Way*, which says:

Conventional truth is the means;
Ultimate truth, the outcome of the means

I've given an explanation of these lines many times before. Their main point is that, as the commentary mentions:

One should teach ultimate truth based on an acceptance of conventional existence in one's own system.

The analogy presented in the commentary is:

One cannot make a child understand in a foreign language.

1.2.3.3. NECESSITY OF TEACHING IT THROUGH VARIOUS APPROACHES

This heading indicates the reasons why the Buddha gave teachings in many different ways.

Teaching existence, non-existence, 195
Both existence and non-existence, and neither
Surely are medicines for all
That are influenced by the sickness.

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse thus:

As a means of guiding the world [or worldly beings], to eliminate views of non-existence, the Teacher [or the Buddha] told trainees that everything exists ...

As the commentary explains, the Buddha taught that things do exist, in order to eliminate the wrong view that things do not exist.

... and to eliminate conceptions of true existence, he taught that there is no true existence.

The Buddha did this to remove another extreme view, which is that if things were to exist then they must be truly existent. In order to eliminate this wrong conclusion, the Buddha taught that there is no true existence.

In relation to conventional awareness and analytical awareness he taught existence and non-existence ...

What this refers to, as explained in the Madhyamaka text, is that the existence of things is established by conventional awareness. Thus conventional awareness establishes the existence of phenomena. However it is analytical awareness, (also referred as wisdom) that establishes non-existence, which refers to non-inherent existence or non-true existence. This establishes the ultimate nature of phenomena, which is emptiness. In other words analytical awareness or wisdom establishes emptiness.

When viewing the existence of phenomena in a conventional way, then things exist because they are established by conventional awareness. Thus things do exist, and that is what we call existence. With regard to non-existence, in the state of complete absorption on emptiness such as the meditative equipoise of an arya who is on the path of seeing, for example, nothing but emptiness appears. Conventional phenomena do not appear to an arya who is in single-pointed meditative equipoise on emptiness. Thus for a higher being it is as if external things do not exist, because the only thing that appears to that higher being is emptiness. The non-appearance of any other conventional phenomena is the establishment of emptiness for such a being. That is how it should be understood.

The text then continues:

...and to eliminate the two extreme views of existence and non-existence, he taught that both things and non-things are not truly existent. Surely these are simply medicines to remove all views influenced by the sickness of wrong thinking. Therefore everything the Teacher [or the Buddha] said is a means to attain nirvana, taking into consideration individual trainees.

As explained here clearly, in every instance whatever the Buddha taught is an ultimate means to guide a particular trainee to a certain level of attainment.

1.2.3.4. ADVICE TO STRIVE TO UNDERSTAND SUCHNESS

Showing how things are free from the extremes of existence and non-existence by teaching that they exist, do not exist and so forth is teaching on the ultimate. Correctly perceiving the ultimate with supramundane wisdom leads to the attainment of the supreme state of liberation.

*Correct perception [leads to] the supreme state, 196
Some [slight] perception to good rebirths.
The wise thus always expand their intelligence
To think about the inner nature.*

The main point of the first line, as explained in the commentary, is that it is by correctly perceiving the ultimate with supramundane wisdom (which is the analytical

wisdom that is gained on the path of seeing,) the direct perception of emptiness leads the trainee to achieve the state of liberation.

The explanation of the second line of the verse is:

Perceiving it to some extent with the mundane wisdom arising from meditation or from hearing and thinking leads to good rebirths.

To what extent does the understanding of the ultimate or emptiness benefit the trainee? Those who realise emptiness directly have supramundane wisdom, which refers here to the wisdom of those who have obtained the arya path. Therefore those who have obtained the arya path and who have the realisation of the direct perception (or understanding) of emptiness have the wisdom of the ultimate, and can therefore be led to achieving the ultimate or supreme state of liberation.

Whereas mundane refers to those below the path of seeing, who perceive emptiness to some extent. This means that they have a slight understanding of emptiness, conceptual or otherwise, that arises from meditation, or from hearing or thinking about emptiness. Such an understanding will lead the trainee, to at least achieve a good rebirth in the next lifetime.

As explained in other teachings as well, the benefits of studying and hearing about emptiness, and then thinking and contemplating and meditating on emptiness will, at the very least, definitely protect oneself from lower rebirths. Not only does it protect one from unfortunate or lower rebirths in the next lifetime, but an understanding of emptiness can help one gain (at the very least) a good and higher rebirth in the next life time.

As the commentary continues:

Thus the wise constantly expand their intelligence to think about the inner nature - emptiness.

For the reasons explained earlier, someone who contemplates and thinks about those benefits of understanding emptiness will constantly expand their intelligence to think about inner nature, which here means emptiness. Thus thinking about how things lack inherent existence, or lack true existence, or lack a truly existent self, one gains liberation and enlightenment as the ultimate result. At the very least, one will be free from lower rebirths and obtain a good rebirth in the next lifetime.

1.2.3.5. THROUGH FAMILIARISATION IN THIS WAY, NIRVANA CAN DEFINITELY BE ATTAINED

This is sub-divided into two:

1.2.3.5.1. Actual meaning

1.2.3.5.2. Why some do not gain release although release is gained by understanding suchness

1.2.3.5.1. ACTUAL MEANING

*Through knowing reality, even if now 197
One does not attain nirvana,
One will certainly gain it effortlessly
In a later life, as it is with actions.*

As the commentary explains:

Even if one does not attain nirvana in this life by knowing the reality of dependent arising free from extremes of elaboration, through familiarity with the understanding of suchness, one will certainly attain it effortlessly in a later life merely by virtue of remaining in seclusion.

The analogy is:

It is like an action performed out of ignorance, the effect of which will be experienced upon taking rebirth.

What the analogy is referring to is that as we study the workings of karma, we come to realise that the results of some actions that are performed now don't necessarily have to be experienced right away, or even later in this life. Rather, the results of some actions will be experienced, or will ripen, in a future life.

Just as that is true for general actions and their results, so too the practices concerned with training one's mind to understand emptiness and familiarising oneself with those practices, are a cause to achieve liberation. Even if one does not gain liberation in this lifetime as a result of one's training and practice, that effort will not go to waste. Rather the merit or the positive influence from that meditation, thinking, contemplating and so forth, will accumulate to result in obtaining liberation in future lifetimes.

As the commentary concludes:

What intelligent person would not strive to understand suchness?

This rhetorical question indicates that they would. The commentary then uses this analogy:

After eating a ripe mango, if you plant its stone, you'll get fruit later.

So you enjoy the mango now and then you engage in the action of planting the seed (or stone), and you will be able to enjoy the fruit again later in the future. Practising in this life is similar to that.

Then the commentary quotes from the *Fundamental Treatise Called Wisdom*, or *Root Wisdom*. Those who studied the *Madhyamakavatara* will remember that at the very beginning of the text it says that hearers and solitary realisers are born from buddhas. At that point a doubt is raised, and that same point is also raised there.

The *Fundamental Treatise Called Wisdom* says:

When consummate Buddhas do not appear
And Hearers too have come to an end,
The wisdom of Solitary Realizers
Manifests independently.

As explained at the beginning of the *Madhyamaka* text, after hearing the Buddha's teachings his disciples, who are in the category of disciples known as hearers and solitary realisers go into seclusion or practise realising what has been taught. Saying that the hearers and the solitary realisers are born from the buddhas indicates that their realisations and achievements are obtained as a result of the Buddha's teachings. The doubt that is raised is why is it that the hearers on receiving the teachings of the Buddha, go on to practise and then obtain their goal of liberation in their own lifetime, while the solitary realisers seem to take much longer. They are reborn again and again, and take much longer to obtain the goal of liberation.

The response is that it is not as if the solitary realisers do not obtain their goal of liberation. Even if they do not obtain the goal of liberation in that very lifetime, having received the teachings and going off in seclusion and practising, they will be reborn again and in a future lifetime will obtain their goal of liberation. That explanation in *Fundamental Treatise Called Wisdom* is backed up with a quotation of verse 197 from *Four*

Hundred Verses. Those students who studied the *Madhyamaka* can refer back to those notes.¹

The conclusion is that the purpose of the Buddha's teaching is of course to obtain liberation as a result of hearing the teachings and practicing them. The ultimate goal or intention is to lead the disciples to liberation, but that does not necessarily mean that the disciples have to obtain liberation within that single lifetime. If liberation is obtained in future lifetimes, that is also a suitable reason for the Buddha to give the teachings on suchness.

What we take away from this explanation as personal advice is that by reflecting on the explanations given in the text, one understands importance of familiarising oneself with the explanations of emptiness, as part of the process of gaining a full understanding and realisation of emptiness. Any continuous effort that we put in now will definitely lead to positive results, if not liberation in this lifetime then definitely a better rebirth in our next life time, and will stop unfortunate rebirths in the future lifetimes. Ultimately, it will lead to achieving liberation.

What is the benefit of making any attempt to understanding suchness or emptiness? It is the ultimate or the supreme goal that one can attain, which is liberation. If that is not obtained immediately then the next best result that one can certainly obtain is a good rebirth. One will obtain liberation, if not this lifetime then in future lifetimes, as a result of the continuous effort that we put into understanding emptiness. This is backed up with the quotes from the *Fundamental Treatise Called Wisdom*, as well as verse 197 from *Four Hundred Verses*.

Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version

© Tara Institute

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

¹ See teachings of 12 March 2002 and 19 March 2002.