
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 appropriate to set a proper motivation, such as the bodhicitta motivation.

If, when one hears the word bodhicitta one feels emotional to the point of uncontrollable tears, then that would be a good sign of progress. If the mere word 'bodhicitta' alone can instil such a deep emotional feeling within oneself, then the benefit of actually developing bodhicitta can surely be seen.

1.1.2.1. WHY EMPTINESS IS FEARED (CONT.)

1.1.2.1.3. WHY CHILDISH PEOPLE FEAR EMPTINESS

Question: Why do they fear emptiness?

Answer: Because of a lack of familiarity.

This preamble indicates that a lack of familiarity with meditating on emptiness brings about fear.

Childish beings are certainly only 284
Familiar with that which involves them.
Because of unfamiliarity
They fear that which extricates them.

It is good to further develop the question in the preamble to relate it to one's understanding and practice. If as indicated here, ordinary beings fear emptiness, because of lack of familiarity with it, then what does it mean to be familiar? How does one become familiar with emptiness? Thinking like this makes it a personal quest.

As the commentary explains:

Childish beings are certainly only familiar with innate and intellectually formed conceptions of a self which involve them in cyclic existence.

Innate and intellectually acquired misconceptions of a self have been explained earlier. Ordinary beings are already very familiar with the innate misconception of an inherently existent self, which is further strengthened by the intellectually acquired misconception; it is these mistaken concepts that lead an individual into the cyclic existence. And:

Since such childish beings have no previous familiarity with a teaching that extricates one from the cycle of birth and death, they fear emptiness.

Childish beings are led into cyclic existence because of their familiarity with innate and intellectually acquired misconceptions of a self. As childish beings are constantly engaged and immersed in cyclic existence, they find it difficult when they come up against something that opposes cyclic existence. They will naturally be fearful of losing what they have been familiar with over countless life times.

When one is familiar with something over a long time, then anything opposing that familiarity is difficult to accept. It brings fear because it is difficult to let go of an object that one is very familiar with. To give a contemporary example, for someone who has a drinking habit, the more they drink, the more familiar they become with that habit, and the more familiar with it they are, the more addicted they become.

Trying to overcome the drinking habit then is very difficult, and it is the same with addictions to any other kind of substances. Similarly, at a broader level, as explained in the text, childish or ordinary beings are familiar with cyclic existence, and that which opposes cyclic existence brings about fear, because it is difficult to accept change. As emptiness opposes the root cause of cyclic existence, they therefore fear emptiness.

From our own experience we come to realise that we are very familiar with the pleasures of cyclic existence. When the shortcomings and disadvantages of cyclic existence are explained, and even when we accept the fact that indulging in, and being immersed in the pleasures of cyclic existence keeps us in cyclic existence, it is still very hard to feel a sense of disenchantment with cyclic existence. Even though we know and understand the faults of cyclic existence intellectually, whenever we meet a desirable object we are drawn towards it. We might acknowledge the faults of samsara, and try to distance ourselves from the causes, but still we find it very difficult to avoid it.

It is very important to apply the understanding we get from this explanation to one's daily practice. There are many who claim to have meditated for many years yet don't see much change in their mind, or they may have done other practices for many years, but somehow there is no change. As a consequence, such people may come to the wrong conclusion that the fault lies in the technique of the teaching. What one should come to realise after reflecting on our deeply rooted attachment to samsara, is that it's not the fault of the teachings, but rather the fault lies in not being able to apply the teachings properly. That is what we should identify as being the main fault, not the teaching or the practice itself.

One should derive the main essence of the commentary, which is how the doctrine of emptiness instils fear, why it instils fear, and how the explanation of emptiness is a means to oppose cyclic existence. The wisdom realising emptiness, is the realisation that phenomena don't have an inherently existent self, and that wisdom directly opposes the grasping at an inherently existent self. Emptiness is the direct opposite of the misconception which grasps onto an inherently existing self.

As explained previously, grasping at an inherently existent self is what keeps beings in samsara from lifetime to lifetime. For as long as they grasp at a self they will remain in cyclic existence. That which opposes grasping at the self is the understanding of selflessness. Thus, directly opposing that misconception of an inherently existing self, opposes all the associated misconceptions of cyclic existence. When we understand this, then we come to understand how the wisdom realising selflessness or emptiness is the ultimate technique to free one from cyclic existence.

As to why emptiness instils fear, one must understand that it is because it opposes the misconception of grasping at the self that we are so familiar with, that we so completely are immersed in and hold onto so tightly. At the same time we have no familiarity with the teachings on emptiness. When there is a suggestion that grasping at the self does not exist then that naturally brings fear, as we have a sense of losing what we have. Basically we're not familiar with emptiness, and we are very familiar with grasping at an inherently existing self. So when the teachings on emptiness are presented, that brings about fear.

One should therefore give up doctrines that are wrong and unwholesome.

This refers to those doctrines that oppose the realisation of selflessness. This line also indicates that realised beings will not give teachings on emptiness or selflessness to those who are not receptive to them. Thus one should not give teachings on emptiness to beings that are not receptive to them

1.1.2.2. FAULTS OF IMPEDING OTHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF EMPTINESS

This subdivision refers to the faults that exist if one obstructs others from meditating on emptiness. The previous outline explained how it is a fault to explain emptiness to those who are not ready for it, as it can bring about fears and so forth, and a misunderstanding of the whole teaching. This heading asks if it is a fault to obstruct those who are ready to receive teachings on emptiness, or who are meditating on emptiness.

Emptiness should be taught to those who, because they feel grateful to the Tathagata, are suitable vessels, but who, because of their great fear, are tempted to reject it.

*If someone who is shrouded in
Complete ignorance and impedes suchness
Will not even attain good fortune,
What need to mention liberation?* 285

The verse indicates that the suitable vessels to receive teachings on emptiness are those who appreciate and respect the Tathagata (meaning the Buddha) making salutations and offerings, but who still have a strong fear of the pitfalls of cyclic existence. Suitable vessels are those who wish to overcome samsara, and who also have the intelligence to be able to adopt the teachings on emptiness.

More specifically it can relate to the specific realisation one needs to have to enter the path, which is renunciation, i.e. a strong and deeply spontaneous wish to overcome the sufferings of the lower realms and entirely abandon cyclic existence. Such beings are suitable vessels because, they have an intense wish to be free of cyclic existence, thus they are ready to hear the teachings on selflessness, which are the main means to overcome cyclic existence. It is good to understand and relate to that. As we are all engaged in society, and we have to coexist with others it is good to remember their limitations, and not explain too much.

Someone who not only has a total disregard for emptiness but is completely shrouded in ignorance and impedes teaching, hearing and thinking about suchness out of jealousy, meanness and the like will not even attain the good fortune of a high rebirth. This being so, what chance is there of such a person attaining liberation, since such actions are grave ill deeds?

This is a vivid illustration of a person who does not accept emptiness and who has a mind that is engulfed with ignorance, which prevents them from seeing the incredible value of emptiness. Rather than seeing that value they impede the teaching, which can mean when others give teachings, or are hearing and thinking about emptiness, they feel upset out of jealousy or just because they are mean. Such negative emotions arise in relation to the ignorance of emptiness. Such beings will not obtain good fortune, meaning a higher rebirth, and if they cannot obtain a higher rebirth because of their state of mind and attitudes, then there is no chance whatsoever for them to obtain liberation.

Rejecting dependent arising free from fabricated extremes [which relates to emptiness] is a more serious

ill deed than killing a hundred million people, so one must take care in this matter to avoid deceiving oneself.

This graphically illustrates that rejecting emptiness or criticising it out of jealousy, miserliness and so forth is a great misdeed. As the commentary says, one must avoid deceiving oneself, meaning that one must be careful not to fall into the category of criticising those who are practising and meditating on emptiness, or teaching emptiness. As we all have faith in the teachings on emptiness we may not have that danger. Nevertheless it is possible, and we must always be alert to a critical mind arising in ourselves. There is a great danger especially in relation to criticising others out of jealousy. That sort of critical mind can very easily arise within ourselves, and it is something we must be wary of and not deceive ourselves about, meaning that we must protect ourselves from that great danger.

If we can relate being shrouded in the ignorance to ourselves then, as indicated here in the teachings, it is because of that very fact of being engulfed in ignorance that all of the faults, such as criticising others out of jealousy and miserliness, come about. If we can identify that ignorance within ourselves, then we can see how we are in danger. Therefore we must always protect ourselves.

1.1.2.3. TAKING CARE NOT TO LAPSE FROM THE VIEW OF SUCHNESS

Whatever understanding one may gain, intellectually or otherwise, one must be very careful not to let that decline or lapse.

*Lapsing from ethics is preferable
To lapsing from the view. 286
Through ethics one gains a high rebirth;
The supreme state is reached by means of the view.*

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse thus:

Since denying emptiness is most detrimental to oneself and others, a lapse in ethical conduct is preferable.

Denying emptiness can bring very great danger and harm to oneself and others. The Tibetan word fault *la-i* has the connotation of being easier. What is being indicated here is that lapsing from ethical conduct is relatively less serious than denying emptiness. The reason the commentary gives is:

...for while the result of ethical conduct is a high rebirth, the view that understands emptiness takes one to the supreme states of liberation and enlightenment.

For someone practising moral ethics, even very well, the highest goal they can reach is a higher rebirth in the next lifetime; one can not achieve a higher status than that. Whereas, the realisation of emptiness will take one to the supreme state of liberation and ultimately enlightenment. Compared with the temporary goal of higher rebirth, the supreme goals of liberation and enlightenment are much more valuable. So the main point is that realising emptiness is much more valuable compared to following moral ethics.

Sutra says:

A lapse in ethics is preferable;
A lapse in view is not.

1.1.2.4. STAGES LEADING TOWARDS SUCHNESS

The wise only teach the view of suchness after carefully examining the vessel. It is also said:

Taught to fools, it confuses them
And does not further peace.
When snakes drink milk
Their poison only increases.

The first two lines of this verse relate to emptiness and the last pair of lines are the analogy. When poisonous snakes drink milk it only increases their poison rather than decreasing it. The analogy illustrates the fact that when emptiness is taught to those who are not intelligent, then rather than benefiting them and bringing peace, it just brings more confusion.

For the unreceptive, conceptions of a self are best; 287
To teach them selflessness is not.
They would go to bad rebirths,
While the extraordinary attain peace.

The commentary states:

It is best to teach the uneducated and unreceptive that there is a self in accordance with their conceptions of a self...

For those who are uneducated, meaning those who don't have much intelligence and who are unreceptive to the teachings on selflessness, teaching that there is a self, in accordance with their conception of a self, is much better. The reason for that is:

...for their attachment to the self will cause them to give up harmful behaviour, making it easier for them to find a happy rebirth.

When there is a very strong misconception of grasping at the self then that can produce attachment to the self, which naturally brings attachment to what is conducive to the self. Because of this, that which is immediately conducive to the self is having good status, i.e. a good rebirth and the good conditions associated with that rebirth. For such people, teachings on obtaining higher rebirth are very attractive, and will be readily accepted, because that is conducive to their strong attachment to the self. Such beings are receptive to teachings that explain the causes to obtain a higher rebirth (such as a human or god rebirth) and are likely to engage in practices such as keeping morality and so forth, basically abiding by the law of karma, and creating virtuous karma. You are already aware that virtuous meritorious karma leads to a good rebirth in the next lifetime and non-meritorious negative karma leads to unfortunate rebirths. These teachings on karma, which present the causes to obtain higher rebirth, are very suitable for a person with a tendency to have a strong attachment to the self. If we are inclined to create virtue because of attachment to the self, and wishing for happiness, we may engage in good deeds to acquire those results. Thus, some good temporary results can be obtained from grasping at the self.

Having explained why such beings are suitable to receive teachings on an existent self, the commentary next shows the faults of explaining emptiness and selflessness to such beings.

It is not good to teach them emptiness, for they will ruin their three doors by rejecting or misunderstanding it. Thus teaching emptiness has a disadvantageous as well as an advantageous aspect. On the one hand, rejecting it through lack of appreciation or denying cause and effect because of taking non-existence to be the meaning of emptiness leads to a bad rebirth.

If teachings on emptiness are given to those who are not suitable, their misunderstanding could result in extremes. It might lead them to the misunderstanding that nothing exists, and that cause and effect, or karma, doesn't exist, and thus lead them to the grave misdeed of completely denying karma, creating the negative karma to be reborn in the lower realms. That is an ill effect!

On the other hand, the extraordinary who have mastered suchness attain peace.

This line indicates the advantageous aspects of teaching on emptiness: those who are receptive to teachings on emptiness will be able, by gaining full understanding of emptiness, to gain the realisations that lead them to the ultimate state of peace, liberation or enlightenment.

I suppose we would put ourselves in the category of those who are receptive to teachings on emptiness!? If we do, then we must make sure that we live up to that position, and make an effort to gain an understanding of emptiness. Not only that but we should make the effort to put it into practice. Whenever there is a category to choose from, we naturally choose to be in the better category, don't we!? That is of course an ideal.

1.1.2.5. RECOGNISING SUCHNESS

This heading has two sub-divisions

1.1.2.5.1. Recognising the fundamental mode of existence

1.1.2.5.2. Why fear arises in the weak

1.1.2.5.1. RECOGNISING THE FUNDAMENTAL MODE OF EXISTENCE

One must definitely understand suchness to reach enlightenment in any of the three vehicles.

There is no other door to peace, 288
And it destroys wrong views.
That which is the object of
All Buddhas is called selflessness.

As the commentary explains:

Since the root of worldly existence cannot be cut without understanding emptiness, there is no other door to peace.

This is a point where we incorporate the understanding we gained from our studies of the Madhyamika, which explained very elaborately that there is only one door to peace or liberation, as is indicated here.

...there is no other door to peace. Dependent arising's lack of inherent existence is called the fundamental mode of existence,

'There is no other door to peace', means that there is only one door to peace, and this refers to the realisation of emptiness, which is the one door leading to the peace of the nirvana or enlightenment. More specifically, one must definitely understand suchness to realise enlightenment in any of the three vehicles. That is the main point that was explained so elaborately in the Madhyamika teachings - the realisation of emptiness is the one technique which leads to the goals of all the three vehicles, the hearer, solitary realiser and bodhisattva vehicles.

Other teachings show how the realisation of emptiness is referred to as the mother, and bodhicitta is like the father. So wisdom is the mother and method is the father. To explain that further, in the caste system in India, if the father is of Brahmin caste then naturally his child is a Brahmin. Likewise if the father is a king, then his child is also naturally from the royal caste.

Whatever the caste of the father the son is of the same caste as his father, whereas the mother can produce children belonging to different castes. For example, a mother can have three children by three different fathers, and the nationality of the father determines the nationality of the child. If one of the children is fathered by a Tibetan the child would be Tibetan, although nowadays, of course, some would say, 'I am half and half'. In India, for example, a mother could have a son of the royal caste, a son of the

Brahmin caste, and a son of the warrior caste. However the father can father only a child of one caste.

The meaning we derive from this analogy is that practising the method side, which in the great vehicle is bodhicitta, produces the ultimate goal of enlightenment. In the lower vehicle the method produces only liberation. Whereas the realisation of emptiness can produce three different types goals, which is liberation for the hearer and solitary realisers, and enlightenment for the bodhisattvas. When one develops renunciation, and along with that the strong wish for personal peace, to be freed from cyclic existence, and that strong determination is infused by the realisation of emptiness, then that brings about the goal of self liberation. Within the great vehicle, one first develops a sense of great love, wishing all beings to be free from samsara and ultimately free from cyclic existence, and when that attitude is infused with the realisation of emptiness, then that brings about the goal of enlightenment.

The main point from this explanation is that whatever goal one intends to achieve from the three vehicles, the only cause to achieve any of these goals is the realisation of selflessness. Without that one cannot attain the goals of either self liberation or enlightenment. The one door to the achievement of that ultimate goal is the realisation of suchness or emptiness.

Having explained that there is no other door to peace, the commentary continues:

Dependent arising's lack of inherent existence is called the fundamental mode of existence, ultimate truth, emptiness and selflessness, and is the object of Hearer and Solitary Realizer Exalted ones and of all Exalted Buddhas. Understanding it destroys wrong views holding to extremes.

Here 'holding to extremes' refers to grasping at a truly existent self.

1.1.2.5.2. WHY FEAR ARISES IN THE WEAK

The unreceptive are terrified 289
Just by its very name.
What so-called strong man is seen
Who does not frighten the weak?

As the commentary explains:

Selflessness must not be taught to the weak-minded for the very word "emptiness" terrifies the unreceptive. Does one see any so-called strong man who does not frighten the weak? For instance, just the sight of a lion or tiger frightens small animals.

The very word 'emptiness' terrifies those who are very strongly attached to the self, other phenomena, worldly existence, and cyclic existence.

For such beings with very strong attachment, who believe one hundred percent in that reality, the mere word 'empty' brings a strong fear to their mind, because it immediately distances them from what they perceive as being reality. The reason it instils fear in the unreceptive is because the power of the word 'emptiness' is so great, because of what it stands for. Let alone the actual realisations, even the name of emptiness is very powerful. To illustrate that, we use the example of the fearsome beast. When animals or humans hear the word 'lion' that brings about fear because of what lions stand for. When animals have an indication that there is a lion around they immediately have fear in their mind because of the power that lions have, but they would not have fear of animals of their own kind. Even with humans, if

we feel we are equal we have no fear, but we fear the more powerful.

1.1.3. The profound is not taught for the sake of argument

This section has three subdivisions:

1.1.3.1. Although not taught for the sake of debate this very teaching burns up wrong contentions

1.1.3.2. Why this is so

1.1.3.3. Appropriateness of compassion for those following the wrong path

1.1.3.1. ALTHOUGH NOT TAUGHT FOR THE SAKE OF DEBATE THIS VERY TEACHING BURNS UP WRONG CONTENTIONS

The Buddha did not teach emptiness for the sake of argument or debate, but the explanation of emptiness, by its very nature, eliminates wrong contentions or wrong views.

Assertion: Since this teaching destroys all wrong views, it should be taught to the unreceptive in order to defeat its opponents.

Answer:

This principle is not taught 290
By Tathagatas for the sake of debate,
Yet it burns up others' contentions
As a fire does its fuel.

The actual question in relation to the assertion is that if teaching on emptiness destroys all wrong views it shouldn't be taught to the unreceptive.

Tathagatas do not teach this principle only to outshine opponents in debate but as the door to liberation.

The purpose of the Buddha teaching suchness is to show the door to liberation.

Nonetheless this teaching of emptiness burns up others' wrong contentions...

Even though not intended to defeat others through debate, explaining emptiness naturally burns up the wrong contentions of others by its very nature. The analogy is that:

...just as fire consumes its fuel without formulating the intention to burn.

The analogy is quite vivid. It is not as if the fire has an intention to burn up timber and so forth, but by its very nature when fire burns it consumes and burns up fuel. The commentary gives another quote from the sutras:

The Master also says:

Like the dew on the tip of the grass
When it meets with the rays of the sun,

Here the analogy is that the dew on the tip of the grass will naturally evaporate when it meets with the sun. Even though the sun has no intention of drying up the dew it naturally does so.

Opponents' arguments and errors
Evaporate when they meet you."

Here the 'you' refers to explanations of emptiness.

We will conclude here. There are not many verses left in this chapter. It would be good to reflect on the explanations given so far in this chapter, because as you would have noticed, there are many profound explanations that will be helpful for our own practice.

Edited Version

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