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# Study Group – Aryadeva's 400 Verses

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*Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga*

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First, please sit yourself in a comfortable upright proper meditation posture and then generate the single-pointed motivation of bodhicitta, wanting to attain enlightenment for the welfare of all sentient beings. Then really think, 'For that purpose I am going to use what I learn in this profound teaching in my practice as much as possible'.

The **first chapter** comes under the outline 3.2.1.1.1. Showing the way of abandoning mistaken grasping at permanence by explaining extensively how to be mindful of death.<sup>1</sup>

1. The explanation of the meaning of the chapter.
2. The explanation of the title of the chapter.

## **1. THE EXPLANATION OF THE ACTUAL MEANING OF THE CHAPTER**

- 1.1. A brief explanation exhorting the disciple to conscientious striving on the path for liberation by being mindful of death.
- 1.2. Explaining extensively how to meditate on impermanence.
- 1.3. The benefits of meditating on impermanence.

### **1.1. A brief explanation exhorting the disciple to conscientious striving on the path for liberation by being mindful of death**

Because of a lack of conscientiousness the mind does not aspire for liberation, which is why one needs to generate conscientiousness. This is done by meditating on death and impermanence.

If you look closely at the words of the heading you can see its deep meaning. What does the path to liberation refer to? First of all liberation is liberation from suffering and its causes. The path that leads there is the practice of the six perfections of generosity, morality, patience, enthusiasm, mental stabilisation and wisdom practised in dependence on renunciation. This can also be summed up as the three higher trainings. What one is liberated from is cyclic existence, and what this means is that one is liberated from suffering and its causes, which are karma and afflictions. So practising generosity, morality, patience, enthusiasm, mental stabilisation and wisdom on the basis of renunciation becomes the path to

liberation, and these practices can also be summed up as the three higher trainings.

If one is not conscientious, i.e. if one is reckless, then the mind will not enter the path to liberation. What makes the mind reckless is a lack of awareness of impermanence and death. If the mind is under the power of the grasping at permanence then it becomes consumed with this life and is not concerned at all with liberation. This automatically shows that grasping at permanence is a distorted and confused state. By overcoming grasping at permanence one can generate the conscientiousness that strives in the path to liberation.

Conscientiousness is a virtue, and recklessness is a non-virtue. Therefore it is important to know what distinguishes them from each other. The *Compendium of Knowledge* defines **conscientiousness** as: While abiding within detachment, non-anger and non-ignorance together with enthusiastic effort, protecting whatever meditation on virtuous objects (virtuous states) and (protecting) the mind from contaminated objects; having the function of perfectly completing and accomplishing all samsaric and non-samsaric perfections.

It is a mental factor that is combined with enthusiasm and abides in a state of non-attachment, non-anger and non-ignorance. It protects any meditation on virtue and protects the mind from contaminated objects. The function of conscientiousness is to accomplish all temporary and ultimate accumulations of virtue and merit.

If the mind is under the control of attachment, for example, then it is difficult to meditate extensively on virtue. So by definition conscientiousness is a mental state that abides free from attachment, anger and ignorance.

To sum it up, conscientiousness is a mental state that is free from mental afflictions, is combined with enthusiasm, protects the meditation on virtue and protects the mind from contamination. So you can see that without having conscientiousness it is impossible to meditate on virtue.

Conscientiousness is one of the eleven virtuous mental factors and its opposite, recklessness, is one of the twenty proximate afflictions. The definition of **recklessness** is exactly the opposite to conscientiousness: A mental factor that abides within attachment, anger and ignorance while being combined with laziness, not protecting the mind from contaminated dharmas and not meditating on virtuous dharmas; having the function of obstruction virtue and increasing non-virtue.

Recklessness is a mental state under the control of attachment, anger and ignorance, and is combined with laziness. It actually prevents the mind from engaging in virtue and leads to engagement with contaminated objects. The function of recklessness is the exact opposite of conscientiousness in that it greatly increases non-virtue, and it greatly decreases one's virtuous practices. It is a state of mind where one thinks, 'It does not matter. I can just leave my mind under the control of the afflictions'.

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<sup>1</sup> To simplify the numbering, the first four chapters from 3.2.1.1.1 to 3.2.1.1.4 will start with 1, 2, 3, and 4 respectively. They all fall under the heading 3.2.1.1 Showing how to generate wishing bodhicitta by training in the meditations common to the medium capable being, which is the abandoning of the four misconceptions.

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Now we go to the root text, which is a very special text. One should tell oneself that now, when one has the great opportunity to study this text that explains in such an excellent manner how to overcome the grasping at his life, one should make an effort to lessen the grasping at this life.

***The ruler of the three worlds [1]  
Is the autonomous Lord of Death himself.  
Realising this, if one sleeps like the perfect ones  
What could be worse than that?***

Grasping at one's permanence and thinking one is not going to die is the main obstacle to generating enthusiasm for striving on the path to liberation. If one allows one's mind to remain under the control of grasping at permanence, thinking, 'Oh, I am not going to die', then one is not going to be interested in wanting to achieve liberation. Therefore it is important that one repeatedly meditates on death and impermanence in order to generate a yearning for liberation.

One's grasping at one's permanence is a distorted and confused mental state, because by nature the aggregates are changing moment by moment. Although they are momentary in nature one does not perceive the aggregates in such a manner: rather one perceives them as abiding, and this perception of the aggregates as abiding is a mistaken, distorted perception. Why? Because the aggregates are actually changing moment by moment.

Meditation on the impermanence of the aggregates has many benefits: not only does it generate the wish for liberation, but it also lays the groundwork for understanding that the aggregates are suffering, impure and lack self.

What kind of person is the person referred to in the third line, a person under the Lord of Death? It is a person who, because of true-grasping at functionalities, is not liberated from the three realms. Such a person has generated no antidote to true-grasping at functionalities in their mind, and therefore they are not liberated from the three realms. The only way to be liberated from the three realms is to realise emptiness.

The common explanation of the three realms is that they are the desire realm, the form realm and the formless realm. However one can also relate the three realms to the lower realms, the intermediate or human realm, and the higher realms of the divine beings.

The reason why one is under the control of the Lord of Death is because one has not realised selflessness. The Lord of Death is the ruler of the three realms and exists in all of the three realms. This relates to the point that is always mentioned - there is no place where one can hide from, or not be affected by, the Lord of Death. Regardless of whether one is in a higher or lower realm, if one has not liberated oneself with the realisation of emptiness one will always be under the control of the Lord of Death. Here one does not need to relate the Lord of Death to an external being or some form and so forth, but one can relate it to the very ending of life, because it is the ending of life that is death. The Lord of Death is autonomous in

that he does not order others to do his bidding, nor is he instructed or ordered by others to kill: it is something he just does autonomously.

The Lord of Death is always looming like a butcher brandishing a sharp knife, and it depends completely on the Lord of Death whether or not one will live. Sometimes one thinks, 'Oh, whether I will live or not depends on other factors in my life', but whether one lives or not is completely in the hands of the Lord of Death. So the Lord of Death looms over one like a butcher with a sharp knife and it is only a question of time as to when one will be killed. Realising this one should generate renunciation with the same urgency as if one had red-hot coals lying on one's head, or as if one were in a pit of burning coal. Through recklessness one is prevented from following a path to liberation, but becoming mindful of one's death will generate conscientiousness, and one will generate an urgency to attain liberation, similar to wanting to become free from burning coal and fire.

There could be nothing worse than being lazy and reckless and remain like the perfect ones, the arhats and buddhas, who have already conquered the Lord of Death. Rather, one should repeatedly meditate on death and impermanence and generate a strong yearning for liberation, and practise the path to liberation with conscientiousness, and in such a way take the essence of this precious human life.

It is similar to the analogy where a king's minister is in danger of being killed by the king and therefore has to be very much aware and on his guard. Likewise one should be aware and conscientious because the Lord of Death is constantly looming. One should practise the path to liberation conscientiously.

The common fear of death that everybody experiences comes from the fear of losing one's possessions, losing one's relatives and losing one's body. Of these three, losing one's body probably causes the most suffering, and it is probably the most difficult for those who have a perfect body. Even in this life one just has to analyse how much suffering it causes if one loses a valuable possession compared to when one loses something that does not have much value.

The fear of death in relation to the Dharma is different. Geshe Potowa said that he was not afraid of death but of birth, because death is over very quickly, but then comes the next life which, for most people, will be fuelled by non-virtue. So it will be a lower rebirth that will be very hard to bear. One can observe that there are different types of lower rebirth or suffering rebirths that would be very difficult to bear.

Since one is under the control of mental afflictions there is nothing one can do about dying. But there is something that one can do about the way that one dies: one can lessen the grasping at this life by meditating on death and impermanence and one can lessen the fear of a lower rebirth by practising virtue and purifying all non-virtue. On the one hand everyone grasps at the happiness of this life, one grasps at one's possessions, one grasps at one's

body and so forth, and these different graspings can be lessened by meditating on death and impermanence. The next life is determined by one's karma: non-virtue causes one to be reborn in the lower realms and virtue causes one to be born in the higher realms; so to avoid being born in the lower realms one needs to purify one's virtue and one needs to create the cause for higher rebirth virtue. By knowing the Dharma and how to practise it, and applying it to one's life one can reap its benefits. In this way one can die without worry.

## 1.2. Extensive explanation of how to meditate on impermanence

1.2.1. The way of meditating on mindfulness of one's own death.

1.2.2. How it is unsuitable to mourn others suffering of death but not thinking about one's own suffering of death that is still experiencing.

1.2.3. Advice to abandon attachment to harmful activities and practise the path to liberation enthusiastically.

### 1.2.1. The way of meditating on mindfulness of one's own death

This comes in two points:

1.2.1.1. Meditating on coarse impermanence

1.2.1.2. Meditating on subtle impermanence

#### 1.2.1.1. Meditating on coarse impermanence

Coarse impermanence is the impermanence that can be directly observed: one can see somebody dying, and one can see the glass breaking and so forth. Subtle impermanence, however, needs to be established by reason, by a valid sign, because it refers to the momentariness of the object, which is not something that can initially be observed directly.

Subtle impermanence refers to the momentariness of the object. The definition of *impermanence* is momentary. It refers to the non-abiding of the object. The object is always in flux and never abiding, not even for one moment. This is not something that one can observe directly: it is something that has to be established by valid reasoning, by valid sign.

Coarse impermanence is what is referred to here as death and impermanence. It is taught in five outlines:

1.2.1.1.1. Life is not an antidote to death and should not be trusted.

1.2.1.1.2. It is unsuitable to be unafraid of death as death affects everybody equally.

1.2.1.1.3. It is unsuitable to be unafraid of death by thinking that there are antidotes to sickness and aging.

1.2.1.1.4. It is very unsuitable to be unafraid of death as the time of death is indefinite.

1.2.1.1.5. Refuting the argument that a brave person is not afraid of death.

### 1.2.1.1.1. LIFE IS NOT AN ANTIDOTE TO DEATH AND SHOULD NOT BE TRUSTED

This comes in two points:

1.2.1.1.1.1. Actual

1.2.1.1.1.2. Since one's life is very long one does not need to be afraid of death.

#### 1.2.1.1.1.1. Counteracting the thought that life is the antidote to death and therefore one does not need to be afraid of death

*One is born to die* [2]  
*Further those in the nature of going without freedom*  
*Appear to be in the process*  
*Of dying not living.*

Here the mistaken notion is that since life is the antidote to death one does not need to be afraid of death. As life stops death and as one is presently is very much alive one is not going to die. One is going to be alive for a long time and therefore there is no need to be afraid of death now, as the time of death lies far into the future.

The attitude described here is, 'Oh, as long as I have my life I don't need to worry about death. I am just going to enjoy life until I die, and then when I die then I will worry about death. Anyway, life counteracts death, and at the moment I am very much alive, so I don't need to worry about death'.

This attitude of not worrying about the Lord of Death until I am going to die is incorrect, because even though one might be alive right now, life is not the antidote to death. Actually it is precisely because one is alive that one is going to die.

One is born to die and those in the nature of going without freedom appear to be in the process of dying not living. Far from being the antidote to death, life is a condition for death. First one is born and the inevitable result of being born is that one will die. One is shepherded by sickness and old age towards death just like sheep are inevitably led to the butcher for slaughter. Thinking that one is protected because one is alive is a mistaken notion: because one is alive one can become sick, being alive is why one becomes old and also why one dies. So being alive does not really have any qualities.

Since rebirth in one's mother's womb, one is continuously moving towards one's death without a moment's respite. Therefore none of these qualities that you ascribe to life are there.

By meditating well on death and impermanence one's Dharma mind will develop well.

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*Edited Version*

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