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## Study Group – *Aryadeva's 400 Verses*

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As usual we can sit in a comfortable position and generate a positive motivation to receive the teachings by thinking, 'The reason I receive these teachings is in order to benefit all sentient beings and for that purpose, may I be able to use the teachings to achieve enlightenment'.

### **1.2.1. How to cultivate awareness of one's own death (cont.)**

#### **1.2.1.1 Meditation on coarse impermanence**

We have been talking on topics related to these headings. The verses we have covered so far have been related to the grosser levels of impermanence that are more noticeable to us. However subtle impermanence is harder to recognise and ascertain.

Next is subtle impermanence.

#### **1.2.1.2. Contemplating and meditating on subtle impermanence**

Subtle impermanence refers to the momentary changes that occur in any functional phenomena. The definition of impermanence is, 'that which is momentary'. The reason why subtle impermanence is referred to as being subtle is because one needs to rely upon logical reasons in order to perceive or understand the momentary changes in any functional phenomenon. Whereas gross impermanence can be perceived directly by the sense perceptions, so therefore one does not need to rely on logical reasons to perceive or understand the gross level of impermanence.

This heading is further divided into two subdivisions.

1.2.1.2.1. Since life diminishes moment by moment do not rely upon it

1.2.1.2.2. Inappropriateness of attachment to continuation because wanting to live long and not wanting to be old are contradictory

The second subdivision indicates that there is a contradiction between being attached to the continuation of life while at the same time not wanting to become old. On one hand we are attached to the continuity of life because we want to live for a long time, but on the other hand we do not wish to get old. The natural result of life's continuity is aging; however one does not wish to become old. So the two desires - continuity of life and not wishing to become old - are contradictory. Therefore, if one doesn't want to become old, it is absurd to be attached to the continuity of one's life.

#### **1.2.1.2.1. Since life diminishes moment by moment do not rely upon it**

The purpose for emphasising awareness and meditation on impermanence is to overcome our excessive attachment in general, and to our present life in

particular. Attachment towards any animate or inanimate object arises in relation to the false qualities that we ourselves have projected upon the object, and afterwards we don't wish for those good qualities to change. But the very nature of the object is that it is changing from moment to moment on gross and subtle levels.

If we are familiar with the subtle impermanent nature of the objects to which we are attached, we will not be surprised and experience too much suffering when we notice the gross changes. Most of us are attached to life and material things, with the wrong view that it is sustainable and long lasting. We see our own life, as well as the things that sustain our life as having a permanent unchanging nature. Because of that view, we plan for our future as though we will live for ever. We are also attached to things as though they will not change and last for ever. But changes do occur, and when we are not prepared for it, it brings a lot of suffering to our mind. Therefore the more we familiarise our mind with the meditations on impermanence, the less suffering we will experience. When we consider these points we can definitely see the benefit of the Dharma. People may ask, 'How can Dharma help?', 'How can understanding the teachings and practising them help the mind?' If one begins to relate the points made in the teachings to one's own life, one can begin to definitely see the benefits that occur as a result of having gained, for example, an understanding on impermanence.

Qualm: Is it permissible or suitable to engage in negativities in order to sustain one's life?

Answer: It is not suitable.

This qualm arises from our normal thinking patterns. If we need to sustain our life, then it may seem acceptable to engage in non-virtuous deeds when those deeds are done in order to sustain oneself. The following verse is a response to that sort of misconception.

*No matter whose life, it does not  
Differ from the moments of mind  
This people certainly do not perceive.  
Thus it is rare to know the self.* [10]

If one is interested in practising Dharma, there can be hindrances that arise from the misconception, 'I will have a long life'. The laziness of procrastination arises because of that misconception, and we think, 'First, I have to accomplish all of my worldly activities such as making money and so forth, then later when I have more free time I can practise the Dharma in a leisurely manner'. That kind of procrastinating attitude arises because of our misconception that life is a continuity that lasts long into the future.

What this verse is indicating is that what we call life is actually nothing more than fluctuating moments of mind. Therefore each moment that we live is actually an exhaustion of that moment of life. We need to understand that life is not something very stable and unchanging that remains for a long time, but rather, in reality, it is only moments of mind.

Just like all other impermanent phenomena, what we call life is also a phenomenon that is changing from moment

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to moment. The realisation of that is hindered by the erroneous state of mind perceiving phenomena and oneself as unchanging and permanent. The misconception of seeing things as having a permanent nature is what obstructs both oneself and other beings from perceiving the actual reality of life. Because of not being able to understand this reality, beings fail to understand the nature of themselves, which in this case relates to the subtle impermanence of life. Therefore in order to overcome this misconception one needs to meditate and generate awareness on subtle impermanence. As the verse indicates, because of not being able to ascertain the certainty of subtle impermanence, beings who know themselves are rare.

**1.2.1.2.2. Inappropriateness of attachment to continuation because liking to live long and not wanting to be old is contradictory**

The next verse is an explanation which serves as an answer to yet another qualm, or doubt, that arises in the mind. Even when the earlier doubt is cleared, one may think, 'Although the mind itself is momentary, the continuation of the mind lasts, therefore it is appropriate to be attached to the continuation of life'.

Qualm: Although life may be impermanent its continuation lasts, therefore is it suitable to be attached to the continuation of life?

Answer: It is not suitable.

*You would like to live long* [11]  
*But dislike old age.*  
*Amazing! Your behaviour*  
*Seems right to people like you*

We have a general common misconception, that regards a later perceived object as being exactly the same object that we had seen earlier. This misconception arises because of the fact that in the later moment there is what is called a 'similar type' aspect of the previous object. When we relate to, for example, any external object that we may see such as the mountains, the sea, landscapes, etc. they are constantly changing from moment to moment. However because there is a similar type in the next moment, (in Tibetan it is called *rig da*, - *rig* is type and *da* is similar) it appears to be the same object although in reality we are not seeing the actual object that we first perceived.

When we are looking at a mountain or a tree, subtle changes occur each moment as we are looking at it, therefore each moment it is a different mountain or tree from the previous moment. The mountain or tree we see in each moment is not the same tree or mountain that we saw in the earlier moment. However when we see the similar type of mountain, tree or any other object in the next moment, we think we are seeing the actual object we saw earlier and refer to it as the actual object; this misperception leads us to think that the object has remained unchanged.

This can be related to ourselves and our life. As ordinary beings, we can only experience and relate to gross impermanence, such as when things fall apart, when mountains are flattened, trees cut down, houses collapse

and when death occurs. We see this and think that things have changed or do not exist anymore. That is the gross level of impermanence that we are relating to. On a subtle level each moment of existence is one of change from moment to moment, even though we may not perceive that.

Another more vivid example is the perception we have right here of this room and gathering. In reality, more than half an hour has passed since we first gathered here, but when we look around and see the same objects and people, it appears as though nothing has really changed. We think, 'I see the same people around me, the same objects, and the teacher is the same'. This is however a false notion. When we consider the fact how more than half an hour has already passed, that is already a change. During that time, subtle momentary changes have constantly occurred as well.

Another very good analogy of impermanence, even for subtle impermanence is when we look at the time. As we are looking at the clock, the seconds constantly tick away, without stopping even for a moment. That is the reality of every functional object: it does not last; it goes on changing moment by moment.

Verse 11 serves as an answer to the earlier doubt, stating that this is an erroneous state of mind and therefore such a misconception should be overcome. The verse says that if you think that it is suitable to be attached to the continuation of life, then that contradicts what you dislike as a result of the continuation of life, which is becoming old and feeble, with white hair, wrinkles and so forth. The verse says that if you do not wish to experience old age, then how could it be reasonable for you to be attached to the continuation of life? Holding on to the view that it is suitable to be attached to a continuation of life, is only considered suitable for you and like-minded beings, but not for the wise. The verse indicates that for the wise who have the 'wisdom eye' which in this case means having the understanding of subtle impermanence, holding such a wrong view is not considered suitable.

**1.2.2. Inappropriateness of grieving only at others' death while overlooking the disadvantages of not being free from fear of death oneself**

This heading has two further sub-divisions:

1.2.2.1. A brief explanation

1.2.2.2. Extensive explanation by answering objections

**1.2.2.1. A brief explanation**

Qualm: Old age and death can be regarded as an unwished-for suffering when it occurs to others, but can I not accept it for myself?

This doubt arises when there is an experience of suffering, such as when death happens to a loved one, for example, one's own child, but one still believes that it will be fine for oneself, thinking, 'I don't mind experiencing old age and death myself'.

Answer: It is inappropriate to have such a view.

*Why do you grieve at death  
On account of your son and others?  
When the one that laments is a victim  
How is that not reprehensible?*

[12]

The meaning of the verse is that just as you would lament and suffer the death of your loved ones, such as your own son, it is suitable for you to recognise the sufferings that you will experience at your own death, especially as you have committed many negative deeds. The indication is, because you are in a situation in which you are creating negative karmas, and you will definitely experience death, it is suitable for you to consider the sufferings that you will experience at the time of death.

This verse has two main points of advice.

1. Generating an awareness of one's own death. This verse actually indicates the absurdity of our mind, where we think that even though we feel suffering and grief when others die, 'It shouldn't be any problem for me'. Not fearing death is a misconception which hinders our practice of Dharma. With this misconception we are led into engaging in worldly negative deeds as mentioned earlier, which are related only to the benefits of this lifetime. When we are attached only to this life and spend all our time and energy in sustaining this life, then we naturally engage in negative deeds. This verse helps to counteract this misconception as well as the misconception that one will not experience the suffering of one's own death.

2. Overcoming grief. This verse is also practical advice for those who may be experiencing extreme grief and suffering because of the death of a loved one, for example one's own child. When someone dear in our life passes away, one can be overpowered by that grief and it can become an obstruction to engaging in virtuous deeds and so forth. The verse indicates that it is natural for loved ones to die, because that is the nature of an impermanent phenomenon. There are the subtle changes throughout life and eventually the gross change of death occurs. So rather than being overly consumed by grief, one can engage in virtuous deeds that will help those who have died, as well as using the experience to generate an awareness of one own death.

**The Buddha has said in the sutras...**

'For those who develop an understanding of the reality of impermanence and meditate upon that, that person will not experience great shock or grief when they are separated from loved ones, through death or any other circumstances.' So, by meditating repeatedly one generates an awareness, of how things change from moment to moment on gross and subtle levels.

To generate the awareness of impermanence the Buddha explained four points in the sutras:

1. The end result of being born, is to die;
2. The end result of a gathering, is to disperse;
3. The end result of reaching a high status is to fall to the low;
4. The end result of accumulation - wealth and so forth, is exhaustion.

When we really think about these four main points that are raised in the sutras, we realise that this is really how things are. Contemplating and meditating on these aspects of impermanence can reduce great suffering in one's own mind.

**How these four points are of use**

There is a story that relates to these four points. There was once a family who were familiar with the recitation of the sutras. They memorised these four points and recited them repeatedly within the family. All of them, particularly the parents, wherever they went and in whatever actions they engaged in, would be reciting these four points. A magician wanted to test their faith and how much they understood the meaning of what they were reciting. He took the opportunity one day when the son was in the forest collecting wood. The magician found the place where the child had left his belongings, and conjured a dead child, who looked just like the son. When the other children saw that conjured dead child, they went back to the father saying, 'Oh, we saw that your son has died'. The father continued to recite the four points so the magician asked him, 'Don't you feel any grief?' To which the father replied, 'A son came without having asked him to come and then left without having been asked to go. All phenomena are in the same nature, so there is no reason for me to be shocked and grief-stricken about that'. When the mother was asked whether she felt any grief on the account of her son's death, she replied in the same way as the father and quoted another saying, 'In the evening there are a lot of birds that gather on a tree to roost, and in the morning they all fly away and disperse. All phenomena are similar in that way'. The magician asked the boy's sister the same thing, and she replied saying, 'In the markets many people gather during the day, but towards the evening when everything is closed, all people are dispersed and gone. All phenomena are similar'. The following verses pick up on the themes of this story.

They are covered under the following sub-headings.

**1.2.2.2. The extensive explanation by answering objections**

This is further divided into six subdivisions.

- 1.2.2.2.1. Refuting the appropriateness of grief because one's son went to the next world without asking
- 1.2.2.2.2. Inappropriateness of being very attached to one's son
- 1.2.2.2.3. Inappropriateness of grieving over a dead person (in this case a son) in front of other people
- 1.2.2.2.4. Inappropriateness of grieving for a dead relative to ensure a close relationship with surviving relatives
- 1.2.2.2.5. Inappropriateness of attachment to being with relatives and so forth
- 1.2.2.2.6. Inappropriateness of attachment to the seasons' marvels

We will discuss the verses relating to these sub-headings next Tuesday evening.

*Edited Version*

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