

Study Group – *Aryadeva's 400 Verses*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual we shall set a good motivation for receiving the teachings such as, 'In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put into practice whatever I hear'.

1.2. Abandoning contaminated actions, the cause for birth in cyclic existence¹

This is subdivided into three:

1.2.1. Advice to abandon actions projecting rebirth in cyclic existence

1.2.2. Why it is necessary to abandon them

1.2.3. Actual way to abandon them

This section explains how to abandon that which leads to rebirth into cyclic existence again and again. It is also good to derive an understanding from the outline itself. Here the sequence is first, advice on how to abandon the causes that lead to rebirth in cyclic existence; second is why it is necessary to abandon those causes and the third is the actual way to abandon the causes for rebirth in cyclic existence. Keeping that sequence in mind can help us to remember the main points.

1.2.1. Advice to abandon actions projecting rebirth in cyclic existence

The wise rid themselves of rebirth in cyclic existence which is governed by the force of contaminated actions; moreover they do so by stopping the process of contaminated action.

The pain of walking, one sees, 159
Decreases when doing the opposite.
Thus the intelligent generate
The intention to end all action

What is being indicated here is how the wise seek the means to overcome the actions that lead to rebirth in cyclic existence. Seeing delusions and karma as the cause to be reborn in the cyclic existence, the wise thus seek to overcome delusions and karma as a result of their sound understanding of the Dharma, the cause and effect sequences of karma and so forth. What is being indicated here is how to overcome rebirth in samsara as a result of the influence of delusions and karma. This does not refer to the bodhisattvas' rebirth into samsara, which is out of their intention to benefit sentient beings. Rather it is rebirth in samsara as a result of the influence of delusions and karma that is to be overcome, or abandoned.

The result, which is samsara, is overcome by abandoning the causes, which are identified as being the delusions and karma. What is being indicated is that those who do not desire the result, which is the experience of being reborn in

cyclic existence, need to overcome the cause. Therefore what is being indicated here specifically is how to overcome the result, which is the rebirth in cyclic existence, by overcoming the causes.

The very causes that lead one into cyclic existence have to be overcome. This is a profound way of explaining how, if one does not wish to experience the result, one must tackle what causes that result. To claim that one doesn't want to be reborn in samsara, and to then willingly engage in the actions that lead one into samsara would be hypocritical, because one definitely cannot achieve the result without tackling the causes. The very actions that we engage in on a daily basis are the sorts of actions that lead one into samsara.

As the commentary explains:

One sees that the pain caused by actions like walking, strolling, lying down and so forth decreases and gradually loses its former intensity when doing the opposite kind of action such as sitting.

The normal activities of walking or strolling or even lying down, are used as an analogy. These sorts of activities require some sort of exertion and because there is exertion, there is eventually discomfort. By walking for too long, one can feel tired and feel aches and pains in one's body. Likewise there can also be the discomfort caused by strolling around, or even in some cases, lying down. What is being indicated here is that the discomfort or pain from walking and so forth is decreased when we stop the action that causes the pain.

As the commentary further explains:

By breaking the continuity of all contaminated actions, all suffering stops.

This is of course very true. If we stop the continuity of the action that brings about the suffering, then naturally the suffering itself will subside.

Thus the intelligent expand their minds to encompass the means to attain the state of nirvana in which all contaminated actions projecting worldly existence have ceased.

Here the commentary is explaining that the main point being made in the verse is that the intelligent strive to expand their minds so that they are able to develop the means to achieve the state of nirvana, which is the state where all the contaminated actions that project one into cyclic existence are completely severed and overcome. The main point being explained here is that those intelligent beings, who wish to achieve nirvana, have such a very sincere determination that will seek out the causes that prevent one from reaching liberation, or in other words, the causes that lead one into cyclic existence. By analysing and thinking about the main causes, or actions that lead one into rebirth in cyclic existence again and again, wise beings first attempt to minimise, and then eventually stop the actions that lead one into cyclic existence. They clearly see that without stopping those actions, one can never stop that cycle of being reborn into cyclic existence again and again.

Having identified and recognised the causes, or actions that lead one into cyclic existence, the wise attempt to minimise those actions. Completely stopping those actions, will then lead to creating the causes to achieve liberation. As the understanding and knowledge of how to achieve liberation is expanded, one comes to understand that without severing the main cause, which is the karma and delusions, by completely overcoming them in their entirety, one can never achieve liberation. Having understood that, the wise attempt

¹ The sequence given on 10 April 2007 was '1.2. Abandoning contaminated actions, the cause for birth there' and '1.2.1. Advice to abandon actions projecting rebirth there', where 'there' referred to cyclic existence. The headings have been made a little more self explanatory here.

to completely sever and overcome delusions and karma. Thus in brief, unless and until the delusions and karma completely cease, rebirth in cyclic existence will continue.

1.2.2. Why it is necessary to abandon actions leading to rebirth in cyclic existence

Seeing the reasons why it is necessary to abandon the cyclic existence will provide the determination to overcome cyclic existence. Four reasons are given:

1.2.2.1. Since cyclic existence is a source of fear, it should be abandoned by way of its cause, contaminated actions

1.2.2.2. Cultivation of fear considering the effects of contaminated actions

1.2.2.3. Considering the nature of contaminated actions, effort should be made to abandon them

1.2.2.4. Inappropriateness of attachment to contaminated actions on the grounds that they cause pleasure

1.2.2.1. SINCE CYCLIC EXISTENCE IS A SOURCE OF FEAR, IT SHOULD BE ABANDONED BY WAY OF ITS CAUSE, CONTAMINATED ACTIONS

Assertion: The intelligent rid themselves of cyclic existence by stopping the process of contaminated action.

*When a single effect's original cause
Is not seen, and one sees the extensiveness
Regarding even a single effect,
Who would not be afraid?* 160

As the commentary reads:

No one can perceive the original cause of even a single effect, such as an element, an elemental derivative, the mind and so forth...

What is being explained here is that the continuity of matter and mind is infinite. This is understood when we talk about a seed: it is the result of a previous seed, which was produced from the maturation and sprouting of a previous seed. That previous seed was also related to its earlier seed as well. In that way when we try to trace the continuity of one single seed, it seems to be endless. Therefore we can see that there are different causes for even one seed, and when we look into different causes of that seed and try to trace it back, it seems to go back infinitely. Thus it is very hard to really comprehend the entirety of the causes and conditions needed to bring about even one seed.

Likewise with mind: the mind is a product of a previous state of mind and that previous state of mind is a product of an earlier state of mind before that. When we try to trace back the continuity of our mind, we cannot come to one point where we can say 'This is where mind begins'. Therefore the continuity of the mind also goes back infinitely. Thus we find that trying to comprehend the causes and conditions of matter or of mind is really quite incomprehensible.

When one realizes that even a single effect has a limitless multitude of causes, what childish person would not be afraid? Therefore one should always feel aversion toward, and strive for the means to gain liberation from, this vast wilderness of cyclic existence, made difficult to cross by the thickets of ignorance failing to comprehend its continuity.

What is being explained in these lines is that having used the analogy of external matter and the continuity of a mind to show how difficult it is to comprehend its continuation, one understands how the continuity of the causes for being reborn in cyclic existence (which are delusions, ignorance

and all of the different delusions which are caused by ignorance) also seem limitless.

Thus cyclic existence is analogous to 'thickets of ignorance'. The ignorance within our mind is so thick and intertwined that it seems like a maze from which we cannot possibly escape. The complexities of the delusions that arise from ignorance are so thick and complex that it is almost impossible to try to think how one could possibly escape from them. When one becomes aware of how delusions are so ingrained and deep-rooted in our mind, then that should definitely bring fear, realising how if one were to remain in that state, suffering in cyclic existence will be endless. Understanding that should definitely instil a strong determination and wish to achieve liberation. When the text asks, 'What childish person would not be afraid? that is a rhetorical question indicating that one should indeed be afraid. When one actually realises that the complexities of all the ignorance and the delusions within one's mind and the suffering that they cause, then that should definitely instil a sense of fear and urgency about overcoming samsara and achieving liberation.

On a more practical level, one can contemplate these main points in one's practice. If we reflect on our own contaminated physical body, we come to realise that the shortcomings of our contaminated physical body are endless. We are so vulnerable to sickness, to feeling fatigue and tired as a result of work and so forth. In order to sustain this physical contaminated body, we have to work so hard and exert so much time and energy, and experience so much suffering. When we reflect even further on our contaminated mental states, we can definitely see that there is so much anxiety, frustration, sadness, depression and so forth that we experience because of the contaminated state of mind that we have. This combination of a contaminated physical body and a contaminated state of mind then becomes the cause for us to experience all of the shortcomings that the body and the mind possess.

By thinking about these disadvantages it becomes really appropriate for us to develop a strong determination and wish to be free from this conditioning. If it is possible to free ourselves, then it is most reasonable to contemplate how we can be free from these limitations and this conditioning that we are in, and thus strive to achieve the state of liberation, or freedom. Contemplating in this way will help us to reduce our strong grasping or attachment to our contaminated existence, and also the contaminated objects that we relate to, the sensual pleasures and so forth. We can develop a mind where we don't place complete trust in them and are more detached from our conditioning and the essential pleasures and so forth that sustain us. Reducing our strong attachment and craving for that can bring release in the mind and thus we can experience some sort of pleasure and happiness as a result of that. Contemplating in this way can be very practical, and even beneficial.

We find that there are so many conditions and experiences in our life that lead us to feel unhappy, uncomfortable, depressed and so forth. We establish so many things but then changes occur. No matter how much we plan, there will always some things that will go wrong and changes that will take place. When those changes occur, that becomes a cause for us to feel depressed or frustrated and to lose hope and so forth. If we can think about how that is the nature of samsara, and think along the lines of how, due to karma, certain changes take place and certain experiences come about, then even when there are changes and things don't go

well externally, it will not affect our mind to the degree where we will feel very depressed and sad. If we have that understanding and reflect in that way, it will prevent us from experiencing shock when things happen. This will help the mind to become more relaxed and more peaceful, and in that way can be of benefit.

1.2.2.2. CULTIVATION OF FEAR CONSIDERING THE EFFECTS OF CONTAMINATED ACTIONS

This is in relation to generating fear by thinking about the effects or the results of the contaminated actions.

*Since all results will not definitely
Be achieved, and those that are
Will certainly come to an end,
Why exhaust yourself for their sake?* 161

This verse relates to very practical advice that we can definitely use. As the commentary reads:

Effort would be appropriate if the results of actions for a specific purpose, motivated by attachment, could definitely be achieved.

What is being explained here in a very practical sense is that if we can definitely vouch for the results to be obtained, then one might think that it will be worthwhile to exert ourselves, to be motivated by attachment, and to engage in those actions. However it is:

...not certain that you will achieve all the results such as perfect happiness. Moreover whatever is achieved is sure to perish in the end.

What is being implied here is that first of all, it is not certain that one will achieve the desired result that one seeks out of attachment, and thus exerting so much energy and effort to achieve a result based on attachment is questionable. We have many examples of how people put in so much effort and energy and time into an attempt to achieve a particular goal in life, or a certain status, or a certain amount of wealth. Having exerted themselves in this way, they mostly don't end up satisfied with achieving what they had planned to achieve.

For example, farmers put in so much time and energy into ploughing and cultivating the fields and harvesting the crop. Throughout the year they work hard in order to achieve a certain amount of wealth and status, so that they can live happily and contentedly. However there are many things that can go wrong during that process, and they never achieve the goal that they seek. Even if they do achieve a certain amount of wealth it is not stable. It is the same with whatever kind of work that one engages in out of samsaric attachment. It is not as though whatever one achieves and obtains will remain satisfactory for ever. In fact because it is in the nature of impermanence, its very nature is that the very next moment that wealth is obtained, it starts to decrease. Eventually one has to give up and lose everything. That is the nature of samsaric existence.

So what is being indicated here is how there is no real essence in the samsaric pleasures and achievements. On a practical note what one can derive from this explanation is that this understanding can release the strong expectations that we have in our mind. It is these strong expectations of samsaric pleasures that cause us disappointment and thus great suffering. Understanding this can lessen any great expectations and trust in samsaric pleasures, and that reduces disappointment. So if through strong grasping we initially had a grand samsaric goal to achieve e.g. some great wealth or status, an understanding of the nature of samsara can lessen the suffering caused by that grasping. If we

cannot achieve our samsaric goals we can reflect on how that is the nature of samsara, cause and effect, and karmic consequences. If one has not previously accumulated appropriate causes, the natural outcome is that our grand goal is not achievable. So in that way understanding this can lessen anxiety.

This understanding that samsara has no essence can help release the strong suffering that may arise when those who have obtained a certain amount of wealth and status lose that, or find that it is decreasing. Understanding that it is the nature of samsara that there is no real essence can help us to deal with change or loss of any wealth and status that we might achieve. So this understanding has a very practical benefit for us.

The commentary then asks another rhetorical question:

Why exhaust yourself physically, verbally and mentally to achieve mistaken objectives?

We have just explained there is no reason to do so.

Make effort to give up actions projecting cyclic existence.

Again, the main point here relates to one's own experience. We can see the fear that we have as a result of having obtained this contaminated body and this contaminated state of mind. This fear that is instilled in us is unavoidable; especially fear of the prospect of losing everything: losing our wealth, losing our status and losing our life. These fears come about naturally as a result of having a contaminated body and a contaminated state of mind. Again, with this understanding of how having a contaminated body in cyclic existence it is in the nature of samsara that we experience the shortcomings of the contaminated body and eventually disintegrate.

Having to give up our body is the result of the karma that we have created in the past. If we have that understanding, then again it can help to loosen that strong fear that we have in our mind. Because we see that it is in the nature of samsara, we see that there is no real essence in this contaminated body and contaminated state of mind that we possess. This can instil the wish to really want to stop the causes of this contaminated body and state of mind, which are the delusions and karma. That strong wish to really overcome the suffering of samsara can result in a deeply felt wish to overcome or abandon the delusions and karma. Thus, as it mentions here, one must exert oneself in overcoming the causes for samsara, which are the delusions and karma.

1.2.2.3. CONSIDERING THE NATURE OF CONTAMINATED ACTIONS, EFFORT SHOULD BE MADE TO ABANDON THEM

Since actions themselves, like their results, are bound to perish, do not exert yourself for no purpose.

*Once it is done, work done with effort
Effortlessly disintegrates. 162
Though this is so, still you are not
At all free from attachment to actions.*

As the commentary explains:

Work, like building a wall, requires effort, but when it is finished it disintegrates effortlessly.

What the first two lines of the verse indicate is that even though so much effort is put into achieving something, it actually disintegrates without any effort.

The explanation in the commentary can be understood in the light of a different kind of explanation of the analogy. If we saw someone erecting a wall, and soon after it was finished

he took it down again and began to erect it again, and this continued in a seemingly endless process, we would regard such a person as utterly foolish. Our situation of being in cyclic existence is similar to that. Thus as the commentary explains:

This being so, since you still do such things, your utter lack of freedom from attachment to actions shows how foolish you are.

What this is indicating is that even while one is experiencing all the shortcomings in samsara, all the sufferings, all the disadvantages that come about as a result of having a contaminated physical body and the contaminated state of mind, one still engages in the actions that produce that situation again and again. What is more we are actually attached to those actions! To willingly engage in the actions that bring about this condition of existing in samsara again and again, can similarly be seen as being extremely foolish, and unreasonable. Thus one must understand how behaving in such a way is very foolish, and that one must overcome that situation. We should contemplate this explanation. The analogy and the explanation are quite vivid, so just contemplating these lines is appropriate.

1.2.2.4. INAPPROPRIATENESS OF ATTACHMENT TO CONTAMINATED ACTIONS ON THE GROUNDS THAT THEY CAUSE PLEASURE

Assertion: Though actions which require exertion do perish, one cannot free oneself from attachment to them, because they are a source of pleasure.

Answer:

*There is no pleasure in relation to
Either the past or the future. 163
That which occurs now, too, is passing.
Why do you weary yourself?*

This assertion comes from those who say that without attachment, one cannot feel any pleasure i.e. there can be no pleasure without attachment. As an answer to this assertion, the commentary explains the meaning of the verse:

There can be no real pleasure in relation to past consciousness, since it has already ceased...

If one were to assert that attachment to the actions that lead one to samsaric existence does bring about a certain pleasure and so it seems appropriate to engage in those actions, then the answer, as explained here is to ask, 'What is the real pleasure?'. There is no real pleasure in relation to the past consciousness; if one has experienced something in the past, there is no pleasure now because it has already happened in the past. The consciousness that experienced that pleasure in the past has already gone, so one cannot assert that there is pleasure now.

...nor in relation to future consciousness, since it is not yet produced.

One cannot claim to experience the pleasure of the future because it has not yet come.

Where is the pleasure that one wishes to experience? If we relate that pleasure to the experience of the consciousness in the past, then because it is in the past we cannot possibly derive any real pleasure now, because it is already gone. We cannot derive pleasure from a future experience, because it has not even happened yet. What we are left with is the pleasure that we experience now, in this moment. That is the only thing we can relate to. However, even the pleasure that we claim to experience now is very momentary and fleeting.

The commentary continues:

Moreover consciousness which is occurring now disintegrates moment by moment and passes. Since there is no reliable happiness, why do you weary yourself?

This rhetorical question indicates that there is no point in making yourself weary for momentary pleasurable experiences now, and that striving for a non-existent effect is unreasonable. The happiness or the pleasure that one claims to be attached to and wishes to experience is not reliable, and it is not real happiness, because it disintegrates from moment to moment. Contemplating this fact in relation to our own practical experience would be very effective. The teaching explains that pleasure is not a reliable source of happiness because it does not give us real lasting pleasure and happiness in our mind. All that we experience is a fleeting, momentary pleasure.

Even though we may have a general understanding of impermanence, if we don't relate it to our actual experiences, then it doesn't make much sense. But when we relate this to our own experiences we can see how, for example, we may have had some elated feeling of being content and happy this morning, but after something happens or an incident occurs, the initial happiness is suddenly gone. Even if we experience some sort of sensual pleasure, in the next moment it is gone and replaced with something else. In that way we can see that each moment's pleasure fades away and disintegrates, and thus it is not lasting, and therefore not reliable.

The commentary gives the analogy that it is that it is like building a house on the bank of a river, or on a cliff overlooking the sea. The flow of water or waves will cause a landslide and then the house will collapse. If the house is rebuilt in the same position the same thing will happen, and one will never complete the house because it will keep on collapsing.

1.2.3. Actual way to abandon them

That is divided into two:

1.2.3.1. Repudiating attachment to meritorious actions

What is referred to here as 'meritorious actions' actually refers to the virtuous actions. One should understand here that this is not saying that meritorious action should be abandoned, but that attachment to such actions should be. It does not refer to repudiating the meritorious action itself, but to attachment to the meritorious action.

1.2.3.2. Repudiating accumulation of demeritorious actions

1.2.3.1. REPUDIATING ATTACHMENT TO MERITORIOUS ACTIONS

This is sub-divided into three:

1.2.3.1.1. Generally repudiating accumulation of actions for the sake of high rebirth out of attachment

1.2.3.1.2. Rarity of going from happiness to happiness

1.2.3.1.3. Detailed repudiation of accumulating actions for the sake of high rebirths

1.2.3.1.1. GENERALLY REPUDIATING ACCUMULATION OF ACTIONS FOR THE SAKE OF HIGH REBIRTH OUT OF ATTACHMENT

This is again sub-divided into two:

1.2.3.1.1.1. Appropriateness of fear since the Exalted see even high rebirths as [being] like hells

1.2.3.1.1.2. If ordinary people ever perceived it like this, they would immediately faint

1.2.3.1.1.1. Appropriateness of fear since the Exalted see even high rebirths as [being] like hells

Assertion: One should perform virtuous actions for the sake of a high rebirth.

Answer:

*The wise feel the same fear for even
A high rebirth has for the hells.
It is rare indeed for a worldly state
Not to produce fear in them.* 164

The assertion that one should perform virtuous actions for the sake of a higher rebirth may seem a reasonable assertion. However what should be understood here is that engaging in virtuous actions just for the sake of experiencing the pleasures of a higher rebirth, such as in the human or in the god realms, is inappropriate. As the commentary explains:

Even high rebirths as gods and so forth, ablaze with the fire of rampant disturbing emotions and shrouded in the darkness of ignorance like the hells, produce fear in the wise with direct perception of suchness [or emptiness].

What is being explained here is that for the wise arya beings, who have direct realisation of emptiness, existence as a human or in the god realms is no different to life in the hell realms. This doesn't refer to the extent of the suffering that is being experienced, which are obviously greater in the hell realms, but to the degree of delusions and ignorance found in the higher realms. The ignorance and delusions that we have are so prevalent and so intricate in our minds that it is equivalent to being in the hell realms, because delusions and ignorance are the causes to end up in the hell realms.

For the wise beings existence as a human or in the god realms is not a really desirable and pleasurable state. We can see that even in the human realms some humans experience really extreme degrees of suffering. Other humans, because of their delusions and ignorance live or behave almost like animals. That is something we can relate to. With these sorts of examples we can come to understand what is being explained.

As it is rare indeed for any worldly state not to inspire the Exalted with fear, the intelligent should consider the disadvantages of cyclic existence. The accumulation of actions out of craving based on seeing a high rebirth as something attractive in itself, without cultivating aversion to worldly existence, is rejected.

What is being explained here is that by seeing the disadvantages and shortcomings of existence even with a high rebirth as a human or in the god realms, the wise ones will shun the causes to be reborn there.

However, it is completely wrong to prevent and give up the accumulation of causes for life as a god or human for the purpose of liberation.

This clarification is to clear away the doubt that if one should give up craving for a higher rebirth, such as the human or the god realms, one should give up entirely the causes to achieve such a higher rebirth. One should not be led to that misunderstanding.

One should reject the idea that it is appropriate to crave for the pleasures of a high rebirth as a human or god, and then engage in actions to achieve that state. However it is appropriate to work towards such a high rebirth for the purpose of achieving liberation and enlightenment, as one may not be able to achieve that goal in one lifetime and would have to continue to engage in the causes to achieve liberation and enlightenment in further lifetimes. Within cyclic existence the best rebirth is as a human or in some

states of the god realms. Therefore as a means for liberation or enlightenment, one need not give up the causes to achieve high rebirth.

This corresponds directly to the explanations given in the Lam Rim teachings in relation to removing the doubts about achieving the highest rebirth. I will clarify that point next week.

*Transcribed from tape by Bernii Wright
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