

# Study Group – Aryadeva's 400 Verses

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It would be good to sit in a comfortable and relaxed position. Likewise it is good to establish a good motivation in one's mind, such as 'In order to benefit sentient beings, I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice as best as I can'.

*1.2.2. Advice to strive for liberation (cont.)*

## 1.2.2.2. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ATTAINING LIBERATION WITHOUT CULTIVATING AVERSION TO CYCLIC EXISTENCE

As this outline mentions, it is impossible to attain liberation without cultivating aversion to cyclic existence. Aversion can be also understood as feeling disgust for, or being repulsed by, cyclic existence. By repeatedly thinking about and contemplating the many sufferings and contaminated pleasures of cyclic existence, one can then develop a sense of distaste for, or be repulsed by, cyclic existence. It is only then that one can develop an authentic wish to achieve liberation. Without developing that sense of distaste or repulsion one cannot develop the aspiration to achieve liberation. It is similar to someone who is thirsty: when someone feels the discomfort or suffering of thirst then the wish to quench their thirst comes about naturally.

*Question:* If not doing any action at all in a context of ultimate existence brings about nirvana, why are impermanent suffering and so forth taught in the treatises.

*Answer:* It is done to produce aversion to the cycle of birth and death so that one will attain nirvana free from all activities of cyclic existence.

*How can anyone who has no aversion  
To this take an interest in pacification? 187  
Like [leaving home], it is also hard  
To leave worldly existence behind.*

It is good to bring the explanations contained in the verse and the commentary to a personal level, and remind ourselves of the importance, and indeed the necessity, of contemplating the disadvantages of cyclic existence or samsara, and the contaminated pleasures that are the causes for the sufferings of samsara. In that way we develop the distaste or disgust for cyclic existence that it is necessary for us to develop.

In worldly terms, we can use the analogy of living in a nice comfortable place, in a nice environment with many good companions: the wish to leave that place would not occur because everything is comfortable. The pleasures of cyclic existence are similar to the worldly pleasures of being attached to a good home, good companions and so forth. For as long as one does not see the disadvantages and the faults of cyclic existence the authentic determination to free oneself from samsara cannot occur, because one has attachment to it. One sees samsara as being pleasurable, so therefore in order to develop repulsion or distaste for samsara one must contemplate the reality of suffering in samsara, which is having a contaminated body and a contaminated state of mind.

When we investigate and analyse the situation from every angle we come to the sound conclusion that there is no real

lasting or stable happiness as long as we have a contaminated body that is subject to pain, beginning with birth, then sickness, aging and finally death. Also the external factors relating to our physical situation such as food and so forth are unstable. There are always problems with friends, and disputes arise, so there is no real lasting and stable companionship that is completely satisfactory.

Likewise internally there are also the sufferings that we experience in our mind, such as dissatisfaction, discontent, frustration, and the ups and downs that always occur in our mind. We experience this because of our contaminated physical aggregates. So it is good to remind ourselves that for as long as we have a contaminated body, the dissatisfaction and discontentment that we experience will be continuous. Wouldn't it be nice if it was possible to attain physical and mental aggregates such that we do not have to experience these shortcomings of sickness, disappointment in companionship and so forth? Wouldn't that be incredible? It is worthwhile to think along those lines.

There is in fact an immediate practical benefit from contemplating the disadvantages and sufferings of cyclic existence in particular. If we remind ourselves of the nature of cyclic existence, we realise that for as long as we have a contaminated body and state of mind then whatever we engage in will be unsatisfactory, and there is no real lasting satisfaction to be found.

If we remind ourselves constantly of the nature of samsara then we won't be too surprised whenever we face difficulties in relation to companionship, work, or any situation that brings us distress. We won't become too distressed or experience too much suffering because we will remember that this is the nature of samsara, and being in samsara means experiencing these different types of sufferings from time to time. Reminding ourselves of that fact helps our mind to lessen the suffering, or the immediate shock, that one would otherwise experience. It seems to really benefit our mind if we think along those lines.

Likewise reminding ourselves of the disadvantages of samsara and the sufferings that occur also helps to lessen our attachment to the pleasures of cyclic existence. Because we see the faults, attachment to the pleasures of samsara will be lessened naturally, and a sense of detachment can then arise in our mind.

One should also remind oneself of the quote from the sutras where the Buddha said that the nature of all gathering is that there will be a parting, and that that all meeting will result in separation.

As the commentary explains, the main point of the verse is the reason why it is necessary to develop a distaste for cyclic existence, and how to develop that.

How could anyone who has no aversion to cyclic existence take an interest in liberation or like an aspiration for liberation, which is the path that the pacification of suffering entails?

In explanation of the previous rhetorical question, the commentary continues:

If one isn't suffering from thirst, one will not feel a strong urge to drink in order to relieve their discomfort.

Until one experiences the great suffering of thirst the wish to quench that thirst will not naturally arise. The wish to quench one's thirst can arise so strongly that if two very thirsty people were to simultaneously see a glass of water, they may even fight over it. Or it can become a race to see who is the fastest to reach it. If the person who reaches the

water first happened to be a kind person, then he might drink some and leave one third for the next person. Situations like this are like tests to see how kind a person can be under desperate circumstances, as they show how much they are willing to spare for others.

Sharing food is another analogy that shows how kind or how mean someone is. If someone were to be given a portion of food to share with others, a person who is normally quite kind would take the portion of the food that is not so nice and leave the better part for another. However a selfish person would take the best part for themselves first, and leave the part that is not so nice for others.

The person who saves the better portion for someone else and takes the not-so-nice portion themselves is just basically showing their nature: they have established a mind of kindness, seeing others as being more important than themselves. Someone who has cultivated the thought of cherishing others would naturally want to give the better part no matter what it is to someone else, because they cherish others more than themselves.

The analogy in the commentary is:

Though one's home may contain little of worth, one cannot completely give up attachment to it. Similarly, it is difficult for those of limited intelligence completely to leave worldly existence behind because they are bound by attachment...

What this clearly indicates is that being attached to one's home even though it is not very worthy is really a very insignificant attachment compared to the desire or attachment one has for cyclic existence in general. Likewise those with limited intelligence who are engulfed by ignorance cannot develop a sense of detachment towards cyclic existence.

This brings to light the reason why some find it very difficult to overcome attachment or desire, even when they have meditated on the faults of the object. There are those who claim that they have meditated on the faults of an object of desire, but who still seem to experience desire in relation to that object. The fault is clearly that only the surface faults of the object have been seen, and the object of desire itself is still held dear to the heart. If one holds an object of desire as being something dear and then tries to see the surface faults, then of course one cannot develop a sense of real detachment towards the object. That is where the fault will arise. Holding the object itself dear to one's heart, while trying to meditate superficially on the faults of the object, simply does not work.

### **1.2.2.3. APPROPRIATENESS OF STRIVING FOR LIBERATION BECAUSE OF THE GREAT DISADVANTAGES OF CYCLIC EXISTENCE**

The rich and powerful, who are attached to the pleasure they derive from things, may not be able to give up their homes and strive in seclusion to attain liberation. However, it is surely fitting for those who are afflicted by sickness and poverty to give up their attachment to cyclic existence.

*One sees that some who are overwhelmed* 188  
*By suffering long for death,*  
*Yet entirely due to their confusion*  
*They will not reach the excellent state.*

As the commentary explains:

Some people who are overwhelmed by the suffering of poverty, of being separated from what is dear to them and the like, long to die by leaping into fire, water, or into an abyss and so forth in order to gain release.

Due to the immense suffering poverty, or being separated,

people become so distressed that they don't see any point in continuing to live. Many would have experienced the suffering of separation when one is separated from loved ones, which is quite intense. At that time one can also lose a sense of the meaning of life, thinking, 'What purpose is there to life?' and so forth. Likewise with the other types of sufferings. As mentioned here, these are reasons for one to feel disgusted with, and a distaste for, the sufferings of cyclic existence. However due to ignorance, some cannot develop the wish for liberation, and thus they end their life by jumping into water and so forth.

As the commentary continues:

In exactly the same way, by gaining certainty concerning the suffering of cyclic existence and abandoning attachment to the self, they could quickly attain the happiness of liberation...

The main point here is that even if one is not able to develop a very sound renunciation leading to the adoption of a life of seclusion and retreat and complete abandonment of worldly life, seeing the reality of the sufferings of cyclic existence should definitely kindle a strong wish to be free from samsara. At the very least one will develop the wish to not entirely depend on samsara, seeing it as being entirely pleasurable.

Rather, based on the reality of sufferings that one experiences and sees in others one develops a sense for the wish to be free from samsara. In fact this sort of advice is given specifically to those who are feeling quite content with their worldly pleasures, because they are wealthy and feel they have everything they desire. Such people may feel content with their worldly life and think they don't have to rely on anything else. However that contentment is an illusion, and so what is being described here is that one should meditate on the disadvantages of cyclic existence, because no matter how good the situation may seem, it is in fact in the nature of suffering.

The commentary says:

...entirely due to their extreme confusion about what to adopt and discard they will not reach the excellent state of nirvana

This points out that one may clearly experience and recognise the sufferings of samsara, and wish to be free from that, but has not yet developed the strong determination to achieve liberation, which is based on renunciation. That is because they still have not removed their ignorance of what is to be adopted and what is to be discarded. The commentary explains the point with the following analogy:

Without taking the medicine a patient will not be cured of his illness. Similarly, even if one suppresses manifest disturbing emotions to some extent, one will not gain liberation from cyclic existence except by employing the antidote which completely eradicates them.

Just as a patient clearly cannot be cured from an illness if they do not take a prescribed medication, similarly manifest disturbing emotions or delusions, although they may temporarily suppressed, will not be completely removed until and unless one completely eradicates the delusions at their root with the antidote, which is the realisation of emptiness. Without that wisdom of realising emptiness directly, one cannot overcome or eradicate the root of the delusions and thus one cannot achieve liberation.

These points were also clearly mentioned in previous chapters, and it is good to remind oneself that these chapters relate to what is being explained here. Also, on a personal level one should use these points as a reminder that one

needs to slowly develop that determination or longing to be free from samsara by contemplating the disadvantages of samsara again and again.

#### 1.2.2.4. MEANING OF THE FUNDAMENTAL MODE OF EXISTENCE SHOULD NOT BE TAUGHT FROM THE OUTSET

*Question:* If one is to strive for liberation which ends cyclic existence, advice on about meditation on suchness would be appropriate. Why did the Teacher [indicating the Buddha] also give advice on giving and ethics?

*Answer:* There is no fault in this.

*Giving is taught to the lowest* 189  
*And ethics to the middling.*  
*Pacification is taught to the best*  
*Therefore always do The best!*

As the initial question clearly states, meditation on emptiness serves as an antidote to overcoming the delusions from their very root. So the question asks why the Buddha did not just teach emptiness, which serves as the antidote to all our suffering. Why did the Buddha have to teach on other practices such as generosity and moral ethics and so forth?

The explanation in the commentary is:

One must lead others gradually, distinguishing between those of least, intermediate and best ability.

This ability can be either in relation to one particular being at different periods of time or the analogy of three different types of beings. There is the initial state where one has the least capacity, or the person of least intelligence, the intermediate state and the best state of intelligence or ability.

As the commentary continues in relation to three types of beings, or in relation to one person at the initial stage and with the least capacity:

Advice about giving is for those who at first are capable only of generosity but cannot give up killing and so forth.

The practices themselves have different levels of difficulty. For example, the later perfections are harder than the earlier practices, relatively speaking. So the advice on giving is directed to those of the least ability who, for the time being, are not ready to practise ethics and meditation. Those who may not be able to give up the negative deeds such as killing and so forth have the capacity to be generous, and for such beings the Buddha skilfully gave the practices of generosity.

The commentary continues:

Those of intermediate ability already practising generosity are taught about ethics, since they are ready to take birth as gods or humans.

Once someone has mastered the practice of generosity with no problem they will develop an interest in a good result for their future life. When the causes for a good rebirth are explained, they will begin to realise that one can attain a good rebirth such as a human being or in the god realms. When that wish to achieve such a good rebirth is developed then they become a suitable vessel for an explanation of the causes for achieving that state, which is ethics. Then they are ready to be given the teachings on ethics.

Those with the best ability are principally instructed in the meditation on emptiness or suchness, the means to pacify cyclic existence.

When one reaches a high level of intelligence or ability to practise, then instruction on meditation on suchness or emptiness is explained, which is the ultimate means to reach liberation from cyclic existence.

The commentary summarises the main point as:

Thus one should always endeavour to do the best and

think, "Why shouldn't I attain liberation?"

#### 1.2.2.5. STAGES BY WHICH TO LEAD ONE TO LIBERATION

If reality is explained to someone as yet unready for such an explanation, that person will deny actions and agents, thinking there is no difference between virtue and ill deeds, and they will go to bad rebirths.

*First prevent the demeritorious,* 190  
*Next prevent [ideas of a coarse] self.*  
*Later prevent views of all kinds.*  
*Whoever knows of this is wise.*

This is also the verse that was explained in the recent teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. As mentioned previously a profound teaching such as emptiness can cause confusion for someone who is not ready to understand it. For example, if we were to take the *Heart Sutra* literally, without the capacity to understand the meaning behind it, then when it says, 'There is no eye, no ear, no smell, no taste no tactile feeling' and so forth, someone without an understanding of the implicit meaning might come to the profound misunderstanding that the teaching seems to defy actual experience. We do experience forms, we do see sights and we do smell things and we do feel things. Someone who takes the *Heart Sutra* literally might think, 'What a contradiction! How can the Buddha teach that these things do not exist? How could he say that there is no eye, no forms, no tastes, no tactile feelings and so forth?' Actually, what the *Heart Sutra* is explaining is that there are no inherently existent forms, and no inherently existent sounds and so forth. But a person without that understanding would hear it as being no form, and no sound at all, and so come to the wrong conclusions.

With such a great misunderstanding they might feel, 'Well that must mean that there is no karma as well. There is no virtue, so there is nothing then to strive for, because everything is just empty'. If a person develops such a misunderstanding then they will see no difference between virtue and ill deeds. Thus there will be nothing to stop them from committing ill deeds, and that will result in them going to lower rebirths.

As the commentary explains:

Initially, therefore, they should be taught about virtuous and non-virtuous actions and about cause and effect since that is easy to understand. As it is the proper time, they should thus be prevented from engaging in demeritorious misdeeds.

If a teaching on emptiness were to be given to a person who is liable to completely misinterpret and misunderstand it, then, in fact, rather than being of benefit for them it can become a cause to engage in unmeritorious deeds. Thus

...they should be prevented from engaging in demeritorious misdeeds.

This relates to general misdeeds, but in particular to the misunderstanding of emptiness. If one were to misunderstand the explanation of emptiness then that could lead them to believe there is no difference between virtue and non-virtue and thus give them the permission to engage in non-virtuous deeds willingly and intentionally. Thus rather than benefiting them it would harm them. So for beings who are liable to misunderstand or misinterpret the teachings on emptiness, the teachings on virtuous and non-virtuous actions in general, and on cause and effect should be given, as they are easy to understand and can be of benefit to them at that time.

Next the coarse self should be repudiated by refuting the referent object of twenty views of the transitory

collections by means of the five-fold analysis of the aggregates.

Once the disciple has been led into engaging in virtue and the teachings on cause and effect and so forth, then they come to a point where their intelligence has developed to the point where they can understand and accept the teachings on emptiness. Grasping at the self is divided into grasping at the coarse self and grasping at the a subtle self. One first teaches them how to overcome grasping at the coarse self through the teachings on the twenty views of the transitory collections and the five-fold analysis of the aggregates.

'Later', as the commentary reads:

when the mindstream has become receptive, selflessness of persons is taught...

Here 'selflessness of person' refers to subtle selflessness. By showing that even selflessness itself does not exist truly, all views conceiving extremes are prevented.

Whoever knows these stages of teaching is wise regarding the sequence in which trainees are led. It is like a skilled physician who prescribes a bland or oily diet to specific patients.

A skilled physician or doctor will prescribe a diet in relation to the patient's symptoms. According to the Tibetan medical treatises a bland diet should be prescribed for someone who is suffering from the bile element, but that same patient may later suffer from heightened wind elements called *lung*, for which an oily or fatty diet should be prescribed.

#### 1.2.2.6. INDISTINGUISHABILITY IN ENTITY WITH REGARD TO THE FINAL MODE OF EXISTENCE OF THINGS

*Question:* By what path is liberation attained?

*Answer:* By understanding that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence.

*Qualm:* Since there are limitless things, their realities are also limitless. Who could know them all? Moreover, it is said that one cannot attain liberation whilst there is a single phenomenon that one does not know and has not abandoned.

This is of course a reasonable doubt that some of us may have actually come up with. When we hear that in order to achieve liberation one has to see the non-inherent existence or emptiness of all phenomena, then one may naturally begin to think, 'If there are limitless phenomena, universes and so forth, and I have to see the non-inherent existence of them all, then how could I ever possibly attain liberation?' Furthermore when the teaching explains that unless one abandons the misconceptions in relation to all phenomena one cannot attain liberation, then again, since there are limitless phenomena how can one possibly overcome the misconceptions of all phenomena? This is a reasonable doubt.

*Answer:* There is no fault.

*Whoever sees one thing* 191  
*Is said to see all.*  
*That which is the emptiness of one*  
*Is the emptiness of all.*

The meaning of this verse has also been explained many times.

Whoever sees one thing's fundamental mode of existence  
Which is its emptiness of inherent existence is said to see  
the reality of all things.

This explanation could lead to another misunderstanding, so it is important to understand the point being made here. One should not misunderstand this point to mean that if one understands the emptiness of one phenomenon then one will naturally see and understand the emptiness of all

phenomena. This is best understood with the example of a vase. The classic syllogism is: a vase is empty, because of being an interdependent origination. Using the reason of interdependent origination one comes to realise the empty nature of the vase, meaning that one sees the lack of inherent existence of the vase. One can apply that same logical reason to any other phenomena, to understand that any phenomena that one focuses on, also lack inherent existence. The commentary refers to the sutra called the *King of Meditative Stabilisation* which says:

Through one all are known  
And through one all are seen

Here again one must understand the context. It does not mean that by knowing one phenomena one will naturally know all. What it does refer to is that when one knows the non-inherent existence of one phenomenon, then one is able to know the non-inherent existence of any other phenomena that one may focus on. One can use the understanding of the non-inherent existence of one phenomenon to understand the non-inherent existence of any other phenomena that one might focus on.

Then there is reference to another sutra called the *Meditative Stabilisation of Gaganaganja* which says:

Whoever through one phenomenon knows  
All phenomena are like illusions, mirages and are  
inapprehensible.

The commentary says:

It is like the following analogy: by drinking one drop of sea water you know the rest is salty. "That which is the emptiness of one thing is the emptiness of all".

The statement, 'The emptiness of one thing is the emptiness of all', could again lead to a misinterpretation. It is not saying that the emptiness of one object such as a vase is the emptiness of another, such as a pillar. It does not mean that that the emptiness within pillar and the emptiness within the vase is one and the same thing. Rather it is referring to the nature of all emptiness. The emptiness of a vase, for example, is that it is a mere negation of true existence. Likewise the emptiness of a pillar is the mere negation of true existence. So as far as their entity or nature is concerned, there is no difference in the mere negation of the inherent existence or true existence of both objects.

The analogy that is used is that 'It is like the space in different receptacles [or vessels]'. There are many different vessels and the space within each of the vessels is defined as the mere negation of obstruction. As far as its entity is concerned the space in all the many different vessels is the same in as much as it is the mere negation of obstructiveness. So in that way the space is the same. Again, going back to the pillar and the vase, it is not saying that the emptiness within the vase is also the emptiness within the pillar. As far as the objects are concerned they are separate, and thus the emptiness within each are based on the separate objects. However the entity of emptiness itself is the same.

The commentary also mentions that when we view phenomena there are many different aspects that appear to us, such as different colours, for example blue and yellow and so forth. These different colours or different aspects of phenomena are separate entities, and each phenomenon is separate and distinct. However as far as the entity or the nature of the emptiness within these phenomena is concerned, they are all the same, in that the emptiness is the mere negation of true existence. So to that extent it is the same entity.