

INTRODUCTIONS SERIES - VOL. 2:

Fundamentals of Buddhist Thought

Who am I?

Understanding the Self, Karma,

Rebirth and Dependent Arising

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Preface

THIS BOOK is the second in a series of introductions to Buddhism, written in particular with newcomers in mind who are seeking orientation and well-founded information in a readily accessible language. The first volume briefly introduced Shakyamuni Buddha, our teacher, and discussed the main points of his teachings contained in the Four Noble Truths. It also introduced the reader to the world of Tibetan Buddhism and the Sakya school in particular.

This volume, also written by Christian Bernert, discusses some of the principles that form the basis of Buddhist thought—the skandhas, karma, rebirth and dependent arising—an understanding of which is vital if we are to engage in the path taught by the Buddha.

We would like to thank Lama Rinchen Gyaltzen, Ven. Ngawang Tenzin and Julia Stenzel for their valuable comments, Vivian Paganuzzi for his editorial work, and the Khenchen Appey Foundation for its continuous support.

With the wish that this reading may inspire you to further explore the vastness and depth of the Buddha's wisdom,

Khenpo Ngawang Jordan

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1. *Introductory Remarks*

SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA was a spiritual teacher who lived in the Indian subcontinent around the 6th century BC. He stands in an age-old tradition of spiritual seekers and contemplatives who dedicated their entire lives to finding answers to the deepest questions of our existence. The path he followed and taught comprises three principal elements: *ethical conduct*, *meditative concentration* and *wisdom*. The whole point of his teaching was one of profound practical relevance: freedom from suffering and dissatisfaction.

As we will see, the spiritual quest on which the Buddha guides his followers directly relates to fundamental questions pertaining to the very nature of our existence. In this sense, we can say that philosophical investigation can be considered an important aspect of the path. To be relevant to this path, however, such investigation must never remain merely an intellectual exercise. It must have practical implications, informing one's conduct and guiding one's meditative journey towards true inner freedom.

This volume will introduce some principles fundamental for an understanding of the path and practice laid out by the Buddha—the skandhas, karma, rebirth and dependent arising—which we have tried to present in a clear and accessible way. These concepts are explained in the most elaborate and systematic way in the Abhidharma teachings, one of the three collections forming the

Buddhist canon (the other two being the Vinaya teachings on discipline and the Sutra discourses of the Buddha). The Abhidharma, most scholars agree, was compiled after the Buddha's demise by later masters to systematize the technical content of his teachings.

It must be noted that even though they form the backbone of Buddhist thought in general, the interpretation of these concepts may vary from one school of Buddhism to another. There is no *one true Buddhism*: there are diverse traditions that evolved over the course of many centuries throughout almost the entire continent of Asia, from Mongolia in the north to Indonesia in the south, and from Central Asia in the West to Japan in the east.

This book contains the author's personal and necessarily limited understanding of these concepts, based mainly on the Tibetan presentation of the teachings, and more specifically on that of the Sakya tradition, occasionally drawing from other sources as well. He has tried, however, to formulate his exposition in a way that is general enough to be acceptable to most Buddhist schools.

We hope that these pages will inspire the reader to further explore these subjects in order to lay the foundations for an effective transformation of the heart and mind.



2. *The Basics of the Buddha's Teaching*

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS AND THE QUEST FOR WISDOM

THE BUDDHA'S first teaching was on the four Noble Truths:¹ the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. These four represent the foundational structure of all Buddhist teachings:

1. Having understood that the experience of suffering and dissatisfaction (the first truth) ...
2. originates from specific causes (the second truth), ...
3. we come to appreciate the fact that suffering can end (the third truth) ...
4. if we let go of its causes (the fourth truth).

Suffering in the context of Buddhist thought refers not only to painful and unwanted experiences, but also to the fact that even pleasurable sensations do not last, as well as to the very nature of experience as we know it. According to the Buddha's teachings, the way we ordinarily approach life does not ultimately allow us to

¹ The *four Noble Truths* may more accurately be called the *truths of the Noble Ones*, since these four are found to be true by those noble individuals who have attained profound levels of realization.

experience lasting peace and satisfaction. Once this is deeply understood, one may start to seek for an alternative.

The origin of suffering lies in mental afflictions and karma. *Afflictions* are mental formations that unsettle the mind and disrupt the experience of the peace inherent to its most fundamental nature. These formations include states of attachment, anger, pride and doubt, as well as wrong views about reality. *Karma* literally means *action* and generally refers to any deed of body, speech and mind, as well as to the causal relationship between these actions and their results in terms of how they condition one's experience of happiness and suffering. Karma as the origin of suffering refers specifically to actions rooted in mental afflictions.

Cessation is the peace resulting from the elimination of the causes of suffering. This is also the meaning of nirvana.

The *path* consists of the methods employed to actualize the cessation of suffering. These involve the threefold training in ethical conduct or discipline, meditative concentration and superior wisdom.

A path of wisdom

One can say that Buddhism is fundamentally a wisdom-oriented tradition because its principal aim—i.e., the end of suffering—depends on a correct insight into the nature of reality. This insight, or wisdom, directly counteracts the ignorance which is said to be the root cause of all suffering and thus functions as its antidote.

According to tradition, wisdom is developed by means of study, contemplation and meditation. *Study* here means receiving instructions from qualified teachers and reading authentic scriptures. Based on the knowledge accumulated in this way, we use our own skills of reflection and analysis to deepen our understanding. We compare the information received to our personal experience, checking whether or not this all makes sense, and why. This process of analyzing critical points of investigation, by oneself and in debate with others, in order to clear all possible doubts about a given subject is called *contemplation*. Once one has reached certainty about the given subject, one familiarizes oneself with this finding with a focused mind. This is what is usually called *meditation*. In a more general sense, meditation can be referred to as the process of familiarizing oneself with wholesome states of mind with focused attention. This process is used to generate and strengthen the virtues needed on the path of awakening, such as the states of trust, admiration and longing with regards to the qualities of awakening, selfless love and compassion for others, and, as described above, insight into the true nature of reality and of one's own mind.



3. *Who Am I? Understanding the Individual*

Without depending on a mirror
The reflection of one's own face will not appear.
Likewise, without depending on the skandhas
There is no clinging to an "I".

– Nāgārjuna: *The Precious Garland* 33

THE SELF AND THE FIVE SKANDHAS

LIKE ALL major religious and philosophical traditions of the world, Buddhism too addresses the question of “Who am I?” We could define our self or identity based on various things such as the physical entity, the witnessing mind, or the function it fulfills in relation to its surroundings. The mere fact that there are so many diverse answers to this question seems to indicate that the essence of the self, the true identity of the individual, is a most elusive thing. This simple statement is, as we will see later, quite close to the findings of the Buddhist masters.

In classical Indian thought, the *self* is defined as the permanent, independent and unitary entity that forms the core of an individual's being. However, in Buddhist thought this concept of self is regarded as a mistaken mental construct imputed onto a variety of physical and mental processes. The self, in other words, is a label super-imposed on the sum or on parts of the human experience. This would be fine if this apprehension of the ‘self’—which can be both intuitive in the sense of a general feeling that this self exists,

and conceptual in the sense of a philosophically established entity—would not cause us any trouble. According to Buddhist thought, however, it is precisely this holding on to an independent, unchanging identity that is the fundamental mistake at the root of all the troubles and pains we experience. From this point of view it is absolutely vital to question the validity of this concept. From a practical point of view too, it is more important to ask the question and to see for oneself, rather than accepting an answer from outside. This is where contemplation comes in. First one collects new information and then one sees for oneself.

What are the five skandhas?

The five skandhas were taught as an antidote to the belief in the self as one unit. When one understands that the basis of this confusion consists of five skandhas, one realizes that there is no unitary ‘self’.

– Gorampa Sönam Senge: *An Exposition of the Skandhas, Dhātus and Āyatanas - A Key to All Knowable Things*

The Buddha used very precise language to describe the nature of reality. He particularly referred to five specific groups of mental and physical processes in relation to the human experience. These five groups are called *skandhas* in Sanskrit, *phung po* in Tibetan (ཕུང་པོ་), which literally means bundles or heaps (often translated as *aggregates*). Of these five skandhas, one is composed of physical processes based on the material elements, and the other four are of a mental nature. The one thing all of these processes have in common is the fact that they are changing from moment to moment: both the body and the mind are in a constant state of flux.

The physical dimension: the skandha of form (*rūpa*, གནུགས་)

The skandha of form includes the material processes of everything within our experiences: everything based on the four basic elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. Here, the term *element* refers to the basic characteristics of the physical world. Earth is solidity, water is wetness, fire is temperature, and wind is motion. In this sense, *fire* does not refer to the flames we can see but to the heat we feel when close to them.

This skandha encompasses every aspect of our physical experience, including the forms we see and the sounds we hear. Our five sense faculties (found in the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and throughout the body) and their respective objects are all part of this skandha of form. The feature all of these material processes have in common is their transient nature. Being dependent on causes and conditions, every physical phenomenon is in a subtle yet constant state of change.

The skandha of sensation (*vedanā*, ཚེན་པ་)

The skandha of sensation (or “feeling”), the first of the four mental skandhas, refers to the capacity to experience the objects of our perceptions. Three types of sensation are distinguished: pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. These sensations arise from the contact of any sense faculty with its respective object. When the body feels the warmth of a fire, for example, there might be a pleasant or unpleasant sensation, depending on the intensity of the heat. Since, according to Buddhist thought, the mind is considered to be a sense

faculty, these sensations can be of either a physical or mental nature.

The skandha of perception (*saṃjñā*, འདུ་ཤེས་)

The skandha of perception (or “discrimination”) is the aspect of the mind which apprehends objects based on their individual features. Based on the particular shape and color of the flames in front of me, for example, I can distinguish the bonfire from all other objects of my perception, label it ‘fire’ and interact with it appropriately. The same goes for sounds, smells, tastes, tactile and conceptual objects. This skandha of perception thus forms the basis for concepts and thoughts by distinguishing between and naming the various inputs we receive from the six senses.

The skandha of formative factors (*saṃskāra*, འདུ་བྱེད་)

Formative factors are the forces active in our minds at any given moment, coloring our perceptions and conditioning the way we receive and respond to whatever appears to our six senses. These mental factors arise together with consciousness, which is why they are also called secondary minds. This group of phenomena is quite large and it actually includes the two previous skandhas of sensation and perception, here singled out because of the central roles they play in our lives. Clinging to our sensations and perceptions, it is said, is the main cause for quarrels in the world, hence the importance of presenting them individually. Conversely, a clear understanding of the process of the arising and ceasing of feelings and perceptions can be used as a stable foundation for profound insight into the nature of impermanence and attachment.

Mental factors in general are the door for our interaction with the world. There are several ways of categorizing them into different groups. According to one tradition, they include **five omnipresent factors** (which are present in each moment of experience), **five object-determining factors** (which ascertain the nature of the objects of experience), **eleven wholesome factors** (antidotes to suffering and its causes), **six root afflictions** (that agitate and disturb the mind), **twenty secondary afflictions** (which also cause suffering), and **four variable factors** (which can be either wholesome or unwholesome, depending on other factors).² In the example of the perception of the bonfire, there is a part of the mind that stays with the object to sustain the perception, another aspect is the sensation one has when one sees or feels it, and yet another might be an attachment to it due to the cold felt previously.

By learning to distinguish and recognize these mental factors in our experience, we become able to work with them, generating and strengthening the wholesome ones, and counteracting and uprooting whatever is unwholesome. This practice requires not only a precise knowledge of these factors, but also a clear attentiveness to what is happening in the mind at any given moment. This is where training in mindfulness and awareness is indispensable. By learning to settle the mind in a calm state of stable attention, we increase our ability to clearly identify the mental factors active in the mind. With practice, this ability will

² For a complete list of the 51 mental factors mentioned here, please refer to Appendix 2.

allow us to employ the appropriate antidotes to remedy any unwholesome state.

The skandha of consciousness (*vijñāna*, རྣམ་པར་ཤེས་པ་)

Consciousness is the basic capacity to know that operates through the six sense faculties. In certain texts we read of eight types of consciousness, adding to the six types the so-called afflicted mind and the all-base consciousness.

1-6. The six sense perceptions are the six resultant types of cognition arising on the basis of six sense faculties and their respective objects (i.e., the eye consciousness based on the eye faculty and visual objects, the ear consciousness based on the ear faculty and sound, etc., up to mental consciousness based on the mental faculty and mental objects). The first five sense-based consciousnesses relate directly to outer objects and are therefore non-conceptual, and they do not have the capacity to distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome states. The mental consciousness can be both non-conceptual (as when visualizing a form) and conceptual (all the conceptual thoughts). It can furthermore be of wholesome, unwholesome or undetermined nature, depending on the mental factors that associate with it.

7. The afflicted mind (*kliṣṭamanas*) is a subtle aspect of the mind responsible for the innate or intuitive sense of 'I/me' we have. The afflicted mind focuses on the continuum of the mind, that is, the eighth consciousness, apprehending it as the self.

8. The all-base consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) is the basic consciousness which continuously flows without interruption, from

moment to moment, from life to life, throughout unconscious states, states of deep sleep, and even states of ‘cessation’ when all other sense perceptions temporarily cease. It is called *all-base* because it carries all the karmic imprints planted by our actions, along with their latencies, and thus serves as a basis for them to later ripen as our various experiences of happiness, suffering and neutral feelings.

THE FIVE SKANDHAS	
SKANDHA	Comprises
<p>FORM</p> <p><i>the four basic elements and their derivatives</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 sense faculties - 5 sense objects - imperceptible forms
<p>SENSATION</p> <p><i>the experience of the object of perception</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pleasant sensations - unpleasant sensations - neutral sensations
<p>PERCEPTION</p> <p><i>the apprehension of the distinguishing features of the object of perception</i></p>	<p>the notions identifying the object of perception</p>
<p>FORMATIVE FACTORS</p> <p><i>the forces that direct the mind to the object of perception</i></p>	<p>51 mental factors</p>
<p>CONSCIOUSNESS</p> <p><i>the basic awareness of the object of perception</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 sense consciousnesses - mental consciousness - afflicted mind - all-base consciousness

Everything is on the move

All of these phenomena—the physical aspects of our experience, sensations we feel, the perceptions we have, the mental formations, and the six or eight types of consciousness—arise based on causes and conditions, and are therefore of a transient nature. Any sensation lasts only a brief instant, to be replaced in the next moment by a new one, which may or may not be similar to the previous moment, depending on the set of causes and conditions giving rise to it. The same goes for all perceptions, mental formations, and moments of consciousness. If these processes were not in a state of flux, our experience of them would not change. Let us take the example of a headache that has lasted for two hours. Due to the similarity of the previous moments of experience with the present one, the mind uses the label ‘headache’ to refer to the continuum of these similar instances of unpleasant experience. In other words, this ‘headache’ we have had for two hours and want to get rid of is nothing but a mental construct. The actual experience is merely the present sensation of heat, pressure, and so forth. As long as the present sensation resembles in terms of unpleasantness and nature the previous ones termed ‘headache’, we assume that it is the same event, whereas in actuality, there is only a series of similar events taking place.

In brief, we can say that the human experience consists of physical and mental processes, all of which are conditioned and therefore constantly changing, without there being any identifiable, unchanging essence or self.

Dealing with fear regarding the dismantling of the idea of self

It is important to keep in mind that we are not changing anything in the reality of things with these investigations; we are not destroying our innermost core of being. We are simply learning to deconstruct unhelpful ways of seeing ourselves and the world. This in no way changes anything about who or what we really are. We do not lose an ounce of self-worth or identity. In fact, learning to see more clearly is fundamentally a kind act towards oneself. We hold within us, as human beings, an incredibly precious potential for awakening. This potential can only fully blossom when all the conditions necessary for its unfolding are present, and clear seeing is one of the principal ones. Other supportive conditions are a mind that is at ease and steady, an open and kind heart, health, and of course, the proper guidance from an experienced teacher.



THE THREE MARKS OF EXISTENCE

Thinking “I” they first cling to a self,
 Then, with “mine”, they are attached to things.
 Thus, helplessly, they turn in circles like a water mill.
 To compassion for such beings I bow down!

– Candrakīrti: *Introduction to the Middle Way* 1.3

Impermanence (anitya, མི་རྟག་པ་)

The five skandhas subsume every aspect of the human experience, both physical and mental. Each of these aspects is made of causes and conditions, and is thus necessarily of a temporary nature. In other words, every single aspect of our experience is impermanent: nothing is lasting.

Unsatisfactoriness (duḥkha, སྤྱག་བསྐྱེལ་པ་)

Wanting our happiness to last, when in reality not a single aspect of the experience is constant, is deeply unsatisfying. No sight, no sound, no smell, no taste, and no object of touch can provide us with permanent pleasure. The body ages and aches, the mind gets upset and hurt, things break or get lost, dear ones suffer and die. We would like to be in control, but nothing is controllable. Even our thoughts are unreliable: they come and go faster than lightening. Nothing in the world can give us true, lasting happiness. This is the second mark: suffering and unsatisfactoriness.

No-self (*anātman*, བདག་མེད་པ་)

All objects of experience are transient, but isn't the subject itself permanent? It is often assumed that a *self* or personal entity lies at the heart of all experience, and there are indeed many views postulating the existence of an essence of some sort that constitutes the underlying structure of experience.³ The identity of the self varies, depending on the situation. Sometimes we identify with the body ("I am walking"), sometimes with the mind ("I think"), and at other times with an entity that is somehow in control of both ("my body, my mind"). However, this self is consciously or intuitively assumed to be a real, independent and unchanging entity going through the ups and downs of lives without being essentially affected by them. This assumption was challenged by the Buddha. Examining all aspects of experience, he could identify an uninterrupted flow of ever-changing physical and mental processes (the five skandhas), but no unchanging personal identity behind them. This is the third mark: no-self.

By holding on to the belief that there is a permanent essence beyond the physical and mental processes and identifying with it, we are in dissonance with reality and bound to generate all sorts of wrong views and misguided actions, bringing about more confusion and suffering. Everything that seems attractive to this self—whether

³ A view prevalent at the time of the Buddha states that while all experience based on the senses is indeed transient and unsatisfactory, there is a permanent, independent and unitary self at its core—the *atman*—the nature of which is truly blissful.

we identify it as the body, the mind, both body and mind, or in any other way—we cling to, and anything that could harm it we generate aversion towards. We engage in all sorts of actions to achieve happiness and avoid suffering based on these states of attachment and aversion, which in turn are based on a distorted perception. By acting in this way, we perpetuate the fundamental delusion of the existence of this independent, unitary self, and thus create the causes for the experience of suffering.

In the Mahayana tradition, the three marks of existence are expanded upon in what is called the *four seals authenticating the view*:

1. *Everything compounded is impermanent*: because every aspect of our experience depends on a variety of components, nothing in it is of lasting nature.
2. *All defiled states are suffering*: as long our perception is stained by an incorrect view of reality and the emotional states it breeds, we will not go beyond dissatisfaction and suffering.
3. *All phenomena are devoid of self-nature*: things do not exist the way they appear, that is, nothing has inherent existence.
4. *Nirvana is peace*: as long as the experience is rooted in mental afflictions, which in turn come from a fundamental misapprehension of reality—that is, the clinging to the self—there can be no lasting peace. By not clinging to the five skandhas as the self, the cause of the other afflictions such as desire and hatred is removed, and thus ends the cause of future suffering.

REBIRTH

A concept central to Buddhist thought and intimately related to the problem of karma is the idea of rebirth. Even though the existence of rebirth has not been proven based on scientific evidence so far, the inability to show its existence does not prove its nonexistence. Until rather recently, we were unable to prove the existence of subatomic particles, but that did not mean that they did not exist.

It is also important to take a critical look at the instrument we use to determine whether or not something exists, which in the end is always the mind. As long as its abilities to know are limited—by the natural limitations of the senses and the limitation of thought—we cannot assume that not knowing something means it does not exist. It simply means that we do not know about it, and that is all we can state with confidence.⁴

Tracing back the substance

Dharmakīrti, an Indian Buddhist teacher active in the seventh century, was famous for his defense of Buddhist doctrine against the attacks of followers of other traditions.⁵ One point of attack was precisely the existence of rebirth. Although it cannot be directly

4 This acknowledgement of the limitations of human knowledge has an equivalent in the Western philosophical tradition called agnosticism, where it is usually related to the problem of the existence of God.

5 Dharmakīrti was instrumental for the development of Buddhist logic and epistemology.

observed, Dharmakīrti argues, we can infer its existence by means of the logical argumentation of causality.

Everything in the world, every single phenomenon we can observe has a cause. Nothing came into being without a cause. One principle important for the process of causality is that the main cause of any given phenomenon must be of the same nature as the resultant thing. According to Buddhist thought, matter is composed of the four elements of earth, water, fire and wind (sometimes the element of space is added to that list). Consciousness, on the other hand, is not made up of these. Its basic characteristics are to be “clear and knowing,” which distinguish it fundamentally from the four great elements. Therefore, it is argued that consciousness cannot arise from matter but must have its own cause. Since a moment of consciousness or awareness must be caused by another moment of consciousness, there must have been consciousness prior to this life. This is precisely the argument from which the existence of rebirth is inferred.

Like the flame of a candle

If, as stated above, there is no permanent self, what is it that continues from life to life? What is it that is being reborn? In his exchange with the Bactrian Greek king Menander I (second century BCE), the Buddhist master Nāgasena famously explains by means of similes the problem of karma and rebirth in the absence of a permanent essence.

“When someone dies,” the king asks, “is it the same or a different person that is being reborn?” “It is neither the same, nor a

different person,” is the master’s reply. What does this mean? Nāgasena goes on to explain this point with the help of the simile of the flame. When a candle burns throughout the night, we cannot say that the flame of the last watch of the night is the same as the one of the first watch. Nor can we say that they are unrelated and substantially different flames. What actually happens is that there is a continuity of individual flame moments, one being the cause for the next. The present moment’s flame comes into being because of the flame of the previous moment, and this moment’s flame is the cause for the next moment’s flame. In a similar way, the consciousness at the moment of rebirth is caused by the previous moment of consciousness, and this must come from a previous life.

Nāgasena also clearly distinguishes the concept of rebirth from that of transmigration in the following simile. When one candle is lit from the flame of another, he says, one cannot say that the flame was transferred from one candle to the other. Similarly, it is not the case that a soul transmigrates from one life to the next.⁶



⁶ This text, the *Milindapañha*, is preserved in the Khuddaka Nikaya section of the Sutta Pitaka of the Pali canon.

KARMA, ACTIONS AND THEIR EFFECTS

Attachment, hatred, ignorance, and
 The actions they generate are unwholesome.
 Non-attachment, non-hatred, non-ignorance,
 And the actions they generate are wholesome.

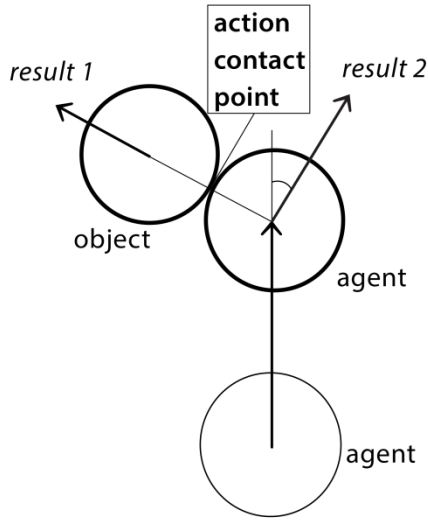
From the unwholesome come all sufferings
 And every bad rebirth.
 From the wholesome come all fortunate rebirths
 And the happiness in all lives.

– Nāgārjuna: *The Precious Garland* 20-21

To understand what rebirth is and what it is not, we have to understand what is meant by *karma*. According to Buddhist thought, karma is a natural law, which, like any other law of nature, simply describes the way things work. Newton did not invent the law of universal gravitation any more than Buddha invented karma. They merely understood and described these natural processes.

Karma literally means *action* and refers to any deed of body, speech and mind. According to the Buddha’s teachings, every action we perform with our bodies, every word we utter with our speech, and every thought we think with our mind have effects on the performing agent. This process is called “karma, causes and results.” The relationship between agent, object, action, and result is similar to the interaction between two billiard balls. When the cue-ball (*agent*) hits (*action*) a resting ball (*object*), not only is the latter set

into motion (*result 1*), but the cue-ball itself will also be affected, and will change trajectory and speed (*result 2*).



In other words, everything we do, say or think will have an effect not only on the object we act upon, but also on ourselves. Our actions will change us, sometimes in ever-so-subtle ways, and condition the way we experience things from that moment on.⁷

⁷ It is said that the precise workings of karma are understood fully only by a fully awakened being, that is a mind that knows all the causes and conditions contributing to the production of a result. The general principles of the process are systematically analyzed in the Abhidharma teachings. This can be studied in detail in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma*.

The good, the bad and the neutral

Avoid all negativity,
 Perfectly accomplish what is wholesome,
 Tame completely your own mind—
 This is the teaching of the Awakened One.

– Shakyamuni Buddha: *The Sutra of Individual Liberation*

Actions are of three kinds: wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral. Simply put, wholesome actions result in pleasant experiences and happiness, unwholesome actions result in unpleasant experiences and suffering, and neutral actions in experiences we feel indifferent towards.⁸

An unwholesome deed is defined as an action motivated by a mind of desire/attachment, aversion/ill-will, and ignorance, the latter referring in this context to an incorrect understanding of the principle of karma, cause and effect. A person may kill an animal, for instance, out of the desire to eat its flesh, out of aversion (to an insect for example), or out of ignorance, as in the practice of animal sacrifice for example. At the other end of the spectrum lie the actions triggered by a mind that is free of desire, hatred and ignorance. Such actions are defined as wholesome because they bring about positive effects for the agent. Free of desire etc., in this context, does not mean the afflictive emotion is simply not active, which is the case in neutral actions as well. It means that the mind

⁸ For a list of the ten unwholesome actions and their opposites please refer to Appendix 3.

is, at least in that moment, not polluted by the affliction due to a correct understanding of the situation, and therefore not attached to or averse to an object which would otherwise give rise to the affliction.

Minding the mind

Based on these definitions we can understand that the principle factor determining the nature of any deed is the state of mind or the intention behind the act. “Intention, I say, is karma,” the Awakened One famously declared, thus revolutionizing this ancient idea.⁹ In other words, whether an action will have a positive or a negative effect on the agent depends mainly on the motivation triggering the action, and this is precisely why the Buddha emphasized the importance of training the mind on the path.

The teachings on karma are meant to guide our conduct so we adopt a harm-free way of living. This has two purposes. First, such discipline promotes a harmonious environment in which the members of society do not harm each other. Secondly, by not creating the causes for one’s own future suffering, one lays the foundation for a stable and fruitful life conducive to the practice of the liberating path. In this sense, a reformed conduct based on the principles of karma is a protection for oneself as well as for others.

⁹ Anguttara Nikaya 6.63. The concept of karma was already prevalent in the Indian subcontinent before the time of the Buddha. Prior to him, however, karma was understood as a phenomenon connected to the physical actions of the body, explaining the importance of rituals in Vedic culture.

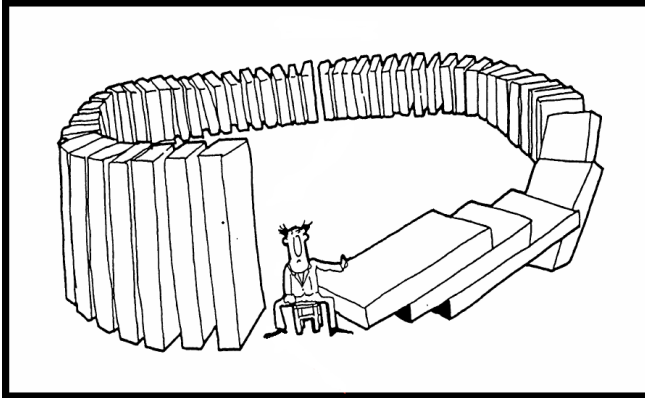
Karma teaches responsibility, not fate

When speaking of karma it is important to understand this concept in light of the Buddha's teachings in general. It is said that just as the ocean everywhere carries the taste of salt, all Dharma taught by the Buddha has the single taste of liberation. In this sense, the teachings on karma too must be understood as constructive instructions on the path to freedom. Sometimes we may think that a misfortune "is just karma" and that there isn't really much one can do about it, or that if something bad happens to someone it is because they did wrong in the past and therefore "deserve" this fate. Such views are in direct opposition to the liberating path and prevent us from taking measures to correct the situation. The teaching on karma in the sense of *actions and their results* ought to be used skillfully as a tool to guide our conduct based on the understanding that whatever we do now will have consequences in the future. As Geshe Thubten Jinpa remarks, "The concept of karma is an ethical concept, where the key purpose is to teach us responsibility for the consequences of our actions. It should be directed more towards the future rather than the past."¹⁰ He goes on to explain that it is important not to use the idea of karma "against" someone else, blaming the victim for the suffering he or she experiences. This would be utterly fatalistic and counterproductive. On a personal level, on the other hand, the

¹⁰ Paraphrased from a talk given by Thubten Jinpa to a Tibetan community in Oakland, California. A part of this talk is available online on the Youtube platform.

concept can be very helpful when dealing with difficult situations. It can make it easier to find peace when one has a fatal disease, for example, seeing it not as an unfair stroke of bad luck, but as a consequence of something one may have done in the past, Thubten Jinpa explains. In this way, the suffering one experiences now can be seen as a process of purifying negative actions of the past, which can bring about a sense of relief.

If there is no self, who is reaping the results of my actions?



This picture illustrates the workings of karma in the sense of “what goes around, comes around” or “as you sow, so shall you reap.” There is one mistaken assumption underlying this illustration, however: the existence of a real person at the origin of the action and at the receiving end of its effect. As we have seen in the previous chapter, all the processes making up our existence are constantly changing, without there being any substantial, permanent and thus “real” entity at its core. The Buddha clearly stated that questions such as “Whose karma is it?” or “Whose birth is it?” are misguided and unfounded. However, the picture is not

entirely wrong. It is precisely as long as we believe in the existence of such a self that the workings of karma will bind us. As long as there is the belief in a real, independent identity, there is attachment to certain experiences, aversion to others, and the multitude of actions triggered by these impulses bringing about the resultant experiences. This is how the repetitive cycle of suffering and dissatisfaction is perpetuated.

What is it that is being reborn?

So far we have seen that, according to the Buddha's teachings, the human experience is composed of various physical and mental processes, all of which are in a state of continuous change. In other words, there is no self or substantial identity to be found among these processes that could transmigrate from one life to the next. What is it, then, that is being reborn?

As stated above, just like a material phenomenon is the result of material causes and conditions, mind or consciousness too is caused by previous moments of consciousness. In this way, there is a continuous flow of consciousness, one moment of consciousness giving rise to the next. These moments form a continuum which goes on without interruption, from one moment to the next. In this sense we can say that rebirth actually happens every single moment.

Since what we call "death" is the end of the functioning of the physical body, the continuation of consciousness does not necessarily stop with the dying process. How it continues, then, depends on the factors conditioning its experience, or, in other

words, on the karma accumulated previously. The mental factors associated with the consciousness, starting with intention and including all the wholesome and unwholesome factors, generate karma, which leaves imprints and conditions the stream of consciousness. This continuation of consciousness conditioned by the imprints of actions is called *rebirth*.

The karmic imprints left in the mind (and more specifically on the subtle continuum of the all-base consciousness) become the seeds for future experiences, and are able to express their full potential once all the conditions necessary for their maturation are present. This is called the *maturation of karma*, which includes our subjective experiences of pleasure and pain, as well as the type of rebirth one gets and the conditions one finds oneself in. The Buddha explained this process of karma, causation and rebirth in the twelve links of dependent arising, which is the topic of the next chapter.

The power of karma

For an action to reach its full potential, four factors need to be present: intention, object, action and completion of the act.

1. **Intention** indicates that the action is premeditated. For instance, a hunter will go on a hunt with the clear intention to kill game, such as rabbits or deer.
2. **Object** here refers to the *intended* object of the action. If the hunter in our example mistakenly shoots a dog, the action of killing has still been committed, but involuntarily on the wrong object, and thus the karma will not have its full strength.

3. **Action** refers to the actual: here, that of killing, which occurs the moment a rabbit or deer has been shot dead.
4. **Completion** means that after the action has been committed, the agent feels that it was right, or, in other words, does not regret the deed: the hunter realizes that he shot the rabbit and is glad about it.

With these four conditions present an action reaches its full potential, which means that it will produce at least one of three possible types of result:

- The so-called *result of full maturation* refers to the type of rebirth one will have as a result of the action, such as being born as a human due to powerful wholesome deeds committed in the past.
- The *environmental result* refers to the conditions one will encounter, such as being born into a family with abundant resources as a result of having been generous.
- The *result which is similar to the cause* refers to two types of outcomes: similar *experience* (such as having a short life as a result of shortening the life of others by killing them, and so forth) and similar *action*, which is the tendency to act in a similar way in the future: once we are familiar with a certain type of action, it will be easier to repeat it again.

Which of these results will be produced depends on many factors, such as the strength of the deed and whether or not any form of purification has been performed. The strength of an action is determined by the following factors:

- *Completion*: all four factors mentioned above are present.

- *Intensity of the motivation*: the stronger the motivation, the more powerful the action will be.
- *Nature of the object*: if the object of one's action is a holy being, someone very close to oneself, like a parent, or someone in great need, the strength of the action will be greater.
- *Frequency*: if the act has been repeated many times, it will become increasingly stronger.
- *Duration*: the more time passes between the action and its karmic fruition, the stronger it will become (which is why it is important to purify negative actions as soon as one realizes the harm one has done).
- The presence of *opposing karmic forces* will reduce the strength of the action. If, for example, one gives a present to someone in need, but is still attached to the gift, the action of giving will not reach its full potential.

Purifying karma

It is said that once a karma has been committed, it will definitely bear fruit—that is, unless it is purified. Even though we cannot undo what has been done, we can influence the way an action will shape our future experience, and even generate conditions that will prevent it from producing its full results. For purification to occur we need to be completely honest with ourselves and find the courage to disclose whatever it is we feel was wrong. Only when we are able to confront ourselves and expose our deeds, along with the desire, pride, anger, fear, confusion, and selfishness behind them,

will it be possible for us to lay such actions aside and neutralize the effect they might otherwise have on us.

It is taught that to effectively neutralize the imprints of an action in the mind we need the combination of four forces: sincere regret, a firm resolution, wholesome actions, and a powerful support.

1. **Regret** means that we are aware of the harmful consequences of a negative deed and feel that it was therefore wrong to act in this way. In this context it is important to appreciate the difference between regret and guilt based on judgment, blaming ourselves for *being* bad or incorrigible. Here, we learn to distinguish the person from the deed and feel remorse based on an understanding of the relationship between unwholesome deeds and their unwanted results. This is likened to the remorse one would feel after realizing that the drink one has just consumed contains poison.
2. **Resolution** refers to the strong intention not to repeat the action. It is said that even though it is unlikely that we will be able to immediately abstain from all harmful deeds simply by realizing our mistake, we should nevertheless resolve to abandon unwholesome deeds, no matter what. As our introspective awareness increases, we will realize to what a surprisingly high extent the power of habit determines our behavior. It is normal to stumble on the way, but it would be wrong not to stand up again. Every time we become aware of an unwholesome impulse, we decrease the power it holds to dictate

what we do, until eventually we are free to choose the wisest course of action.

3. **Wholesome actions** in this context are deeds carried out with a good heart—a mind free of attachment, hatred and ignorance—based on the intention to counteract a negative action. This can be a simple act of helping someone in need, or specific rituals of purification, such as the recitation of mantras of purification. It is generally considered that deeds related to the Buddhadharmā—such as building representations of the Three Jewels, supporting the study and practice of the Buddha’s teachings, sponsoring the publication of sacred texts, or making offerings to the monastic community—are particularly powerful actions of purification, because such deeds create a connection with the highest possible good, i.e., liberation from suffering and the attainment of full awakening.
4. **Support** here refers to individuals we unequivocally trust as a force of good, and as being beyond the influence of mental afflictions and negative actions—in other words, awakened beings. It is to this support that we disclose our misdeeds with sincere regret and resolve not to repeat them in the future. We choose awakened beings, i.e., buddhas and bodhisattvas, as our support because, just as someone drowning in quicksand needs to rely on firm ground to save him- or herself, our trust in the fact that freedom from suffering and its causes is possible, and the inspiration these beings represent, offer a stable foundation for our practice of purification.

To neutralize a karmic imprint it is important to combine these four forces together and apply them as quickly as possible after the deed, because, unless it is purified, the strength of an action increases with time until it reaches maturation by producing its result. Thus, the faster one acts on a negative karmic imprint, the easier it is to neutralize it.

Karma and the end of suffering

Established in the discipline,
And equipped with hearing and contemplation,
One applies oneself intensively to meditation.

– Vasubandhu: *Treasury of Abhidharma* 6.5

Generally speaking, four types of actions can be distinguished:

1. White karma, deeds motivated by a good intention that will produce pleasant results.
2. Black karma, deeds driven by a negative intention that produce unpleasant results.¹¹
3. Neutral karma, actions that produce results that are neither pleasant nor unpleasant.
4. Karma that leads to the end of karma: these are actions that will allow us to put an end to suffering, in other words the practice of the profound path of liberation.

¹¹ There is also a grey area of course: combinations of harmful actions based on good intentions or beneficial actions carried out with impure intentions.

Liberation is neither attained by simply abstaining from acting in the hope of exhausting all negative karma, nor by purifying every single imprint left in the mind, which would be an endless task. Both scenarios are impossible because, according to the Buddha's teachings, samsara has no beginning, implying that we have had countless lives in which we have committed an immeasurable number of deeds, both positive and negative. In other words, the store of past karmic imprints is endless.

How, then, *does* the path work? The practices prescribed by the Buddha allow us to work with the conditions we find ourselves in at the moment. First it is important to adopt a way of life in line with the principles of karma in order to avoid creating further causes of suffering and confusion. This is the purpose of the vows one can take as a support for the practice—whether as a lay follower observing five basic precepts or as a full ordained monastic keeping over 200 vows.¹² As we then learn to apply the methods of purification based on this conduct, the mind becomes increasingly peaceful, stable and clear. In others words, we create conditions that are conducive for the more advanced stages of the Buddhist path, namely the meditative practices of calm abiding and insight, or *shamatha* and *vipashyana*. With the practice of calm abiding, we learn to improve the mind's ability to temporarily isolate itself from the influence of mental afflictions through the sustained practice of meditative concentration. This in turn establishes an essential

¹² The five precepts for lay followers are: not killing, not stealing, not lying, no sexual misconduct, and no intoxicating substances.

condition for profound insight to occur, because only a focused and unwavering mind can see reality as it is. It is this insight, then, that puts an end to the causes of suffering by permanently eliminating the karmic imprints from the mind along with their latent tendencies.



4. Where Does It All Come From? Dependent Arising

All phenomena arise from causes.
These causes have been taught by the Tathāgata;
And that which puts an end to these causes
Has been proclaimed by the Great Ascetic as well.

– Shariputra: *The Essence of Dependent Arising*

THE EXPLANATION of *dependent arising* and related concepts are arguably the most distinctive aspects of Buddhist doctrine. This teaching not only explains how everything in the world comes into being, but also forms the basis for the entire path to liberation. It is also a highly sophisticated set of teachings, in parts very difficult to comprehend, which has always been subject to interpretation and debate within the Buddhist traditions.

In a nutshell, the principle of dependent arising argues that in order to come into being, everything in the world depends on causes and conditions. Since any cause is itself also produced by its own set of causes and conditions, the entire world of existence is said to be without absolute beginning. This is why this principle is illustrated by a circle, without beginning and without end.

We can distinguish two aspects to this teaching: the “inner” process of dependent arising describing the chain of causality generating the endless cycles of rebirth and suffering based on ignorance, and “outer” dependent arising describing how phenomena in general come into being.

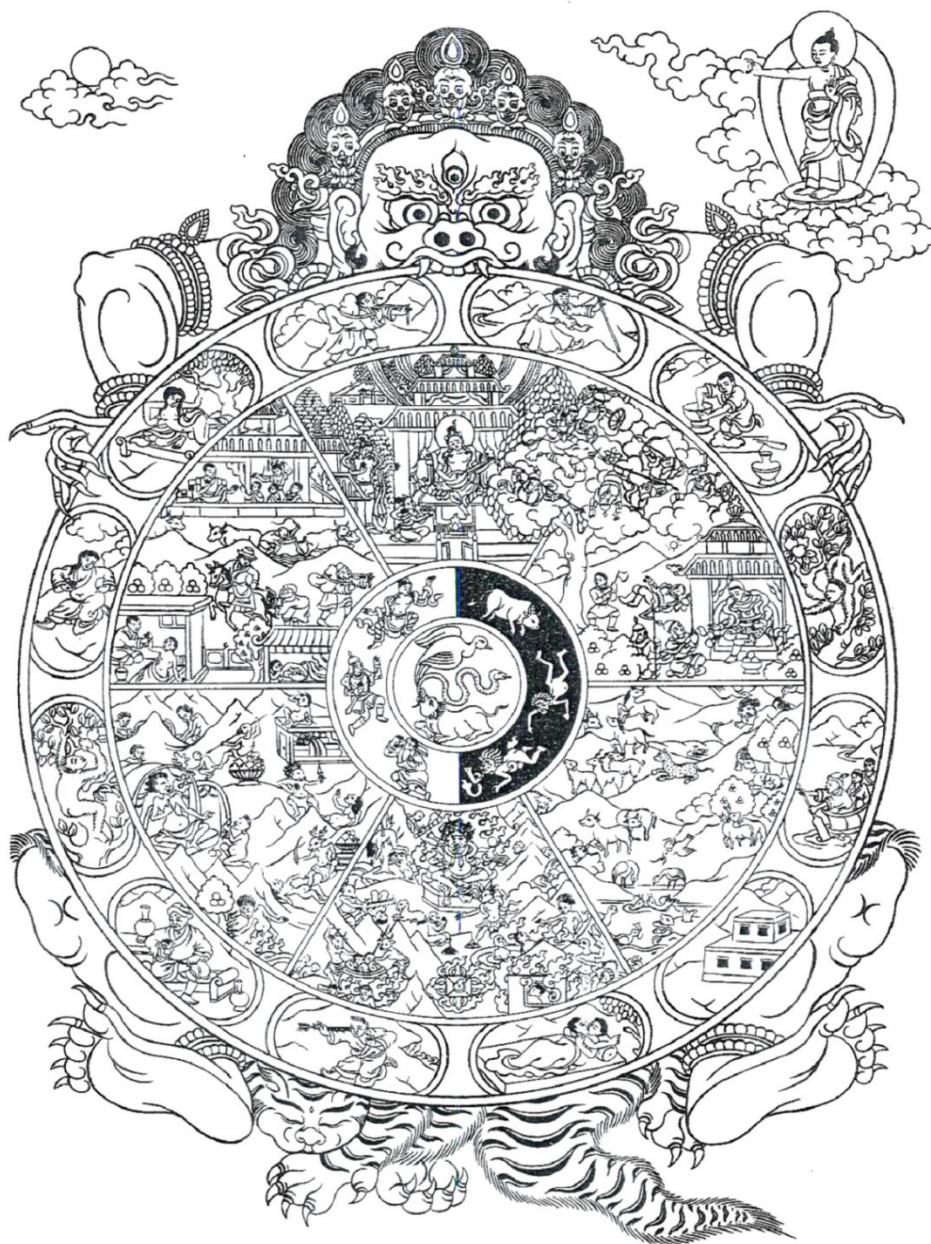
INNER DEPENDENT ARISING: THE TWELVE LINKS

Cycles of becoming

Inner dependent arising is explained by means of the twelve links of depending arising, which describe the gradual process of the generation and ending of suffering. In Buddhist iconography these twelve links form the outer rim of the Wheel of Life (or more accurately *cycle of becoming*), which depicts samsara, cyclic existence. This wheel illustrates how beings are caught up in repetitive patterns of conditioning leading to ‘becoming’, experiencing all possible forms of existence birth after birth.

In the center of the wheel we see a pig, a bird and a snake, symbolizing the three poisons at the core of samsara: ignorance, hatred and desire. Due to these three, beings produce karma, the causal chain of deeds and their results. This is illustrated in the next circle, the white half of which represents the accomplishment of wholesome deeds leading to the pleasant experiences in fortunate forms of existence, and the black half standing for negative actions leading to the woes of the lower realms, both always within the confines of cyclic existence. The third circle depicts the six realms in which beings can be born (clockwise starting from the upper left section): the three higher planes of humans, devas and asuras, and the three lower realms of animals, hell beings and pretas.¹³

¹³ For an explanation of devas, asuras, hell beings and pretas, refer to the glossary entry *six realms*.



The outermost circle illustrates the twelve causal links of dependent arising, the process which keeps the wheel turning:

- *Ignorance* [a blind man] conditions karmic formations [a potter].
- *Formations* condition consciousness [a monkey].
- *Consciousness* conditions mind and body (“name-and-form”) [people in a boat].
- *Mind and body* condition the sense bases [a house with six windows].
- *Sense bases* condition contact [a copulating couple].
- *Contact* conditions sensations [a man with an arrow in his eye].
- *Sensations* condition craving [a drunk man].
- *Craving* conditions clinging [a monkey eating].
- *Clinging* conditions becoming [a pregnant woman].
- *Becoming* conditions birth [a woman giving birth].
- *Birth* conditions *aging and death* [a corpse carried by a man].

The wheel is in the firm grip of Yama, the Lord of Death, reminding us that wherever we find ourselves within samsara, every form of existence is subject to decay and inevitably ends with death. Outside the suffering and dissatisfaction of samsara we find the Buddha, standing pointing at the moon, a symbol for the peace of nirvana, the cessation of all suffering.

The twelve links of dependent arising

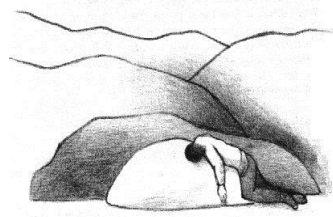
The twelve links describe the process of conditioning and rebirth based on ignorance. The following explanation follows this process in reverse order, starting at the twelfth link (i.e., aging and death,

which stands for suffering in general), a link we can most easily relate to.

12. Aging and death

(*jarā-maraṇa*, རྗེ་སྲི་)

Life is inevitably entangled with struggles and difficulties of all kinds.



Psychological trauma, depression, stress, anxiety are just a few of the mental ailments afflicting our existence. On top of these we may suffer from various forms of malnutrition, heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's disease and many others. This does in no way undermine our pursuit of happiness. We can of course have beauty and enjoyable experiences in our lives, but we should be realistic about them. When the body ages, we lose our physical strength and our faculties degenerate. Eventually the body will stop functioning and die. The Buddhist approach to this reality is to make a deliberate effort to embrace it as an inherent aspect of the process of life. But this should lead to neither resignation and depression, nor to a life of reckless hedonism. Rather, this realization can ignite an inner light in pursuit of a path to true freedom. It is important to keep in mind that the goal of the path laid out by the Buddha is a radical transcendence of suffering, not a merely comfortable and stress-free life. Once we accept that death is not the end but the gateway to a new beginning, and that every form of life will always be afflicted by one kind of suffering or another, we may start to seriously look for an alternative, which is none other than the end of suffering, nirvana.

11. Birth (*jāti*, རྐྱེ་བ་)



The aging process of our body starts, of course, with birth, an event often associated with pain and trauma for both the mother and the child. It is important to point out here that birth and life per se are *not* regarded as inherently bad. In fact, the potential for goodness present in a human life is seen as something of immeasurable value. Now, whether or not the human life becomes fruitful depends entirely on the course of actions taken by the individual.

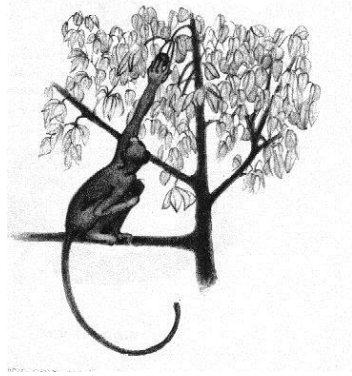
10. Becoming (*bhava*, རྐྱེད་བ་)



What is it that brings about birth in this world of conditioned existence? According to the Buddha's teaching it is karma, our actions. In particular, it is the ripening of strong karmic seeds which will propel the consciousness into a new birth, the quality of which depends on the type of actions performed in the past. In other words, the karmic seeds stored in consciousness joined to the conditions present at the time of death will result in a corresponding type of birth. This process is called becoming. Becoming is illustrated by a pregnant woman. The body of her child is fully formed in her womb, just like the karma that will produce a rebirth is ripe, but not yet manifest.

9. Clinging (*upādāna*, ཉེ་བར་ལེན་པ་)

The actions leading to rebirth, in turn, are conditioned by our mental clinging or fixation. We hold on to people, to possession, to wealth, to status, to ideas, to our identity and so on. Because we cling to all these objects we



are compelled to act in certain ways, rejecting whatever is experienced as a threat and running after anything identified as a cause of happiness. We have to keep in mind, however, that if we had identified the causes of happiness and suffering correctly, we should be free of suffering by now. Since this is obviously not the case we can conclude that the foundation of our understanding of the world and ourselves may be incorrect.

8. Craving (*tṛṣṇā*, རྗེན་པ་)

Why do we cling? Because we crave. We thirst for the input from our senses to be pleasant and agreeable to our expectations and moods. When we do experience pleasure, we crave for this



experience to last. When we experience something that strikes us as unpleasant we reject it and want to get out of the situation. Craving is illustrated by a man drinking alcohol. Though we know that certain habits are destructive, our strong habitual craving renders us unable to resist the temptation.

7. Sensation (*vedanā*, ཚོར་བ་)

This craving, in turn, is conditioned by our sensations. Whenever we see an object there is a certain reaction or feeling. When this sensation is pleasant we crave it, when it is unpleasant we reject it, and when it is neutral we are indifferent towards it. Whenever we hear a sound, a certain sensation arises, which, again, can be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The same goes for sensations based on smells, tastes, the objects of our sense of touch, and even our thoughts. Sensation is illustrated by a person hit in the eye with an arrow. The arrow stands for sense impressions, which have a strong impact on our lives.



6. Contact (*sparśa*, རེག་པ་)

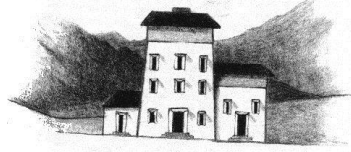
This relation of our sense faculties and their respective objects is called contact. For any sensation to happen, there needs to be contact with the object first. Contact is of six types: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and conceptual. Contact is symbolized by a couple embracing or kissing.



5. Six sense bases

(*ṣaḍāyatana*, སྐྱེ་མཚེད་བྱུག་)

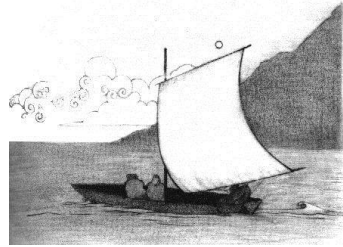
The sensations we have are conditioned by our sense bases, of which humans have six: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. Depending on the set of sense faculties we are born with, their functioning and how well they age, we will have certain sensations. A dog, for instance, will be more receptive to high frequency sounds and odors than a human, and to a deaf person the squeaky sounds made by a novice violin player will not be a nuisance. The sense bases are the gateways for us to experience the world, which is why they are symbolized by a house with a door and windows.



4. Name and form

(*nāma-rūpa*, མིང་གསུགས་)

Our senses are, quite obviously, conditioned by the set of mental and material components we are born with. An earthworm cannot see or hear, its



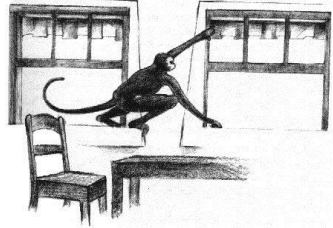
primary senses being the senses of touch and taste. Humans, on the other hand, have six senses, relying primarily on sights, sounds and thoughts. The term *name* in the phrase ‘name and form’ refers to the mental aspect of our identity (i.e., the mental skandhas), which, when associated with *form*, i.e., the material aspect of the person based on the four great elements, will produce the sense bases through which the individual will relate to the world. In other words, ‘name and form’ stands for the five skandhas. The form

skandha is illustrated by a boat carrying people, representing the mental skandhas.

3. Consciousness (*vijñāna*, རྣམ་ཤེས་)

What is the necessary condition for the five skandhas to be taken up in order to have a new life? It is consciousness.

As seen in the previous chapter on rebirth, consciousness is the link between one life and the next. Being a continuum of individual moments of consciousness it is, like everything else, a conditioned phenomenon and thus not a permanent entity identified as the self. Consciousness is simply a series of individual moments of awareness which, when linked together, form a continuum which goes on as long as there is a cause for it to continue. This continuum of consciousness, also known as the all-base consciousness, conditions the mind and body of the next birth because it carries the karmic seeds that are the cause for the particular type of birth one will obtain. Consciousness is illustrated by a restless monkey.



2. Karmic formations (*saṃskāra*, འདུ་བྱེད་)

The stream of consciousness which continues from one life to the next carries with it the imprints of our actions of body, speech and mind. These actions are like karmic seeds which will later produce the experiences corresponding to the nature of these seeds. Actions imbued with the energy of attachment, aversion and ignorance will



result in unpleasant experiences, and those free of these poisons will result in pleasant ones. In chemistry class, we learn that “nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed.”¹⁴ This law applies to the realm of mental energy as well. Actions leave imprints on the mind, form and condition consciousness, and thus cause its continuity in one form or another. Karmic formations are represented by a potter working fresh clay on his wheel into a pot, just as actions, once committed, will produce results.

1. Ignorance (*avidyā*, མ་རིག་སྲ)

These conditioning actions, in turn, are rooted in ignorance. In the context of karma and the definition of unwholesome actions, ignorance is understood in a more narrow sense as the misunderstanding of the law of cause and effect. In the context of the twelve links of dependent arising, ignorance is taken in its most basic sense as not seeing things as they really are. In other words, *this* ignorance does not refer to a mere lack of information, but to a fundamental delusion with regards to reality.¹⁵ This



¹⁴ This quote paraphrases the findings of the French chemist Antoine Lavoisier (18th century) related to the law of mass conservation.

¹⁵ Two types of ignorance are distinguished: the ignorance that is one of the three poisons (depicted in the center of the Wheel of Life) and the ignorance that is the first of the twelve links of dependent arising, described in this paragraph. The ignorance of the twelve links is the basic delusion of apprehending a self or inherent identity in the individual and in phenomena. This is the most fundamental form of ignorance which gives rise to all other aspects of confusion.

delusion causes an inability to recognize the four Noble Truths and to correctly understand dependent arising, the three marks of existence, the five skandhas and the workings of karma. Not seeing the real nature of the world, ourselves, our experience, and of the mind, our actions are based on a view that is not in accord with reality, and thus we fail to accomplish our goal. We do all kinds of things in the pursuit of happiness, but the pleasant experiences do not last. We run away from unpleasant ones, but they keep coming back. Not only do we not understand why this keeps happening, but we are subject to a fundamental delusion: we believe in the reality of our experience, cling to the idea of a personal, independent self, and act in accordance with this confusion. Craving and clinging to pleasant experiences, and trying to avoid unpleasant ones, we engage in actions, both wholesome and unwholesome ones, which in turn produce their own results in the form of pleasant and unpleasant experiences. This cycle of actions and results based on ignorance is the self-perpetuating wheel of conditioned existence called samsara. In the painting, ignorance is illustrated by a blind man about to trip over a rock.

The following table¹⁶ explains how each of the twelve links of dependent arising afflicts beings by conditioning their existence:

¹⁶ This table is based on a teaching by Rongtön Sheja Künrig, a Tibetan master from the 15th century. Rongtön Sheja Künrig, *Adorning Maitreya's Intent*, 38.

THE 12 LINKS OF DEPENDENT ARISING		
	LINK	How does it afflict beings?
1	IGNORANCE	veils the vision of reality
2	FORMATIVE FACTORS	plant the seeds for rebirth in the consciousness (i.e., the all-base consciousness)
3	CONSCIOUSNESS	leads to a place of rebirth
4	NAME & FORM	are the seizing of the body of the next existence
5	SIX SENSE BASES	bring the condition of name and form to completion
6	CONTACT	determines the object of perception based on the coming together of object, sense faculty and consciousness
7	SENSATION	is the experience of the pleasant and unpleasant maturation of deeds
8	CRAVING	nurtures the seeds of birth in a new existence
9	CLINGING	binds beings to the new existence
10	BECOMING	actualizes a new existence in the next birth
11	BIRTH	binds beings to the suffering of aging and death, and so forth
12	AGING & DEATH	are the actualization of the maturation of deeds

Conversely, we can see that when we have a correct understanding of the reality of our experience, that is, when ignorance ceases, there will be no actions contaminated by a wrong view. Without such actions, there will be no consciousness conditioned by afflictions. Without such consciousness, there is no basis to take up contaminated name and form, without which there are no afflicted sense bases. Without such sense bases there is no afflicted contact which would lead to afflicted sensations. Without such sensations, there is no craving; without craving, no clinging; without clinging, no becoming; without becoming, no birth; without birth, no aging and death. In this way suffering comes to an end.

How many lives does it take?

The twelve links are usually said to span over three life times with links 1 and 2 belonging to the past life, links 3 to 10 to the present life, and links 11 and 12 to the future life, but it is important to note that the processes at work here do not necessarily work in this way. The present life, for instance, also contains birth, aging and death, as well as ignorance and karmic formations; and a future life will also contain the first ten links. For the practice of the path as well it is important to understand that the process of ending suffering can take place in a single life.

When ignorance is eliminated, there will still be sense bases, contact, and sensations, but due to the correct apprehension of the object of perception there will be no more craving and no clinging, which in turn puts an end to the process engendering further suffering. Everything hinges on whether or not the way we

apprehend the objects of our experience is in harmony with the way things really are, and this brings us to outer dependent arising.



OUTER DEPENDENT ARISING: THE WISDOM OF EMPTINESS

Whatever is dependently arisen
Is explained to be emptiness.
Being a dependent designation,
That itself is the middle way.

That being so, there is no such thing
That is not dependently arisen.
Therefore, a non-empty thing
Does not exist.

– Nāgārjuna: *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* 24.18-19

In the explanation of inner dependent arising we have seen how ignorance engages the individual in endless, self-perpetuating and ultimately unfulfilling cycles of actions and experiences. The teaching on *outer dependent arising* investigates the nature of reality, that is, how everything in the world comes to be and exists, the misapprehension of which is ignorance, the first of the twelve links which keeps the cycle of samsara in motion.

The importance of the right view

Our emotions and actions are strongly based on the views we hold of the world, on how we see ourselves and everything around us. It is therefore important to question and analyze these views. A wrong understanding of the facts will cause continuous frustration and we will likely end up trying to manipulate our environment, which in turn will prove ultimately unfulfilling and frustrating. Whether we are aware of them or not, our views dictate how we perceive the

world and justify our emotions and actions. In our pursuit of lasting happiness we commit actions that can, at best, produce pleasant sensations and temporary happiness, but that will possibly sow seeds of future dissatisfaction, craving, and regret, in other words *suffering*. As long as our views and beliefs, our expectations and assumptions are at odds with reality, we are bound to be disappointed and frustrated.

Correct understanding, or *right view*, is therefore the only safe remedy to this universal ailment. Right view is of two types: conventional and ultimate, both of which are related to the reality of dependent arising. The conventional view is concerned with the law of karma, cause and effect, a correct appreciation of which is essential for the cultivation of the causes of happiness. The ultimate view is a direct realization of the true nature of reality, which is the direct antidote for the ignorance that is at the root of samsara. The more we are able to attune our view to reality, the more we are free.

Great dependent arising

The investigation of nature of reality is the most profound subject taught in Buddhist philosophy and here, again, different schools offer different approaches.¹⁷ The followers of the Madhyamaka or

¹⁷ The analysis of the various schools of thought is the subject of a whole genre of Buddhist literature called *philosophical tenets* (*siddhānta, grub mtha*). These different views will be further discussed in a volume dedicated to the subject.

Middle Way school¹⁸ famously make use of precise lines of reasoning to investigate reality. One of these methods is the analysis of ‘great dependent arising’. Here, we are not concerned with the twelve links of dependent arising discussed above, but with how each and every component of reality actually exists.

The arising of every aspect of our physical and mental reality depends on causes and conditions. Without seeds, soil, moisture, warmth and time, there is no tree. Without a tree, machines, water and the effort of many individuals, there is no paper. Every single component of these equations can further be analyzed in similar way, *ad infinitum*. And the same is true for every single perception, feeling and thought we have. Without the person living next door, and my living here and calling it my home, there is no neighbor. Without my neighbor, the music he listens to and my hearing it, there is no frustration. Without accumulated frustration, my neighbor’s habit of listening to loud music and my short temper, there is no anger.

Every single thing depends for its arising on factors that are not itself. In other words, nothing has independent, inherent existence. There is no inherently existing, real ‘tree’ out there. It is a mere label superimposed by the conceptual mind on clusters of events. The tree is empty of being a ‘tree’. In the same way, the paper is empty of being ‘paper’ and the neighbor is empty of being a ‘neighbor’. This lack of inherent existence is called *emptiness*, and

¹⁸ The Madhyamaka tradition is based on the writings of the Indian master Nāgārjuna (c. 150 – c. 250 CE).

this is the true nature of phenomena. From this perspective, the belief that things are truly and inherently existent is a wrong view. This kind of view is called an *extreme*. However, to conceptually hold on to the idea that things are *nonexistent* is just another type of extreme view. The scriptures refute each one and the combination of these. In a way, reality is this mystical union of appearance and emptiness. But this is not a reality that can be apprehended in any way. This statement is simply an acknowledgment that we cannot deny appearances, but that they are all devoid of intrinsic nature.

That which appears to the mind when the analysis which investigates their ultimate reality is not applied is termed *conventional reality*. Ultimate reality, then, is that which is directly experienced upon final analysis: the nonconceptual realization of the true nature of reality free of all conceptual extremes, clinging neither to ‘existence,’ nor to ‘nonexistence,’ nor to both (existence-and-nonexistence), nor to neither. The reality of this state, being nonconceptual, is beyond verbal expression and conceptual understanding.

What happens when we find that ultimately there is nothing to hold on to? It takes away the ground underneath the mental afflictions. When the mind does not hold on to ‘this’ or ‘that’, there is no basis for the judgment and hence no ground for the impulses of clinging to certain experiences and rejecting others. This realization is the ultimate protection. Seeing things as they really are is tantamount to liberation from all forms of suffering and stress. In other words, the deeper our understanding of reality, the more the mind lets go, free to rest in its blissful nature.

The danger of misunderstanding emptiness

The buddhas taught emptiness
 As a means to be free from all views.
 But those who hold to emptiness as a view
 He called incurable.

– Nāgārjuna: *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* 13.8

When engaging in this kind of analysis it is important to be very clear about what we are doing. We are not negating the fact that wholesome mental states produce good results and that unwholesome states produce suffering. This is, as we have seen, the infallible law of cause and effect. The workings of karma, of our day-to-day experiences of happiness and suffering, is called *conventional reality*. It is the reality of dependent arising. What we are looking for in this investigation of the deeper implications of dependent arising is the ultimate reality of things. What is the ultimate nature of that which arises in dependence on causes and conditions? What we are left with here is nothing to hold on to. To conflate *ultimate reality*, i.e., this state of not finding anything to hold on to, with the *conventional reality* of our ordinary appearances is a serious mistake. It is absolutely wrong to think that “since phenomena are not real, it does not matter what I do.” In fact, a view denying the reality of cause and effect on the conventional level is the worst misunderstanding about reality we can possibly have, because we will still have to face the consequences of our actions. The Buddha himself warned against the misuse of his teachings with the simile of the snake catcher. A skillful snake catcher will grasp the snake correctly (and possibly extract its venom for medicinal purposes). If

we are not careful and hold the snake at the wrong place, however, it will turn around and bite us, causing our certain death. In the same way, the teachings on emptiness have the potential to cure us from all forms of suffering. A misunderstanding of them, however, can cause serious harm. It is therefore important to be extremely cautious about our conduct, while at the same time deepening our understanding of reality.

The role of compassion

One factor that is vital for a meaningful and successful integration of insight is compassion. Without compassion, no great result will come, no matter how deep one's insight may be. Indeed, the union of compassion and wisdom epitomizes the path of the bodhisattva. A practice not rooted in compassion is therefore considered unskillful and, ultimately, will lead one astray. With a firm grounding in compassion and the resulting wish to fully awaken for the benefit of others, however, insight is provided with the best condition to naturally unfold. Insight, it is said, is like a flower that will open fully when it is nurtured by the water of compassion.

Working with deepening levels of insight

In the practice instructions of the *Lamdré* tradition¹⁹ three progressive levels of analysis are taught as a skillful means to

¹⁹ The *Lamdré* (lit. "The Path together with its Result") is a complete system of practice focused mainly on the tantric path based on the *Hevajra Tantra*. It goes back to the teachings of the Indian master Virupa and is nowadays taught exclusively in the Sakya tradition.

deepen one's insight into reality: investigating outer appearances, investigating mental appearances, and investigating the illusory nature of these appearances. Since these investigations are instructions for contemplative practice, they are to be studied under the guidance of a qualified teacher. What follows is merely a general outline of this gradual approach.

1. Investigating outer phenomena

Whatever we see, hear, smell, taste, and feel is an experience or perception. These perceptions—of oneself, of others, and of the world—are only that, personal representations or versions of reality. Francis has a different experience of a given situation than Joan, and Joan's view of things will be different from that of her dog Daisy. All we ever have access to is the data we gather through our senses. This data is then processed to create a mental representation of the world *inside* our mind. In other words, we can never have any experience outside our own mind—all experiences are individual mental constructs, everything is mental representation only.

2. Investigating mental representations

These mental constructs, in turn, arise in dependence on certain causes and conditions that are unique in any given moment. Depending on the ability of our senses, on our past experience, and the conditions we find ourselves in, the experience or mental representation we have will be different. Our reality, that is to say our *view* of reality, is never fixed but arises in dependence of various factors. This insight allows for openness and flexibility. By working

with an open, inquisitive mind, we can improve our perception, making it progressively more in tune with the nature of things and less harmful for ourselves and others.

3. Investigating dependent arising

Whatever arises in dependence on something else is by nature empty of inherent existence and does not exist in and of itself. When it comes to the true nature of things, the identity boxes created by the mind to label and relate to “things” are simply inadequate. Names and words have the tendency of reifying things, making concrete realities out what in fact is not concrete at all. When the necessary causes and conditions are present, nothing obstructs the appearance of phenomena. Yet, when the nature of that which appears to the mind is investigated, we come to realize that reality is not “this” or “that,” that these are just views, not realities. In the final analysis, there are no inherently existing “things” at all, and so the labels “existence” and “nonexistence” equally do not apply to ultimate reality, which is beyond all conceptual elaborations. In this way, it is stated that the nature of whatever appears in dependence on something else is beyond words, it is “indescribable, inconceivable, unutterable.” The realization of the union of appearance and emptiness is a gateway to freedom, open to us in every moment of perception.

When neither entities nor non-entities
Remain before the mind,
Since, at this moment, there is nothing else to hold on to,
There is perfect, non-conceptual peace.

– Śāntideva: *The Way of the Bodhisattva* 9.34

Appendix 1: From Abhidharma to Yogācāra

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BRANCHES OF BUDDHIST THOUGHT

On the Buddhist path of practice, wisdom is developed by first studying the teachings, then analyzing them, and finally cultivating in meditation the profound understanding gained in this manner: the triad of hearing, contemplating and meditating. The Buddhist masters of the past have composed a great many treatises, commenting on the words of the Buddha and his disciples, providing us with many ways to analyze and understand the nature of our experience in depth. These scriptures have been grouped into various classes of teachings, based on their particular approach to the methods offered by the Buddha.

1. Abhidharma, ‘Higher Teachings’ (ཚོས་མངོན་པ་)

The Abhidharma teachings are a detailed and systematic analysis of phenomena, comprising the outer world of our surroundings and the inner world of our experience. They examine the phenomenal world of experience from the point of view of enlightened beings, thus establishing the foundation for authentic Buddhist practice. According to Tibetan schools, the Abhidharma treatises *Treasury of Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmakośa*) and *Compendium of Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmasamuccaya*) composed by the brothers Vasubandhu and Asaṅga are regarded as the most authoritative scriptures of this tradition.

2. **Madhyamaka**, ‘the Philosophy of the Middle Way’ (དབུ་མ་)

The Madhyamaka school of thought is founded on the *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*), a treatise composed by the Indian master Nāgārjuna (1st cent. CE), which in turn is a commentary on the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* (*Prajñāpāramitā*) of the Buddha. Madhyamaka is an investigative method rather than a doctrine, leading to the direct realization of the ultimate truth. It details various means of critical analysis which, if applied skillfully, dismantle the habitual conceptual framework which filters and distorts our perception of reality. Important masters of this tradition in India include Candrakīrti, who wrote the *Introduction to the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakāvātāra*), Āryadeva, author of the *Four Hundred Verses* (*Caturśataka*), and Śāntideva, with his *Entering the Bodhisattva’s Way* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*).

3. **Prajñāpāramitā**, ‘the Perfection of Wisdom’ (ཤེས་ཐུན་)

The teachings on the *Perfection of Wisdom* are based on the sutras bearing the same name. As a class of teachings, the *Prajñāpāramitā* deals with the hidden meaning of these sutras as presented in the *Ornament of Direct Realization* (*Abhisamayālaṅkāra*) of Maitreya and the commentaries by Haribhadra and Vimuktasena. This treatise presents in a very detailed manner the various ‘stages’ and ‘paths’ experienced by a practitioner on the path, the levels and objects of realization and the minds realizing them, from the very beginning up to the omniscience of a fully awakened Buddha.

4. Pramāṇa, 'Means of Valid Cognition' (ཚད་མ་)

The teachings on the means of valid cognition provide very effective tools to sharpen one's intellectual faculties, which are then used to gain insight by analyzing the nature of reality. Generally speaking, the Buddhist traditions regard sound reasoning as an invaluable help in the development of wisdom, indeed as a necessary component of the path. It assists one in dispelling doubts and confusions by distinguishing right from wrong understanding, thus helping one to develop unshakable confidence in the Buddhist path and in the actuality of its result, perfect enlightenment. Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, authors of, among other works, the *Compendium of Means of Valid Cognition* (*Pramāṇasamuccaya*) and the *Commentary on the Means of Valid Cognition* (*Pramāṇavarttika*), are regarded as the founding figures of this school.

5. Yogācāra, 'School of Yoga Practice' (རྣལ་འབྱོར་སྐྱོད་པ་)

Yogācāra philosophy is based mainly on the treatises of the bodhisattva Maitreya and of the brothers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. These texts of Indian origin expound a philosophy deeply rooted in the yogic experiential approach of Buddhist practice. They form what has been called the *lineage of vast activities*, the complement to the *lineage of the profound view* originating from Mañjuśrī and Nāgārjuna, thus offering a balanced understanding of the Mahāyāna path. Important texts of this tradition include Maitreya's *Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes* (*Madhyāntavibhāga*) and *Distinguishing Phenomena from their True Nature* (*Dharma-dharmatā-*

vibhāga), and the *Sublime Continuum (Uttaratantra)*, the latter being the most authoritative treatise on Buddha-nature.

Appendix 2: The Fifty-One Mental Factors

Five omnipresent factors, present in each moment of mind:

1. Sensation (i.e., the second skandha): the mental factor experiencing the object of perception (in terms of being pleasant, unpleasant or neutral).
2. Perception (i.e., the third skandha): the factor apprehending the object's distinguishing features.
3. Intention: the mental impulse which initially moves the mind towards an object.
4. Attention: the factor which causes the mind to engage with the object.
5. Contact: the factor which arises through the coming together of object, sense faculty and attention.

Five object-determining factors, which ascertain the object of experience:

6. Interest: the mental factor of taking a strong interest in an object.
7. Adherence: the factor which stabilizes the attention on the object so it is not distracted elsewhere.
8. Recollection: the mental factor which keeps the object in mind so it is not forgotten.
9. Concentration: makes the focus on the object one-pointed.
10. Understanding: discriminates the qualities of the object.

Eleven wholesome factors, which act as antidotes to suffering and its causes:

11. Faith: the factor of trusting, admiring and being inspired by a genuinely reliable object.

12. Shame: the factor which avoids unwholesome deeds out of self-respect.
13. Consideration: avoids unwholesome deeds out of respect for others.
14. Non-attachment: frees from attachment to worldly phenomena.
15. Non-hatred: frees from ill-will towards objects of hatred.
16. Non-delusion: frees from delusion through understanding.
17. Diligence: inspires to act in wholesome ways.
18. Pliancy: makes body and mind serviceable to sustain wholesome efforts.
19. Heedfulness: pays attention to avoid the unwholesome and adopt the wholesome.
20. Equanimity: allows for the mind not to be disturbed by the afflictions.
21. Non-hostility: does not wish to harm based on compassion.

Six root afflictions, which agitate and disturb the mind:

22. Desire: clinging to things of the world.
23. Hostility: a strong aversion towards sources of harm.
24. Conceit: the mental factor of having an inflated sense of self based on the five skandhas.
25. Ignorance: the factor of being unaware of the real state of things, including the four Noble Truths.
26. Doubt: being uncertain with regard to the four Noble Truths.
27. Views or beliefs: five views which are not in accord with reality.
 - a. Believing the skandhas to be the self ('view of the perishing collection').

- b. Holding the extreme views of permanence or complete annihilation regarding the skandhas and the self.
- c. Believing that one's wrong views and opinions are correct and supreme.
- d. Believing that certain forms of mistaken discipline and conduct are supreme means leading to liberation.
- e. Holding wrong views regarding the law of karma.

Twenty secondary afflictions, derived from the root afflictions:

Derived from hostility (5):

- 28. Anger: wishing harm to others.
- 29. Resentment: holding a grudge and wishing to retaliate.
- 30. Spite: wishing to make others miserable, based on anger and resentment.
- 31. Envy: not being able to bear others' good fortune.
- 32. Cruelty: wishing to hurt others due to lack of compassion.

Derived from attachment (3):

- 33. Miserliness: holds on to possessions out of attachment.
- 34. Pomposity: takes pride in one's qualities, ignoring the good qualities of others.
- 35. Agitation: does not allow the mind to settle due to attachment to things of the world.

Derived from ignorance (6):

- 36. Concealment: does not want to reveal one's faults.
- 37. Dullness: renders the mind unserviceable, unable to remain with clarity with a wholesome object.
- 38. Laziness: has no interest in what is wholesome.

39. Lack of faith: not trusting, admiring or feeling inspired by a genuinely reliable object.
40. Forgetfulness: forgets wholesome objects.
41. Lack of introspection: makes one unaware of one's conduct, causing one to become careless.

Derived from attachment or ignorance (2):

42. Pretension: shows qualities one does not possess.
43. Dishonesty: pretends that one has no faults to reveal.

Derived from any of the three poisons (4):

44. Lack of shame: does not prevent unwholesome deeds based on self-respect.
45. Lack of consideration: does not prevent unwholesome deeds based on respect for others.
46. Heedlessness: does not protect the mind by avoiding unwholesome deeds and adopting wholesome ones.
47. Distraction: does not allow the mind to be still.

Four variable factors, which may be neutral, wholesome or unwholesome:

48. Sleep: withdraws the mind within.
49. Regret: makes one displeased with an action performed in the past.
50. Investigation: directs the mind towards an object to gain some general understanding of it.
51. Analysis: scrutinizes an object in detail.

Appendix 3: The Ten Unwholesome Actions and Their Opposites

Any action rooted in any of the three mental poisons—desire, hatred and ignorance—is by definition unwholesome. The following ten actions in particular are to be avoided:

Through the body:

1. Killing: taking the life of any living being.
2. Stealing: taking what has not been given.
3. Sexual misconduct: sexual activity based on excessive desire, in particular with an inappropriate partner.

Through speech:

4. Lying: saying things one knows to be untrue.
5. Divisive speech: saying things that cause division among others.
6. Hurtful or harsh speech: saying things that hurt others.
7. Idle talk: saying things without purpose or meaning.

Through the mind:

8. Covetousness: wanting another's position or possessions for oneself.
9. Ill-will: wishing harm to another.
10. Wrong views: thinking that the law of karma does not exist, that there are no past and future lives, and that the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are not true refuges.

Each of the seven actions of body and speech can be rooted in any of the three mental poisons of desire, hatred and ignorance. By abstaining from these ten actions, or where possible engaging in their opposites, i.e., freeing lives, practicing generous giving, etc., one practices what are called the ten wholesome deeds.

Glossary

Abhidharma One of the three pitakas or ‘baskets’ containing the scriptures of the Buddhist canon. The Abhidharma teachings are a detailed and systematic analysis of phenomena, comprising the outer world of our surroundings and the inner world of our experience.

arhat A person who has achieved the spiritual goal of liberation from samsara, the cycle of existence. Arhathood is the highest goal on the Hinayana path.

bodhicitta The mind of awakening, or enlightenment thought. Bodhicitta is of two types—relative and ultimate. Relative bodhicitta refers to the resolve to attain buddhahood for the sake of all beings and the practice motivated by this intention, whereas ultimate bodhicitta refers to the realization of emptiness, or ultimate reality.

bodhisattva An individual who has generated the resolve to attain the state of complete buddhahood for the sake of all beings.

buddha A person who has attained buddhahood (i.e., true and complete awakening), perfectly free of all obscurations and endowed with perfect wisdom, compassion and the ability to help others.

Dharma The Buddha's teachings, the path of practice, and the realizations based on those teachings.

Hinayana The foundational Buddhist system of theory and practice based on the first turning of the Dharma wheel (i.e., the teaching of the four Noble Truths). It is also defined as the path of individual liberation emphasizing renunciation and is taken by individuals of lesser abilities who are concerned mainly with their own liberation from suffering. This path can thus be defined on the basis of the philosophical system adhered to, or the motivation of the practitioner. It should not be conflated with the Theravada tradition, which may be practiced with the motivation to attain buddhahood for the sake of all beings.

karma The law of actions and their results. According to the Buddha's teaching, the factor determining whether an action is good or bad is the intention behind the deed.

Mahayana The Great Vehicle, the system of Buddhist theory and practice based on the second and third turnings of the Dharma wheel (i.e., the profound teachings on emptiness and the teachings on the discrimination between the definitive and the provisional teachings). This vehicle is also termed the *bodhisattva path*, taken by those motivated by great compassion and the wish to attain perfect awakening, or buddhahood, for the sake of all beings.

nirvana The state beyond sorrow, the end of suffering and dissatisfaction obtained by practicing the Buddhist path through to its end. Generally speaking, two types of nirvana are

distinguished. The nirvana of the Hinayana refers to cessation, i.e., the liberation from samsara. The Mahayana nirvana refers to perfect buddhahood, a state that is beyond both ordinary samsaric existence and the cessation of the Hinayana.

noble eightfold path The eight branches of the path laid out by the Buddha: 1) right view, 2) right intention, 3) right speech, 4) right action, 5) right livelihood, 6) right effort, 7) right mindfulness, and 8) right concentration.

paramita The practices which a bodhisattva cultivates in order to attain complete buddhahood. They are the paramitas of giving, discipline, forbearance, diligence, concentration, and wisdom. To this list are sometimes added the paramitas of skillful means, aspiration, power, and gnosis.

samsara The beginningless and ceaselessly repetitive cycle of uncontrolled birth and death which beings are subject to as long as they are not enlightened. This perpetual cycle of worldly existence is characterized by suffering, unsatisfactoriness, and a lack of true freedom.

Sangha The community of those practicing the Buddha's path. In the Mahayana this term refers in particular to realized bodhisattvas. It is the third object of refuge, one of the Three Jewels.

shamatha The meditative cultivation of one-pointed attention with the purpose of temporarily pacifying the mental afflictions. One of the two branches of Buddhist meditation.

six realms The six types of existence within samsara: devas, asuras, humans, animals, pretas and hell beings. Each realm is characterized by the predominance of certain mental afflictions. Devas are divine beings enjoying long and pleasant lives, the predominant affliction being pride. Asuras are godly beings consumed by their jealousy towards the devas. Pretas are spirits afflicted by insatiable hunger and thirst, and hell beings are tormented by ceaseless and unimaginable pain resulting from hatred.

skandhas, five (aggregates) The five groups of phenomena that characterize human experience: one group of physical phenomena (i.e., the aggregate of form) and four groups of mental phenomena (feelings, perceptions, formative factors, and consciousness). It is on the basis of the five skandhas that the concept of a self is generated.

Sutra A scripture believed to contain the actual words of the Buddha. The sutras have been commented on in the *śāstras*, or commentarial treatises, and the essential points for practice have been extracted in the *upadeśas*, or pith instructions. The collection of the sutras forms one of the three pitakas or 'baskets' containing the scriptures of the Buddhist canon.

Tantra A form of Buddhist practice based on a collection of texts called "tantras." Also called *Vajrayana* (or "Vajra Vehicle").

Three Jewels The three objects of refuge: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

twelve links of dependent origination The process of conditioning and rebirth. The twelve links of dependent origination are ignorance, karmic formations, consciousness, name and form, sense bases, contact, sensation, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and aging and death.

Vajrayana See *Tantra*.

Vinaya One of the three pitakas or 'baskets' containing the scriptures of the Buddhist canon. The Vinaya teachings explain the discipline prescribed by the Buddha and relate the events in the lives of the Buddha and his disciples which led to the formulation of the rules of conduct.

vipashyana The cultivation of special insight, seeing reality as it is, in order to eliminate mental afflictions and the suffering they produce. One of the two branches of Buddhist meditation.

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