

Essence of Buddhism As Related to the Four Noble Truths

Ideal Teacher! You love beings like your children,
giving valid sacred Teachings of shunyata and interdependence.
You have attained the ideal result, the Liberated state.
To that ideal Being, the Buddha, I bow my head.

Your eloquent teaching on emptiness and interdependence
is unexcelled and special; different from other teachers.
Who would disbelieve your teaching
that there is nothing that does not arise interdependently!

This is a system which follows scripture
by way of logic and reasoning; it is not for fools!
Persevering by investigating hundreds of perfect reasonings,
we are fortunate to enter the path of interdependence!

Though my butterfly wings can't encompass
the extent of the sky of your Teachings
If there is something wrong with my writing this
to benefit some of less intelligence like myself, I beg forgiveness.

Thus, with utmost reverence to our perfect Teacher, the fully enlightened Buddha, and strong prayers of aspiration, my subject here is the very blessed Teachings of the first of Buddha's three wheels of Dharma; the root of Dharma, the Twelve Links of Interdependence and the Four Noble Truths. Though Buddha is no longer actually with us, we are extremely fortunate to be able to practice his profound and vast Teachings still undiluted. If these Teachings decline, the Teachings of Buddha decline. If these Teachings flourish, Buddha's Teachings flourish, without doubt!

Therefore, now when, according to the Hierarchs, it is 2559 human years since Buddha kindly took birth in our world, in memory of our kind Buddha, respectfully, I would like to explain what I know to help beginners like myself. With this motivation I will here write briefly about the Four Noble Truths, the Three Supreme Jewels, and the Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination.

First I will give a brief introduction and then the main extensive explanation.

A Brief Introduction

Buddhism continues to gradually spread from Asia to many other countries of the world; that is really something worthy of rejoicing. Indeed, from the time of Buddha's paranirvana up to the present time, Buddha's teachings have spread like branches and leaves from a single root. However, every country and region has their own traditions, each monastery its own system, and they come to use different names and designations. On one hand this is wonderful as everyone rejoices in their different traditions and styles of Buddhist practice, and powerful auspiciousness spreads everywhere on earth.

In terms of practice, however, just as a branch from the trunk of a tree and each successive branch and twig become smaller and smaller, the teachings may become very narrow in scope. Like rivers meeting up to the snow line, this Dharma lineage that we are practicing has its origins in the 108 volumes of the Kangyur, Buddha's own words, and the two hundred and thirteen volumes of the Tangyur, the Commentaries. If we never study any of Buddha's words yet supposedly practice a specific form of them, we may actually be holding on to branches while throwing out the root. Sometimes, if we are not careful, there is a danger that we may cling very tightly to our own tradition, praising it most highly, while almost forgetting Buddha's teachings and our kind Buddha himself! Perhaps my worries are unfounded, however, like rabbit or 'chicken little' who thinks the sky is falling!

I myself also regard my tradition and lamas as very important and practice, without fail, every day. It is important to remember our lineage when we practice. However, when studying we must definitely keep Buddha's own teachings as the foundation and study all traditions. Taking myself for example, I am an abbot in name only. I have not been able to complete all the studies I would have wished. Yet I now continue to study, contemplate, and meditate on all lineages of Tibetan Buddhism to the best of my ability.

Furthermore, in 2006 I went to Burma and studied in the Sthavira tradition for six months. I was extremely moved by it. The Buddhist practice of Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and so forth, is like the essence of Buddha's teachings. There are some who discriminate between Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions, but I feel that is unfortunate. Hinayana and Mahayana should be differentiated only based on the scope of the person practicing it, not by external terms and customs. In any case, we are all very similar like leaves and branches from the same trunk. Since Buddha's teachings are very vast and profound we must study all its traditions. If you think, I'm too old, too dull to study, that is not the case. It is never too late to study.

In Sakya Eloquence, it is said,

Even if we will die tomorrow morning, study today.
If we don't master it in this life,
In future lives we will be able to recover it
Like money we have deposited.

As said, even if we don't become learned in this lifetime, the hearing, contemplation, and meditation on Buddha's teachings will never be wasted. It will be like money in the bank in future lives.

Again, as long as we are a follower of Buddha, even if we don't study all of Buddha's teachings, it is indispensable to study them at least in a brief form. This will enable us to understand the branch of Buddha's teachings that we are practicing more easily; plus we will have a greater appreciation of the other traditions; it will have many benefits.

In particular, these days, if lamas teach a view from their own tradition, for example, their particular branch of Tibetan Buddhism, Mahamudra or Dzogchen, it may pos-

sibly bring some temporary benefit to the mind of the disciple, but they will not gain a comprehensive understanding of the whole of Buddha's teachings. Therefore I think it is extremely important to study and meditate on the teachings that Buddha gave in the Sanskrit and Pali languages such as the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination, the Eight-fold Noble Path, the Thirty-Seven Wings of Enlightenment, etc; we should definitely study these.

In Tibetan Buddhism, many lamas these days do not at all check the minds of disciples and confer upon them initiations of Yidam Deities with impressive, fierce-sounding names. Some hope that they may be instantly propelled to the state of Liberation by the initiation. That depends upon the practice and realization of the lama conferring the empowerment. No matter how many times empowerment is conferred, if the lama cannot introduce the actual meaning of the empowerment to the mind of the disciple, the disciple will just remain the same person that they were before. Better than that, in the midst of our daily lives, if we can study well and meditate on the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve Links, and so on, it will definitely transform our lives. Some people regard these as easy subjects that can be understood by studying them once or twice. If Buddha's teachings could be learned just by hearing them one time, there would probably not be all these people wandering in samsara experiencing so much suffering! The reason for that is, if you realize the true meaning of Dharma you can abandon all deluded states of mind. If delusion is absent you will not accumulate negative karma. Without the cause, the effect, that of wandering in samsaric suffering, will not occur. This has been an explanation of some secondary points that came to mind. Now we come to the main subject.

Extensive Explanation

I will write about 1) the Four Noble Truths and 2) Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination. Then, in connection with these subjects, I will give an explanation of 3) refuge and 4) a final summary of the essence of the meaning.

The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths has two parts: first a brief explanation by way of their natures or entities, then an extensive explanation by way of their branches.

Brief Explanation of Their Entities

The Brief Explanation has five parts. The benefits of knowing the Four Noble Truths and the drawbacks of not knowing them; how Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths with each of their stages; the enumeration of the Four Truths; and how to practice them.

Benefits of Knowing the Four Noble Truths and Drawbacks of Not Knowing Them

As for the benefits of knowing the Four Noble Truths and the drawbacks of not knowing them, the Four Noble Truths is a scripture that reveals the paths of nirvana and samsara unmistakably. Even if Buddha had not taught about samsara and suffering it is readily apparent that it is actually the common condition of all living creatures, all sentient beings of this world. Between the two abodes of samsara and nirvana, we currently experience samsara. If we wish to escape samsara, by practicing the Four Noble Truths in the correct order we can free ourselves from the suffering of samsara from now on. To free ourselves from the suffering of samsara we must first know the faults of samsara. The first two truths show the stages by which we enter samsara, and the latter two reveal the Arya paths and cessations. Therefore you must definitely understand the Four Noble Truths.

How Buddha Taught the Four Noble Truths

Second, as for how Buddha originally taught the Four Noble Truths, Buddha had practiced austerities for six years at Bodhgaya, India. Finally he attained full enlightenment one day in the early dawn. After seven weeks, having been requested by humans and devas to teach, on the fourth day of the sixth Tibetan month Buddha gave his first teaching, the Four Noble Truths, to the five human entourage and eighty-thousand devas at Varanasi, India, on the banks of the Ganges River. At that time there were many Brahmins of India who asserted that liberation could be attained by physical exertions alone. Realizing that liberation could not be attained by exertion of body and speech alone Buddha instituted a previously non-existent special religious system called Buddhism — Nang-pay-chö in Tibetan — an inner path of mental development. The word Nang-pa, a 'Buddhist,' has vast significance. Between inner and outer, nang means the inner. Pa means that which possesses it. Because it is a religious system which, for example, regards inner ego-grasping ignorance as the enemy, it is an inner path.

As for their order, Buddha said in Sutra,

This is the noble truth of suffering.
This is the noble truth of its cause.
This is the noble truth of cessation.
This is the noble truth of the path.

In this way, explaining the entities of the Four Noble Truths, he gave the first teaching.

Then he taught the actions to be undertaken in relation to each of the four truths.

Suffering is to be understood.
Causes are to be abandoned.
Cessation is to be manifested.
Paths are for the mind to rely upon.

Finally he gave teachings on the results of the Four Noble Truths.

Suffering should be known but there is no knowing.
Causes should be abandoned but there is no abandoning.
Cessation should be manifested but there is no manifesting.
Paths should be meditated but there is no meditating.

In this way Buddha first identified the Four Noble Truths, then explained what to do in relation to each of them. Finally he explained that the Four Noble Truths and the actions undertaken in relation to each of them all lack true existence; they are illusory in nature. There is suffering and knowledge of it but both the suffering and the knowledge of it are illusory, lacking true existence. There are causes of suffering and they must be abandoned, but both the causes and their abandonment are illusory, lacking true existence. There is cessation of suffering and it must be manifested but both the cessation and its manifestation are illusory, lacking true existence. Paths to cessation of suffering must be meditated upon, but the true path and meditation on it are both illusory, lacking true existence. This realization of the illusory, empty nature of the Four Noble Truths is the final result of meditating on the Four Noble Truths.

When Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths it was in the order of true sufferings, true causes, true cessations, and true paths. The reason for that is of profound importance. Once you have recognized suffering you may develop the wish to abandon its causes. Having been introduced to emptiness and true cessations you develop the wish to enter the true paths which bring their attainment. This is the purpose behind the order. This will be explained extensively below under practice, so I won't elaborate further here.

Enumeration of the Four Noble Truths

Each of the four truths is further subdivided into four making sixteen when extensively explained. This number is definite. First, the four branches of true sufferings are impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and selflessness.

Impermanence

This is the momentary production and cessation of things.

Suffering

This is the continual torment of the three root sufferings, the eight branch sufferings and so forth.

Emptiness

Sufferings are empty because they do not exist by way of their own self identity.

Selflessness

This is the non-inherent existence of the self of persons.

Second, the four branches of true causes are cause, source, condition, and strong production.

Cause

This is the cause of samsara, the delusions and the negative karma generated by them.

Source

This is the source of our experiencing true causes and true sufferings.

Condition

It is also the condition which conjoins our causal source of suffering with its resultant suffering.

Strong Production

This is when strong waves of suffering are sometimes encountered.

Third, the four branches of true cessations are cessation, peace, excellence, and definite deliverance.

Cessation

It is the cessation of the continuum of causes of suffering and resultant suffering.

Peace

All karma and delusion is pacified without remainder.

Excellence

It is the source of immutable ultimate happiness.

Definite Deliverance

Liberated from samsara, never to return, a special bliss of nirvana is attained.

Fourth, the four branches of true paths are path, awareness, accomplishment, and definite liberation.

Path

This is from the state of an ordinary person up to the arya grounds.

Awareness

It is the transcendent wisdom insight awareness that acts as the antidote to delusions.

Accomplishment

It is the accomplishment of perfect, unmistaken mind.

Definite Liberation

Freed from all faults you are led to the state of eternal happiness.

How to Practice the Four Noble Truths

Unwanted suffering is like an illness, causes are like the incorrect food or conduct which caused the illness, cessation is like the pacification of the suffering of the illness, and path is like the medicine that brings healing of the suffering.

As said in Uttaratanttra,

The sickness is to be known, the cause to be abandoned,
Abiding in bliss is to be attained, and the medicine is to be relied upon.

In general, when commentary on karmic cause and effect is given, causes are explained first, then afterwards the results they produce are explained. In the context of the Four Noble Truths, however, the results are explained first. This is for a very important purpose. If you want to abandon undesirable suffering you must first be introduced to those sufferings. Buddha said first, 'Suffering is to be known,' not, it's causes are to be known. There is deep significance in that. If we do not recognize the suffering we are currently experiencing as suffering we will not develop the wish to abandon the delusions which are its cause. For example, if a sick person who is being tormented by suffering of disease wants to be free from the illness, the illness must first be precisely identified. Then, by using a medicine that is an antidote to the disease they try to treat it. Otherwise, like suddenly taking medicine without first identifying the sickness, it will not be beneficial.

There is yet another example. When shooting an arrow, if you don't first have clear sight of the target's location, the arrow will not hit it. Similarly, to attain true cessation free from suffering, you must first identify the suffering. Then when you check to discover its cause you will find that delusions are the sole principal cause. When you recognize delusions as your enemy, then you will develop a wish to abandon them.

Second, as for true paths and cessations, generally speaking, cessations are the result attained in dependence upon their causes, true paths. Here, again, however, the cause is not taught first; instead, resultant cessations are explained first. What is the reason for that? If resultant true cessations, emptiness, its purpose and benefits are first explained, then you will want to find the path leading to realization of such a profound and vast emptiness. Finally, by understanding that only true paths of sacred Dharma can accomplish that, you will want to enter true paths. By persevering in Dharma and correctly practicing the cause and effect of the Four Noble truths without the slightest laziness or procrastination, like, for example, if an elegant lady's hair catches on fire, or a snake slithers into a meek person's lap, (two examples of situations that bring immediate reactions, thus pointing to the need for immediate Dharma practice without procrastination) you may finally be victorious over the delusions which have enslaved you for so many lifetimes.

In Sutra it is said,

You are your own protector, your own refuge.
Therefore, like a horse trader training a horse
you must subdue and train yourself.

Thus, you must accomplish your own welfare; it is primarily in your own hands. That is the special unexcelled characteristic of practicing Dharma in accordance with the Four Noble Truths.

Extensive Explanation of Their Branches

Phenomena to be known are of two types: those endowed with mind, which can have pleasant and unpleasant feelings, and those lacking mind. We go through life always endowed with, never separated from, mind. Types of sentient beings, their birth-places and living situations, etc, differ by the power of karma, but the fact that sentient beings have mind is the same for everyone. Because we have mind, along with that we naturally want happiness and don't want suffering. Therefore, in accordance with our wishes, based on a philosophy of interdependence, Buddha showed us how to achieve happiness and stop suffering by means of this very important teaching of the Four Noble Truths. If we really want to experience happiness and be free of suffering the Four Noble Truths are essential for that.

In brief, on the basis of sentient beings wanting happiness and not wanting suffering, Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths. Since desired happiness and undesired suffering are changeable, they are impermanent. Since they are phenomena which are produced by causes and conditions, thinking of that, Buddha taught the Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination along with the Four Noble Truths.

True Sufferings

Well then, what is Buddha talking about in the first truth of suffering? In general there are two types of suffering; external and internal. External suffering is the environment which is comprised of the four outer elements. Inner suffering is that of sentient beings living in the environment, in particular, the person who has the five aggregates. Suffering includes all of these. For example, by the power of the mind within we develop attachment to outer objects, cling to them as real, and fight to procure them for ourselves and to defeat others. This condition leads to epidemics, war, and conflict. Whenever delusions develop by the power of such dualistic perceptions they will be the cause of suffering.

There are three types of internal suffering. First is the suffering of suffering. This is what we currently directly experience as suffering, for instance, like a headache or stomachache.

Second is the suffering of change. It is the happiness that sentient beings now enjoy. Because of some merely temporary pleasant feeling, suffering is not sensed directly, but as the temporary happiness slowly loses its potency it gradually reverts to

suffering. For instance, if poisonous food is eaten, pain of hunger will be alleviated temporarily and there will be a sort of temporary happiness, but a little while later pain from the poison will be experienced. Pleasure experienced on the basis of visual forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations is only temporary. For instance, someone who is cold will experience a facsimile of happiness by getting into the sun, but if they stay too long it will naturally turn into suffering.

Third is the suffering of pervasive karmic formation. This is the aggregates of body and mind that are taken up at birth by the force of delusion, which is the basis for the suffering of suffering and the suffering of change, The reason it is called suffering of pervasive karmic formation is that it pervades all unenlightened beings. It is the basis for our current suffering and produces the many sufferings of the future. In short, it is called pervasive suffering of karmic formation because we have to experience it without choice as long as we are under the power of delusions and karma, as long as we have the five aggregates appropriated by delusion. Thus, the three types of suffering have been explained.

True Causes of Suffering

Secondly, what is included in true causes of suffering? It is the source, the cause that produces the resultant sufferings of the three types explained above. It has two varieties: karma-causes of suffering and delusion-causes of suffering. If you can recognize the three above mentioned types of suffering, since such suffering is a result, its production definitely must have a cause. If you check carefully, suffering arises in dependence upon karmic causes. If you investigate further you will gradually come to know that karma arises out of the causes of delusion, attachment and aversion; and pursuing it further, out of self-grasping ignorance. Therefore resultant true sufferings arise from their cause, true causes of suffering.

First, as for karma-causes of suffering, this word, karma, is Sanskrit. Its categories are three-fold: non-virtuous karma, virtuous karma, and neutral karma. Non-virtuous karma is karma that produces bad results or suffering, and is therefore to be abandoned. There are ten non-virtuous karmas: physically killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct; verbally lying, slandering, speaking abusively, and wasting speech; and mentally, covetousness, malice, and propagating misguided philosophies.

Then, with regard to good or virtuous karma, it is karma that produces good results, or happiness. Since it is good karma it is to be practiced and it transforms into ten virtues, that of abandoning the ten non-virtues. For example, along with abandoning killing, protecting animals and humble, meek people. Along with abandoning stealing, practicing generosity. In addition to abandoning hurtful sexual activities, taking ordination vows or vows of a lay practitioner. Along with abandoning lying, speaking the truth to others. Along with abandoning slander and speaking divisively, reconciling others who are at odds. Abandoning harsh speech, speak gently to others. Abandoning meaningless speech, do meaningful recitations. Abandoning covetousness, abide in contentment. Abandoning malice, meditate on love and compassion. Abandoning spreading wrong views, practice seeing Buddha's teachings as valid. The ten virtues are found in the aftermath of abandoning the ten non-virtues, not elsewhere.

Third, as for neutral karma, it is karma that produces neutral, middling results, neither good nor bad, neither happiness nor suffering, somewhere in the middle. Since such actions have not been taught to be virtuous or non-virtuous they are neutral, non-specified karma.

Second, as for delusion-causes of suffering, in Sanskrit it is called klesha. In Tibetan it is nyön-mong, delusion, a word that carries a sense of inauspiciousness or misfortune. They are bad attitudes which disturb our mental peace. Such attitudes are naturally perpetuated by attachment, aversion, and ignorance. There are multitudes of other delusions as well, jealousy, pride, anger, etc, with various levels of intensity from gross to subtle. In general, the principal cause of suffering is the ignorance which grasps for self. This is clearly taught in the Buddhist scriptures.

In Pramanavartika it says,

Once there is self, there is other.
From that, one becomes attached to self and averse to other.
It is in connection with this
That all faults and problems arise.

What this means is that we always have this mind thinking 'I' in the continuum of our awareness. On that basis, when the thought, I or me, appears to the mind, gradually, with habituation, we cling to it as independently existing, as truly existent. To protect that seemingly self-existent I, we cling to that which helps it as 'my side' and that which harms it as the 'other side.'

Thus, we categorize my side and others' side based on attachment and aversion. This all traces back to the principal cause, self-grasping ignorance. When we divide things into my own and others sides with the self-grasping thought of 'I,' we develop attachment towards those perceived as friends and relatives because they benefit us, and anger towards the other side, who we perceive as enemies by reason of their harming us. In dependence upon these two harmful mental states we accumulate various non-virtuous karmas such as the ten described above. Because of that accumulation of karma there will be many painful results. If an action is motivated by the three poisonous delusions the only result can be suffering.

Nagarjuna said,

Attachment, anger, ignorance;
That produced from those three is non-virtue.
Non-attachment, non-anger, non-ignorance;
That produced from those three is virtue.

True Cessations

Third, as for true cessations, they are a quality of ceasing or abandoning all sorts of delusion, gross and subtle, in dependence upon true paths which are their means of attainment. So, if we say that true cessation is the abandonment of all causes of suffering, all delusions, is it really possible to abandon all delusion completely? It is definitely possible to abandon delusion. I will explain three reasons.

First Reason

As said in Pramanavartika,

The nature of mind is clear light.
Defilements are adventitious.

Accordingly, the mind is like a temple of clear light, not a filthy abode filled with the three poisons. The Jewel Ornament of Liberation says,

Buddha is Dharmakaya and Dharmakaya is shunyata. Since shunyata pervades all sentient beings; all sentient beings have Buddha nature. Just as there is no division at the nature of the foundational state, there is no difference between the suchness of Buddha and the suchness of sentient beings. Neither is primordially better than the other, larger or higher, etc. All sentient beings have the essence of buddhahood.

Thus the nature of our mind has always remained clear light unstained by delusions such as attachment and aversion. Delusions, the minds of attachment and aversion, are temporary, fleeting moments of consciousness; they are impermanent. The actual nature of the mind is the sphere of the ultimate, never defiled by delusion. For example, no matter how heavily and long clouds remain, they cannot become the nature of the clear blue sky. In dependence upon this reason, deluded minds are only temporary, and can be exhausted and abandoned.

Second Reason

The delusions such as attachment and aversion in your mind are mistaken, deceived mental states which engage objects in discordance with their actual nature. Such mistaken minds have no valid support from another mind. Their remedial minds such as love and wisdom realizing selflessness are perfect minds which are in accord with reality. Therefore, the more we accustom ourselves to them, the more they have valid support and perfect witnesses.

For example, suppose someone kills another, in violation of the law of the country. Both the criminal and their accusers have to go to court. With the jury, witnesses, the judge, etc, it must be decided whether the criminal or the accuser is telling the truth. They must examine and decide. Whoever has truth on their side will prevail. Like that, a mind deceived by the sly delusions can never win; transcendent wisdom awareness will eventually emerge victorious.

For example, in the case of hot and cold, where there is hot, cold cannot remain; it is just the nature of things. Where a powerful antidote is present, what it remedies is not. It is like hot and cold which cannot possibly exist together on the same basis.

Since the delusions in the mind are impermanent they change. As long as something is changeable it is deceptive, not true. Insight realizing selflessness is the direct antidote to ignorance's mode of perception and it has valid support. By familiarizing ourselves with that awareness we will eventually be able to abandon delusion.

Third Reason

If we become accustomed to positive states of mind, they are infinitely expandable, like the constant yearly and monthly never-ending advance of technology, for example. If we become accustomed to positive mental states, many positive qualities are attained on that basis. As said in Bodhicaryavatara,

There is nothing that does not become easier with familiarity.

Likewise, whatever we become accustomed to, whether good or bad, our mind will follow. On the positive side, on the path of sacred Dharma, we advance from the first to the tenth ground until all defilements are eliminated from the mind.

If we well contemplate these three reasons that delusions can be abandoned, as just explained, we can reject defilement of delusions in dependence upon virtuous mental states such as love and compassion, and finally, by developing wisdom realizing emptiness, we can sever delusions from their very root. For these reasons, it is extremely clear from scripture, logical reasoning, and pure awareness, that no matter how much we examine it, the delusions in our minds are something fleeting which can be abandoned. If delusions can be completely abandoned, it is natural that true cessations can be attained.

True Paths

Fourth, what are true paths? They are paths which are the means of attaining true cessations; for example, like the wisdom insight directly realizing selflessness or emptiness. To understand this, you first need to know about your mind. In general, mind is mere clarity and cognition. There are both perfect minds as well as mistaken awareness. As for perfect mind or awareness, it is a mind which perceives its object in a way that accords with fact; for example, like a mind which perceives a white piece of paper non-mistakenly as white. A mistaken awareness perceives its object in a way somehow discordant with fact. For example, a person afflicted with jaundice may see white paper as yellow, not white as it is in fact. In any case, there are both mistaken and unmistakable types of awareness. Perfect or correct minds can see phenomena as they are without mistake; for example, minds which realize suffering to be impermanent, suffering, empty, and selfless. Minds which perceive suffering as permanent, as happiness, not empty, truly existent, etc, have mistaken modes of apprehension. The awareness which can

see objects as they are can understand their natures clearly, without confusion. When you realize the true nature of samsara you generate actual renunciation, a real wish to attain Liberation.

If you develop perfect renunciation in your mind, by entering the perfect path of sacred Dharma you attain the path of accumulation. The first two paths of accumulation and preparation are paths of ordinary beings, whereas the paths of seeing, meditation, and no more training are arya paths, beyond worldly paths. The five paths must be accompanied by practice of the three trainings. These are the training in ethical discipline, the training in samadhi, and the training in wisdom insight. Each of the three trainings and five paths proceed in dependence upon the previous one. The path of preparation is attained in dependence upon the path of accumulation and the path of seeing is attained in dependence upon the path of preparation. When you attain the path of seeing you see the true nature of reality just as it is; you become an arya being. From there you ascend to the path of meditation, ridding your mind of delusions, attaining successive levels of realization, until finally you attain the great nirvana of a Buddha's enlightenment.

In short, you must first learn the Four Noble Truths. Among the four noble truths, true cessations and true paths are the Jewel of Dharma; these you must understand precisely. Arya arhats who have true paths and cessations are the Sangha Jewel. Sangha Jewels who complete their meditation on the paths finally manifest the last of the five paths, the ultimate path and cessation of 'no more training' called non-abiding nirvana; at that time they become a Buddha Jewel. When you understand how the Three Jewels arise in this way, it will induce certainty that if you persevere solely in practice of the Four Noble Truths and five paths, you will attain that state of great Liberation.

At that point when you speak about the Three Jewels of Refuge you will not be practicing out of blind faith. Because you understand the reasoning behind it you will develop unshakable faith in true paths and the Three Jewels. You will feel great reverence when you speak of the Three Jewels and your mind will draw closer to them. If that happens you have attained faith in the Three Jewels based on logical reasoning. Such faith is unshakable and irreversible. It is extremely important to develop this kind of faith which does not just follow blindly.

The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination

Secondly, the twelve links of dependent origination has seven parts: the benefits of understanding interdependence and the drawbacks of not understanding it; how the Buddha taught interdependence; origin of the word; ascertainment of number; the nature of each link; how the twelve links are included in various categories; and the wheel of life which represents interdependence.

Benefits of Understanding Interdependence and Drawbacks of Not Understanding It

As for the first, as said in Sutra,

O bikshus! One who sees interdependent origination sees the Dharma!
One who sees the Dharma sees the Tathagata, the Buddha.

And Je Tsongkhapa said in his Praise of Interdependent Origination,

By reason of seeing your peerless teaching
of interdependent origination
Certainty is developed in the validity
of your other teachings.
For many other purposes you explained it well.¹
In following after you,
All degeneration fades far away
Because the root of all faults is stopped.

As said, the principal cause for us to wander in samsara is ignorance. Ignorance is the root of all the delusions. So, if it can be eliminated, all delusions are eliminated. For example, if a tree is cut down from the root, its branches and leaves are also naturally all cut down as well.

For this reason, teachings on the forward and reverse order of the twelve links of dependent origination as taught in the Shravaka scriptures have spread very widely. In Thailand, Burma and elsewhere, the twelve links of dependent origination are not only a subject of study; they meditate on them as the essence of their practice. It is an extremely important topic.

All inner and outer phenomena do not exist by way of their own independent entity, rather they are interdependent in three ways: they exist in dependence upon causes, in dependence upon their parts, and in dependence upon being designated by name. For beginners, dependence upon cause and effect is easier to understand. If we contemplate it well, there is no outer or inner phenomenon which exists without depending upon cause and effect. Then gradually contemplate dependence upon parts. For example, take the term, house. When it is new to the mind we just think, this is a house, and think nothing else. If we examine it closely, the house is made from a collection of many materials, earth, stone, metal, etc, built by human beings who then call that collection of parts a house. That is dependence upon parts. The same understanding can be applied to other phenomena as well. Once your mind is familiar with that you will be convinced that phenomena are also dependent upon being labelled by a term or name. First, understand interdependence in terms of cause and effect: in dependence upon this cause, this result occurs. For example, from a barley seed comes barley, not beans. This is in-

¹ In explaining interdependence Buddha sought to eliminate impediments to Liberation, ie. the belief that Liberation could be attained by physical and verbal exertions alone or that one could be liberated by belief in a creator god. Instead, he taught that one must liberate oneself, as he had, by realizing selflessness which comes through understanding interdependence.

terdependence of cause and effect. Second, all phenomena exist in dependence upon many parts. For example, a house is made of many materials, earth, stone, metal which, when made into a certain shape, is labelled as a house. Thirdly, phenomena that are dependent upon cause and effect and dependent upon their parts in actuality are not inherently existent and exist in dependence upon being labelled by a name. Thus you will be introduced to the idea that phenomena are name only, not existent from their own side, or by their own power.

In any case, if something arises in cause and effect, it is dependent upon causes and conditions and is empty of self. As said in Root Wisdom of the Middle Way,

All that arises in interdependence,
That is explained to be empty
Being labelled in dependence
Is itself the path of the Middle Way.
Because of this there is no phenomenon
which is not interdependent.
Because of this there is no phenomenon
which is not empty.

If you well understand the meaning of interdependence and emptiness you will understand the entirety of Buddha's teachings. The other teachings are just branches of the teachings on interdependence and emptiness. When Je Tsongkhapa offered praise to Buddha he did not praise specific qualities of enlightened body, speech, or mind, but rather his teaching of interdependence which is not taught by other teachers because it is the uncommon essence of Buddha's teachings. There is very deep significance in this.

How Buddha Taught Interdependence

Second, as for how Buddha taught interdependence, as said in Sutra,

What is dependent origination?
By existence of this, that arises.
By production of this, that arises.
Thus, through the condition of ignorance, karma is created.
By condition of karmic formation, there arises consciousness (with the karmic imprint).
By condition of consciousness arises name and form.
By condition of name and form arises the six sense bases.
By condition of the six sense bases arises contact.
By condition of contact arises feelings.
By condition of feelings arises craving.
By condition of craving arises grasping.
By condition of grasping arises becoming.
By condition of becoming arises birth.
By condition of birth arises old age and death,

cries of sorrow and misery,
Suffering and mental unhappiness,
and all kinds of disturbing experiences.
In this way there arises nothing
but a huge mass of suffering.

As for how the twelve links of interdependence are stopped, by stopping ignorance, karmic formation is stopped. By stopping karmic formation, consciousness is stopped. By stopping consciousness, name and form is stopped. By stopping name and form, the six sense bases are stopped. By stopping the six sense bases, contact is stopped. By stopping contact, feeling is stopped. By stopping feeling, craving is stopped. By stopping craving, grasping is stopped. By stopping grasping, becoming is stopped. By stopping becoming, birth is stopped. And by stopping birth, aging and death are stopped. Cries of sorrow and misery, suffering and mental unhappiness, all disturbing experiences are stopped. Finally, even this mass of suffering currently being experienced will be stopped.

Origin of the Term

Third, as for the origin of the term, it is translated from the Sanskrit word, pratita, which means base, relativity, and meeting. In terms of how it is applied, all phenomena are said to be dependently originated. Taking the Sanskrit term pratita samudpata, interdependent origination, in terms of results arising from causes, all products are taught to be of dependent origination. This accords with both Vaibashika and Sautantrika tenets. Madhyamaka and Cittamatra philosophies explain it differently but, without elaborating further, this is sufficient for now.

Ascertainment of Number

Fourth, with regard to the number of links, the Sakya master-scholar Omniscient Gorampa said,

Momentary interdependence,
Interdependence of being related,
Temporary interdependence,
Continual interdependence, and so forth,
there are many types of interdependence.
If we comment on each of them individually
It will be a collection of many words
So we'll leave it here for now.

As taught in the Sutra quoted above, there are two types: dependent arising on the side of the totally deluded, and dependent arising on the side of the fully purified. As for deluded interdependence there is both external interdependence and internal interdependence. External interdependence is the objects perceived by the five sense faculties: perception of visual forms by the sense faculty of the eyes, perception of sounds by

the ear sense faculties, and likewise the different objects of the nose, tongue, and body sense faculties. The appearances of objects to these perceptions are external interdependence.

As for internal interdependence, it is as described before, from the condition of ignorance giving rise to karmic formations, up to the condition of birth giving rise to aging and death. Furthermore, internal interdependence refers to beings living in dependence upon food, having good rebirth in dependence upon virtuous conduct, having worse rebirths in dependence upon faulty conduct, and so forth, including all the various experiences of suffering and happiness that arise in dependence upon karmic causes; it is a vast subject.

As for fully purified interdependence, there are, for instance, the five paths of Tantra: the path of preparation arises in dependence upon the path of accumulation, the path of seeing arises in dependence upon the path of preparation, the path of meditation arises in dependence upon the path of seeing, and the path of no more training arises in dependence upon the path of meditation. The ten grounds, the Arya bhumi or levels taught in Sutra are another example: in dependence upon the first bhumi, the Joyful, there arises the second bhumi, the Stainless, and so on for all of the ten bhumis. The higher practices of a yogi or yogini must all develop in dependence upon the lower practices in which they previously engaged.

Fifth, The Individual Natures of the Twelve Links of Interdependence

As Nagarjuna said,

- 1) Discordant with, or opposite of, transcendent wisdom awareness, the ignorance which is the root of samsara is the self-grasping ignorance that is obscured from knowing the actual nature of phenomena.
- 2) Karmic formation is that which accumulates the karma to be propelled into rebirth in any of the six realms of lifeforms.
- 3) Consciousness refers to the consciousness upon which karma has been accumulated during the causal period.
- 4) As for name and form, name refers to the four non-physical aggregates of feeling, perception, karmic formation, and consciousness that were propelled by the karma; while form refers to the physical form that develops in the womb from a soupy oblong shape, to an oval shape, to a fleshy oblong shape, to a round harder shape, finally developing into the shape with arms and legs.
- 5) Sense bases. As the embryo grows, the sense bases such as that of the mouth and nose develop into the particular bodily form.
- 6) Contact. Through the meeting of objects, sense faculties, and consciousness, pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral objects are contacted and known.
- 7) Feelings. In dependence upon contact, pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings are experienced.

- 8) Craving. In dependence upon those feelings there develops a wish to not be separated from pleasant feelings, a wish to be separated from unpleasant feelings, all in an aspect of liking samsara.
- 9) Grasping. The previous craving grows stronger and becomes attachment. There is the primary cause of desire, the cause of views, the cause of holding certain vowed moralities and conduct as supreme, and the cause of viewing self.
- 10) Becoming. The second link of karmic formation is catalyzed by the eighth link of craving, and the ninth link of grasping. Through this the tenth link becomes the powerful karma which will propel the next rebirth. It is a cause which is named after its effect.
- 11) Birth. This refers to the consciousness which makes connection with the place of rebirth in the next lifetime.
- 12) Aging and death. Aging begins from birth as the infant goes through changes. As for death, it occurs when the aggregates are left behind and consciousness separates from the body. Aging and death are counted as one link.

How the Twelve Links Are Included in Various Categories

Sixth, the way the twelve links can be categorized has three parts. First, there is a four-fold categorization grouping them according to their basis: ignorance, karmic formation, and consciousness are propelling links. The four links of name and form, sense bases, contact, and feeling are links that have been propelled. Craving, grasping, and becoming are links which cause actualization, while birth, aging and death, are links that have been actualized. Second, is a three-fold categorization. Ignorance, craving, and grasping are fully deluded-delusions. Karmic formation, and becoming are fully deluded-karma, while the remaining seven links are fully deluded-rebirth. Third, a two-fold grouping, ignorance, karmic formation, craving, grasping, and becoming, are all included within true causes of suffering. The remaining seven links are included within true sufferings.

The Wheel of Life

Seventh is an explanation of the Wheel of Life which represents the twelve links of dependent origination.

During Buddha's lifetime the story is that King Bimbisara of central India received a gift of a priceless set of armor from the king renowned as Utrayana from a remote area. King Bimbisara consulted with his friend the Buddha about what he could offer in return. Buddha gave the king a picture of the Wheel of Life symbolizing the Four Noble Truths and the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. The king sent it to his friend King Utrayana. By just seeing it, King Utrayana, ministers, subjects, anyone who saw it instantly understood the cause and effect nature of happiness and suffering, samsara and nirvana, and attained the resultant state of an Arhat.

Later Buddha told his attendant Ananda to have painted next to the door of the Sangha's meeting hall this picture that represents the twelve links of dependent origina-

tion. Even up to the present day you can see it next to the door of the temple at many Buddhist monasteries.

Symbolism of the Wheel of Life

This Wheel of Life is a symbolic representation of samsara and nirvana. It shows how, from the first link of ignorance up to the twelfth link of death, beings cycle in samsara through the twelve links. Who cycles? By what cause? Where do they cycle? How do they cycle? How long do they cycle? From when did they cycle?

1) Who Cycles

Sentient beings of the six realms² controlled by karma and delusion.

2) By What Cause

They cycle by the first of the twelve links, ignorance, acting as the cause and the three poisons acting as conditions.

3) Where Do They Cycle

They cycle through the domains of the six types of lifeforms.

4) How Do They Cycle

Under control of ignorance, the first of the twelve links of dependent origination, they gradually accumulate karma. Consciousness provides the base. In stages, like the turning wheel of a chariot or bees circling in a jar, they cycle.

5) How Long Do They Cycle

They cycle until their karma and delusion are exhausted.

6) How Long Have They Cycled

They cycle ever since they have been propelled by ignorance.

The picture depicts each of the twelve links in turn. There is the custom of giving an accompanying commentary for each of the twelve, but fearing it become too much, this will suffice.

In brief, the Four Noble Truths and Twelve Links of Dependent Origination are the pure essence of Buddhism. As long as we are someone seeking Liberation we would be fully qualified Buddhists if we could correctly learn, contemplate, and meditate on them. If we have practiced the view and tenets of the Shravakas such as the Four Noble Truths, Twelve Links, Eight-fold Noble Path, Four Close Placements of Mindfulness, then we need to generate pure love and compassion for others and pure renunciation wishing to liberate ourselves. We should persevere in whatever practices we can.

² realms of gods, demigods, humans, animals, spirits, and hell beings.

Refuge

This has two parts: a brief explanation of refuge and why we must by all means attain Liberation.

A Brief Explanation

The causes of refuge are fear and faith. If there is no fear, faith will not develop. Without faith there is no movement towards refuge. Without refuge you cannot get free of samsara. If you can't escape samsara you will not be happy. If you are not happy the purpose of taking human birth has not been served. Thus, each of these arises in dependence upon the previous, the first being faith, the cause for refuge. Buddha said,

People who have no faith
Will not have virtuous Dharma.
It's like a seed's been burned by fire:
It will have no sprout.

As said, faith is very important.

Having understood that there is no happiness and nothing but suffering of the three types wherever we are born amongst the six realms of samsara, if we think about the suffering of this and future lives in worse realms our body will shiver. The thought will occur to us, I must learn the method to free myself from suffering now, in this lifetime. We will feel a dread of those sufferings. When we feel that and check to see who can protect us from those sufferings we will see that it is only Buddha. If we wonder by what path Buddha became enlightened, he was like ourselves, caught in samsara, experiencing its sufferings directly, and seeing others experience them. Buddha was terrified and gave up his family and royal domain to enter the path of holy Dharma and attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Buddhas, from their side, have attained the two purposes, have expanded all qualities, fulfilling their own purpose through the Dharmakaya, and are able to fulfill the purposes of others through Form Bodies, Rupakaya. Buddhas have perfected all qualities of abandonment and realization.

Dharma is the teachings Buddha gave. It can be summarized as expression and that which is expressed. The expression comes in the words of the scriptures, and that which is expressed is the realization of the entire meaning of Dharma without exception.

Having a single-pointed aspiration towards this sacred Dharma, those who strive with perseverance are members of the Sangha. Sangha includes Stream Enterers, Once Returners, Never Returners, Arhats, Bodhisattvas, etc, there are many types by factor of their respective abandonments and realizations. We should understand that they have attained Sangha qualities in dependence upon the path of holy Dharma and that those of the Sangha will eventually become Buddhas.

It is in dependence upon this path that the many Buddhas of the past have emerged, that future Buddhas will become enlightened, and present Buddha Shakyamuni, etc, all the thousand and two Buddhas of this fortunate aeon have attained enlightenment; we can understand this directly. In dependence upon that we can understand that Buddha is not something which comes from outside ourselves, but from within our own being, and develop the courage to persevere in holy Dharma.

In brief, to give an example for clarity, Buddha is like a skilled, compassionate doctor. Dharma is like the medicine, and Sangha is like the nurses. We are like a seriously ill patient. As important as it is for a patient to have a doctor, if they are to be healed it is not one hundred percent in the hands of the doctor. The patients themselves have to take the medicine at the times prescribed and to be careful about their food and conduct. If they act thus they may be cured of their illness. Like in that example, Buddha said,

I have shown you the liberating path
But understand that liberation depends on you.

There is good reasoning behind this.

Why We Must, By All Means Attain Liberation

Just as we want happiness and don't want suffering, people, by nature, wish to stop all suffering whenever it arises. The sufferings that we experience in this life, can all be included in four: sufferings of birth, of aging, of sickness, and of death. Branch sufferings are vast in number; the suffering of encountering enemies, the suffering of being parted from beautiful friends, of meeting with the unwanted, the suffering of not finding what you desire though you seek it, and so on. We each have our own various sufferings. To get rid of these sufferings we must sever them from the root. Having identified suffering, we must gradually examine further. What is the basis of suffering? Where does this basis come from?

The basis, or body, of suffering is the base of the five aggregates that arise from delusion, our current body. For example, whatever feeling we are now experiencing, joyful, unpleasant, or neutral, from what did it arise? It arose through the force of self-grasping ignorance. Self-grasping ignorance is a mind that is mistaken in how it sees things. If you follow it, attachment or aversion will develop.

As said in Madhyamakavatara, Guide to the Middle Way,

First, comes the thought, I, and attachment to self.
Then the thought, mine, and attachment to things.
Like a water wheel, beings ceaselessly cycle up and down
without choice. Prostration to compassion for beings.

As said, first the thought, I, occurs, and with that condition, attachment develops. Someone who doesn't fall on my desirable side is labelled as an enemy. With these attitudes of attachment and aversion we cycle with no chance of escape. How do we cycle? As Je Tsongkhapa says in his Three Principals of the Path,

Carried off by four strong river currents,
Tightly bound by karma, hard to stop,
Stuck in cages of self-grasping's bars
Enshrouded in dark fog of ignorance
Continuously reborn in samsara,
Incessantly tormented by three sufferings...

These words of the great master are very blessed and powerful and carry vast meaning. To explain their meaning: our mind first takes a mistaken path in the vast darkness of ignorance. That ignorance generates the thought, I, and self-grasping that is very strong and forceful, like chains, ties up all our limbs. By power of ignorance and self-grasping saying "I," attachment to my side and aversion to the other side develops and, tormented by suffering, it is difficult to stop. By the power of bad karma, our body is completely and tightly bound and tied up by karma. We're then carried off by great ocean waves of intense suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death, without choice. Accumulating still more negative karma we are reborn endlessly, continuously experiencing suffering of karmic conditioning, suffering of change, suffering of pain, and so on.

Nagarjuna says in his Jewel Garland,

As long as the aggregates are grasped,
That long will there be a thought grasping, I.
Once I is grasped, karma is again created.
Once there is karma, there is birth.

As he said, as long as your aggregates are grasped as truly existent, there persists a mistaken grasping of true, or inherent, existence. By power of this grasping, delusions of attachment to my side and aversion to the other side arrive. Through these delusions, bad karma accumulates. It is through accumulation of such karma that we directly experience karmic results. If we wish to cut it off from the root there is no other method than to do analytical meditation on profound emptiness. Praying for self-grasping to disappear will not help! Doing physical practices of prostration and circumambulation cannot act as its direct antidote. What diminishes and eliminates self-grasping ignorance? It is the view realizing selflessness by which it can be overcome and conquered.

Nagarjuna said,

At the exhaustion of karma and delusion,
the elaboration upon elaboration
of concepts, karma, and delusions
are all ceased by emptiness.

Thus, it is like that.

The root of wandering in samsara is this ignorance. It arises because of awareness being deceived. You need to discover within yourself an antidote that is directly opposed to this mistaken attitude which grasps for true self-existence. This is solely the transcendent wisdom awareness, the view of emptiness, of selflessness. To discover it, faith in the guru, compassion for sentient beings, any kind of conventional physical or verbal practice, other than having some benefit, by themselves cannot directly undermine our current ignorance. What can 'harm' ignorance? You must find the mind which is directly opposed to that wrong view of ignorance in its way of seeing. This is only the correct view of selflessness, of emptiness. By carefully meditating on the twelve links, if you do analytical meditation, you will find the certainty in your own valid perception and be able to eliminate ignorance forever.

Mipham in his Lamp of Certainty, said,

Alas, the precious certainty which engages
the profound ultimate nature;
When you are not there, this world is caught
in a net of illusion, confused and deluded.

Summarizing the Essence of This

Now, to conclude, I will give a brief explanation of how to meditate on the twelve links of dependent origination.

As said in Sutra,

What does interdependent origination mean?
It is like this: because this exists, that arises.
Because this is born, that is born.
Ignorance causes karmic formation,
Karmic formation causes consciousness imprinted with karma

...and so forth, each arising as cause for the next, with unwanted results arising without choice. For this, the six causal links are the first, ignorance; the second, karmic formation; the third, consciousness; the eighth, craving; the ninth, grasping; and the tenth, becoming. These six causal links give rise to the six resultant links. The six resultant links are the fourth, name and form; the fifth, the sense bases; the sixth, contact; the seventh, feeling; the eleventh, birth; and the twelfth, aging and death.

When we repeatedly examine our ignorance, many will find within the heart of themselves, Tashi, or whatever their name, a sense of I looming up in the center of our heart. The stronger it arises the more it seems to exist completely unrelated to the other aggregates. Such a mind of ignorance arises. By power of that ignorance, delusions of

attachment to ones own side and aversion to the other side gradually develop. Finally, body, speech, and mind all take a mistaken path under the power of delusion, propelling future rebirth in samsara, again creating the second link of karmic formation, accumulating causes of suffering and delusions, etc. That powerful karma is then catalyzed by the eighth link, craving, and the ninth link, grasping, to become even more powerful, creating the tenth link of becoming. By the strong power of the karma of becoming, rebirth in samsara is once again propelled, causing that pervasive suffering of karmic formation, the fourth link, this body of name and form, to be conceived in the mother's womb, growing each day. When nine months and ten days arrives, birth takes place amidst pain and misery. Then the infant becomes a youth, the youth an adult, then aged, then sick, finally arriving at death once again. Our suffering in samsara is never ending. Even though we don't want it we now experience suffering of pain, suffering of change, and pervasive suffering of karmic conditioning. The principal cause of the other two is the pervasive suffering of karmic conditioning.

If we sever the twelve links in reverse order, it comes down to the ignorance which, in confusion, grasps at the reality of appearances. Since this ignorance grasping true existence arises with mistaken perception, it is not natural. The natural mind of people is clarity and cognition, the buddha-nature. How can negative minds of delusion such as ignorance be abandoned? They must be abandoned with the support of emptiness, the view of selfless transcendent wisdom awareness; there is no other way.

If we meditate on emptiness gradually, it is not difficult to abandon the delusions. That is because ignorance has no valid perceptions to support it. The nature of ignorance is that it is the root of suffering. It is impermanent, the creator of karma, a lie, truth for the obscured, changeable, fallible, momentary. Transcendent wisdom awareness is the opposite, backed up by valid minds of love, of compassion and so on. It is the root of happiness, permanent, immutable, unborn, true, unchanging, eternal, etc. The stronger our wisdom awareness, the weaker our ignorance becomes. For example, the brighter the light in a room, the more its opposite, darkness, will naturally be completely absent. The more our wisdom awareness expands, the more we can weaken its opposite, ignorance. If we can abandon ignorance we are able to cut the root of samsara.

As said in Four Hundred Verses on the Middle Way,

Just as body sense pervades the body,
ignorance abides in all delusions.
Therefore, all delusions
Are destroyed by ignorance being destroyed.

As I said before, if you wish to get to the root of ignorance you must definitely contemplate and meditate analytically on the Four Noble Truths and the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination.

Shravaka bikshus place a corpse before themselves and examine it. From where did these bones come? From death. Death arose from sickness, aging, birth, and so on,

in this way gradually meditating on the twelve links in reverse order. It is very beneficial to the mind.

When meditating, finally recognizing self-grasping ignorance for what it is, we meditate on emptiness, the view of selflessness, its antidote. That is because, if we meditate having recognized and determined that self-grasping ignorance is faulty, we can challenge the root of all the delusions. Without recognizing the delusion which is the object to be refuted, although we purport to practice Dharma as the antidote, it is like shooting an arrow to the West when the target is in the East! If we wish to overcome delusion, if we don't understand what the delusion is, where it abides, how it persists, and so on, we will not be able to eliminate it completely.

For example, when entering battle, the enemy is analyzed, recognizing first of all who and what they are, how large are the enemy forces, where they are on successive days, and finally, how should we engage them in battle. If the battle is entered after all of this is known, the enemy can be banished from the area and victory claimed.

Like this example, there is an unfortunate 'general' of ignorance accompanying the five poisonous delusions in our minds, remaining there and covering our mind. Moreover, its method of obscuring us is very clever, hiding amidst the twelve links of dependent origination. By first understanding the twelve links and identifying them one by one, finally we can catch the enemy ignorance which grasps for true existence and, by relying on wisdom insight realizing selflessness as the antidote, we must engage ignorance and kill it. What is ignorance grasping for true existence, really? It is the view which grasps for I, for self.

It is possible that some might think as follows. If we must abandon the view of what is called self, must we abandon this person named Tashi, or whatever, of whom we presently conceive? That is only because we are conflating the present Tashi who is name only, with the self that is not existent from its own side. They only seem to be arising from the same basis, two mistaken to be one. If we think about it, however, it is a mistake to think that this sense of self which seems to loom up so independently is the same as that person comprised by the five aggregates who is merely labeled, only designated by a name.

Wherever you search among the five aggregates for what the mind thinks of as the I or self of the person named Tashi, etc, can you find it? Think. For example, first search for the self of Tashi on the basis of this body. This body is a collection of many atoms which is just labeled and designated to be Tashi. If you wonder if the self exists within the body, this body has a head, two legs, two arms, which each have their own different branches and sub-branches; searching through these, self is not found. Checking the parts of the limbs, cutting them into pieces, you can divide the body into many particles, but you will not find self. The same goes for all the other four aggregates as well: feeling, perception, karmic formation, and consciousness. Although we search through all four of these we will not find the I or self that is thought of as the person. Well then, does self abide in consciousness? We must examine the continuum of con-

consciousness from every angle. There are various levels of consciousness, from coarse to subtle. If we wonder whether the current mind is the self, the current mind also has past, future, and present parts; in which part does self abide? If we say it abides in all three, then just as your mind exists in the past, present, and future, so you would have to have a past, present, and future self; there would have to be three selves in a single person! If you say the self is this present mind, the present mind has present, future, and past parts. By dividing present mind into three parts this way, like the particles perceived in outer things, although you seek the self in the inner mind, it is not found.

Is what we call self, then, primordially absent wherever we seek it externally and internally? That also is not the case. There definitely exists a self that is subject to benefit and harm, that acts and is acted upon. How does it exist? We can say that the way self exists is conventionally, in the body of five aggregates. It is merely designated by name by a conventional mind that does not subject its object to ultimate analysis. You can say that it is conventionally designated as existent for the worldly who are deceived.

Another example: in a windowless corner of a room, in flickering gloomy light, is a coiled rope that looks like a striped snake. Someone sees it and thinks it is a snake, at the same time shouting to everyone that there is a snake in the house. Until a thorough search of the house is made, everyone will have the same thought: a rope mistakenly perceived as a snake. To our mind which does not check or examine Tashi, etc, we are like the rope perceived as a snake. Just as there is actually no snake in the house there is absolutely no inherently existent self in the five aggregates.

What is important about Arya beings refutation of self? They are not saying that this body of a precious human life which is rare and difficult to find is bad. What is rejected is the truly existent self which we cling to, which we grasp as inherently existent, as permanent. It is this wrong awareness which cherishes ourselves most highly of all; it is this mind which creates so much non-virtue through attachment and aversion. Because this selfish mind is a mistaken awareness, it is something we should continually seek to refute. Buddhist scriptures state that all mistaken minds are refuted.

The essence of Buddha's teaching is summarized in the Four Seals of Buddha's teachings:

First, All Compounded Things Are Impermanent.
Second, All Contaminated Things Are Suffering
Third, All Phenomena Are Empty And Selfless
Fourth, Nirvana, Passing Beyond Sorrow, Is Peace

Although Buddha says very clearly that all compounded things are impermanent, our minds cling to compounded things, ourselves in particular, as permanent and truly existent. On that basis we make our first mistake. Although Buddha says that all contaminated things are suffering, we sentient beings cling to the contaminated happiness of our five senses as pure, perfect happiness; thus comes our second mistake. Although Buddha says that all phenomena are

empty and selfless, we sentient beings cling to all the external phenomena we perceive through our senses as inherently, truly existent; thus comes our third mistake.

Finally Buddha says that nirvana is peace. He is speaking about a mind that is unmistaken in its way of seeing; not a mind that is mistaken. Therefore, this peace of nirvana is something that has receded very far from us. This is because our mind has gone in a mistaken direction. In any case, Buddha instructs us with a mother's love. Although Buddha clearly guides us to an unmistakable perfect path, saying do this, on this path you will find happiness, and don't do this, if you do, it will bring you suffering, still we sentient beings insist on going in mistaken directions.

When Buddha teaches about impermanence and suffering it is possible that many people will not want to listen. This is just a factual observation that accords with the way things actually exist, not something that Buddha has made up for Buddhist practice that is contrary to fact! Even if you do not accept Buddhism, people are going to die. We see for ourselves and experience that people have to go through unwanted suffering. We should accept Buddha's teachings as true. Buddha has commented on the reality of things just as they are.

Many people, when they speak of selflessness, get the mistaken idea that the basis which experiences happiness and sadness, this person named Tashi must be given up; that is not at all the case. In all the Buddhist scriptures it is taught that this body we have now is rare and difficult to find and very precious; and we must take good care of it. It is not at all the idea that this body and life is bad and that we must get rid of it. How else could we practice the Dharma?

The non-inherently existent self and this body which bears the five aggregates are different. The self that is refuted is a self that is clung to as inherently, truly existent. As long as there is self-grasping ignorance, that will give rise to delusions. If delusions develop, they harm us. That itself will cause suffering. Because self-grasping ignorance is the root of all delusions, thinking of that, Buddha taught the view of selflessness as the antidote.

For example, through the condition of self-grasping ignorance we develop attachment to objects that we find pleasant. That object of attachment may be harmed by others. Through conditions created by harsh speech, etc, unhappy states of mind such as anger and jealousy arise at the same time. In any case, self-grasping ignorance induces attachment to objects, and attachment breeds aversion. Because that self-grasping is obscured ignorance, it naturally already includes the root delusions of the three poisons. Any karma created with the three poisons will be non-virtuous, no matter what.

Some might possibly think self-grasping is indispensable for me and my family and friends in order to protect us. Otherwise we will not make any profit in the world and we will lose out. Therefore, there is no way we can give up self-grasping.

Although it is possible from one point of view that there is some truth to this, in actuality, it is a short-sighted view. For example, these days the main source of all business and wealth depends on the hard work of people in society. For this, some people are very greedy with no contentment and compete to win out over others, mostly committing the ten non-virtues, bribing and deceiving others in order to profit from their loss. That is not only devoid of Dharma, it is not seen as good conduct in any human society.

Whatever the results of accumulating the ten non-virtues, they do not create happiness temporarily, or in the long term. For example, if someone tells a lie when there is profit in it for them, it is no different than any other lie or theft. The wealth thus obtained gives them no real ease or peace of mind. They must always be tormented by guilt and regret. Lying to others out of self-concern, killing and so forth, even if you are victorious, is not the conduct of a real hero. The real hero is someone who can banish the great demon of self-grasping that has festered in their mind from beginningless time up to the present.

Venerable Milarepa said,

These days people harm the destitute by killing and stealing from them, and boast about being courageous if they are victorious. But they are actually bowing down to their own self-grasping ignorance. They are the real cowards, in fact. There is no point in creating extra harm to poor sentient beings. They are already drowning in the suffering of samsara. There is no need to kill them; so many die naturally every day! I am the real hero! If you wonder why, it is because I won't bow my head at the feet of self-grasping ignorance. I fought with it, finally gained victory, and banished it. Now, I remain nurturing my parents-sentient beings with love. If you want to be a real hero, follow me!

Furthermore, the essence of Mahayana Buddhism is cherishing others. When you speak of cherishing others, many may think it means letting go of all profit and just accepting defeat, but it is not really like that. When you give up self-cherishing and think, even briefly, about the welfare of other sentient beings, that is the beginning of finding your own true happiness. The main reason we have been wandering in samsara from beginningless time up to the present is our self-centered, self-cherishing mind. If we give up selfishness and willingly cherish others from today onwards, we have taken the path of the Bodhisattvas without mistake, going from happiness to happiness. As said in Bodhicaryavatara, Guide to the Bodhisattva Conduct,

Whatever happiness living beings experience
Comes from wishing the happiness of others
Whatever suffering living beings experience
All comes from seeking their own happiness

What need is there to say much?
Childish beings seek their own happiness
Whereas Buddhas accomplish the welfare of others.
Just look at the difference between them!

In any case, as said above, start with the Four Noble Truths, then by stages, go for refuge, then contemplate the twelve links of dependent origination in forward and reverse order. Finally develop heartfelt certainty in the meaning of selflessness. If you search for what is called I or self every day in analytical meditation you will gradually become familiar with the view of selflessness, and finally develop certainty. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that he meditates on the meaning of selflessness at least fifteen times a day!

These days there are many who meditate on the four close-placements of mindfulness and shamata, mental-quietness-meditation, but there are very few who meditate on the meaning of selflessness. What makes us unhappy are delusions, gross attachment and aversion.

When we develop very strong attachment and aversion, if we take a moment to question, where is the object of our delusion? Where is the subjective mind that experiences it? Our attachment or aversion will diminish; there will be this benefit. The more someone has attachment and aversion, the less they will have any happiness. Eventually the source of all problems comes down to clinging to I, to self.

Actually, whatever happens to this current body, good, bad, pleasant, unpleasant, it is all like last night's dream. In our life we have two kinds of dreams, large and small. Our large dream is the pleasant and unpleasant experiences we have in this body. Our small dreams are those we have at night. Not many people realize that our waking experience, the current situation of our body, is like a dream. We grasp it as being so real and concrete. In any case, even if we can't give up all self-grasping ignorance, when negative circumstances arise, if we can think that they are not real, like an illusion, like a dream, and likewise, whatever worldly praise we receive, whatever good things happen, if we can think of them as like an echo, like reflections in a mirror, like bubbles in water, our mind will not be disturbed. We won't develop pride, etc, there will be many purposes served.

In any case, knowing what is the real purpose of this brief human life, entering the path of holy Dharma without mistaking what should be practiced and what should be abandoned, we should practice in order to be able to proceed from happiness to happiness in this and future lives. Not wasting our life in meaningless distractions, if we take its essence by rightly persevering in the practice of holy Dharma, great meaning will come into our hands. As long as we are someone seeking Liberation, at this single occasion when we have attained this precious human life of freedom and endowments that is so difficult to find, we must not leave it empty handed, but persevere in the essence of sacred Dharma.

Anyone who wishes to take the path of happiness,
Who wishes to sever enemy delusions from the root,
Please practice the perfect teachings of holy Dharma
of the Four Noble Truths and Twelve Links of Interdependence.

These days beings who are proud of their meditation
Think of nothing at all. It is difficult for such
Placement meditation to act as the antidote to delusion.
How delightful it is to enter analysis of meaning!

Tsongkhapa, who is Manjushri in actuality, said,
If you don't know the object that is to be negated,
Nothing will become the direct antidote to self-grasping.
I feel heartfelt faith in this eloquent teaching.

The cause of wandering in samsara is samsaric karma:
How do beings cycle? How long will they cycle?
How much do they cycle? Asking these successive questions,
Train in the excellent path taught in scriptures on the twelve links.

Ignorance is the root of all delusions. Likewise,
the root of all phenomena is interdependence.
Therefore we are very fortunate to spend sessions of meditation

On the forward and reverse order of the Twelve Links of Interdependence.

The different good and bad things, happiness and suffering of this life,
Are not real, like illusions, like dreams and hallucinations,
Understanding this, bless us to develop deep conviction
in the view of selflessness.

May light of emptiness and interdependence
Completely clear away gloomy darkness of ignorance!
May it be auspicious that we realize all phenomena
are unreal and illusory, and attain eternal bliss of Buddhahood.

This brief commentary on the Four Noble Truths was written for some of my aspiring disciples on the 22nd of April, 2019 during a two-day teaching retreat on the Heart Sutra. The entire subject of the Heart Sutra is selflessness so I thought if I wrote a commentary on selflessness and its complementary supports, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, the Four Noble Truths, etc, it would not be a teaching specific to Tibetan Buddhism alone but the very essence of Buddha's teachings; so that it might fulfill a greater need for the general Buddhist community's understanding. As the teaching master of Manjushri Dharma Center, respectfully, I, with the name of a Dharma teacher, Khenpo Karten, with great joy, finished writing this on Mother's Day, 12th of May, 2019, like something that arose by itself without causes and conditions! Yet, it is very regrettable that I cannot repay any of the kind care my deceased mother gave me in this lifetime; so by making effort at this time to write this in her memory, I dedicate its virtue to returning her kindness and, at the same time, as a cause to benefit those of little intelligence like myself.

Sarva Mangalam
Tashi Delek

Translation by Jampa Tharchin
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