

The Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination

Introduction

The purpose of Dharma study and practice is two-fold. The first purpose is to attain knowledge, accumulate information, and become educated. We study and investigate the philosophy. We become familiar with various subjects including the causes of the undesirable conditions we find ourselves in that bring about our suffering. But the second purpose, and main reason we study and practice, is to learn how to free ourselves from suffering. The very reason we practice Buddhism, the main motive, is to learn practical ways to liberate ourselves from the darkness of suffering.

The desire for happiness and peace is an intrinsic part of the nature of the mind of all sentient beings. We all desire peace, harmony and happiness and when we do experience these qualities, we wish to sustain them. But as soon as unfavorable conditions arise and conflict arises in our mind, we feel uncomfortable and make efforts to free ourselves. That kind of feeling is universal regardless of who we are. Human beings, insects, mammals, fish, birds, and every other type of sentient being, all desire the same thing — happiness.

Because of confusion we fail to recognize the sources of peace and harmony. We also fail to recognize the cause of our suffering. Therefore, instead of cultivating conditions that will result in happiness, at times we actually create more suffering for ourselves. We do not deliberately do this, but because we remain deluded about how reality actually works, it happens nonetheless. Thus, it becomes crucial for us to discover the different causes which will result in freedom from suffering and which will allow us to achieve happiness.

The study of the twelve interdependent links as discussed in Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* gives us an opportunity to develop a perspective of all phenomena, how it exists and how our life exists. These teachings of the twelve interdependent links are profound and important to study because through them we begin to understand how everything is interconnected; how the whole universe, including the outer universe and the inner universe, is interdependent. Gampopa said, "Those who have more ignorance should contemplate the law of interdependent origination as the remedy."

However, it is insufficient to merely study and investigate, we must implement the teachings. Without implementation we can not actualize the results. So it becomes crucial to implement the teachings, which means we must discipline our mind. We must make our mind clearer, calmer, more peaceful and purify the different types of negative thoughts which are the root causes of our suffering. That is the main purpose of our Dharma study and practice and the intention of these teachings.

The Buddha once taught about a *pratyekabuddha* (solitary realizer). This is one who has renounced samsara and all its sufferings and who has gained insight into the inner conflicts that manifest in our individual lives and in society. They see that life has the

sufferings of aging, sickness and death which are unavoidable, that every one of us has to go through them and it is not easy for us. They recognize there are physical difficulties to tolerate, mentally difficulties, confusion, stress and suffering. And because of these insights some individuals renounce that samsaric environment and go to a solitary place to meditate and practice. The Buddha taught the following story about one such individual.

Once there was a solitary realizer who went into a mountain cave and stayed there to meditate for a long time. One day he left his cave and while walking along came to a cemetery where he found a bone. He said, “This bone is from a person who died. It shows that the life of a person is so driven by the results of old age, sickness and death, that it is the nature of our existence. We give so much importance to our life and care so much for it, but in the end this is the final outcome. This bone appeared here because of death; it is the end of this life’s journey.”

Then he said, “Then where does death manifest, or occur, from? Death comes from decaying and aging. From the day we are born onward, we are subject to decay and aging and this is brought about by birth itself. So birth is the origin of life and from there we go through all the stages.”

First we struggle with death and find it is unavoidable when there is birth. Then we look for the origin and cause of birth. And so it goes, questioning what was created by the previous action. Like a chain, it goes from one phase to another; step-by-step they are interdependent. We call this the twelve links of interdependent origination, or the twelve elements of interdependence. These twelve are ignorance, mental formation, consciousness, name and form, six increasing fields, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, existence, birth, aging, and death.

Everything is interdependent. Nothing is concrete. The Buddhadharma teaches us about cause and effect. First we look at the results of suffering and the results of happiness. Then we look for the cause of the suffering and the cause of the happiness. Buddha gave the example of a rice field. When we plant rice we need fertile ground, good conditions such as the weather, fertilizer, water and the seed itself in order to grow good rice. When all these elements come together perfectly, rice grows well and we have a bountiful crop. The rice harvested is not independent; it depended on many different causes and conditions. Our inner mind is the same. The *Rice Seedling Sutra* says:

Monks, he who understands this rice stalk can understand the meaning of interdependent origination. Those who know interdependent origination know the Dharma. Those who know the Dharma know the Buddha.

The existence of phenomena is the manifestation of many causes and conditions. These things do not exist the way we perceive. Because of the time we have spent in study and practice, when suffering occurs we begin to see how it is illusionary in nature, how it is transitory, rather than grasping at it as substantial. That gives us an opportunity to ease

the ridged nature of the mind. Our minds tend to be rigid like concrete which results in our concrete suffering.

The Buddha said, “Because of this, that is produced. Because of negative thought, suffering is produced.” Conversely, because of positive cause, happiness and peace are born. Suffering is not something manifested independently, so when it occurs, instead of questioning why we have suffering, we should be determined to take care of the cause of the suffering. We have that individual responsibility.

Mental patterns arise due to the obscurations of the mind which we term ‘ignorance.’ Ignorance is the mental factor that obscures the clarity of the mind in the same way that a cloud obscures the clarity of the sun and dims the sunshine. The cloud then causes rain, the rain causes the grass and trees to grow and so it continues in that manner.

It is the same with ignorance. The obscuration veil is there and from that state of mind we do not perceive the intrinsic reality of phenomena. (What we do perceive is artificial and sometimes called ‘fabricated nature.’) Through this misperception of phenomena we manifest different mental factors of attachment, anger, jealousy, etc. These mental formations in turn create different karmas and so it continues.

In the same way, due to the condition of birth, there occurs old age, death, sorrow, and lamentation. Because of birth we age, with age we grow old, finally death approaches. We then have sorrow and lament both inwardly and outwardly with others. Where there is sorrow and lamentation there is suffering, unhappiness and distress. All are interdependent and interconnected. Suffering is not one independent thing. It depends on many causes and conditions, it all links together.

The twelve interdependent links specifically describe our lives now. In Buddhist cosmology there are three worlds, or realms: the desire world; the form world; and the formless world. The form and formless realms do not have all twelve interdependent links; these two worlds have some, but not all of the links. There are also four different types of births described: born from a mothers’ womb; born from an egg; spontaneous births; births from moisture and heat. According to conditions, due to ignorance we human beings are born from our mothers’ womb in the desire realm.

Link One – Ignorance

At the very first, there is ignorance, which is the confusion that misunderstands all knowledge.

The origin of all samsaric conditions in this world is caused by ignorance – the confusion that misunderstands all knowledge. Due to this misunderstanding we create artificial, superficial and contrived conceptions, the primary one being our awareness of self. Our misperception of what we recognize as ‘I’ fosters attachment to that ‘I’. We hold ‘I’, ‘self’, or ‘ego’ as substantial and solid, then grasp onto it. This gives rise to the idea of an ‘other’ outside of our ‘self’ and separate from ‘I’. We perceive these as two

opposites, then, because of attachment to 'I', anger arises towards anything which opposes our attachment. We begin to make efforts to preserve the 'I' and defeat the 'others'. Back and forth, the conflict forms and grows.

Buddhism does not deny the label of 'I'; everything is merely a label. The 'table', the 'book', the 'light', the 'fan', these all are just labels given by somebody. Especially now in modern times, scientists who have such great knowledge, invent a lot of new things and then name them. They are experts at bestowing labels. But we fail to realize how things are temporarily labeled and misperceive them as fixed. Our minds are so fixed that we have no mental flexibility. Even if somebody merely changes the name of something, we react negative. And when somebody opposes an idea we have, because we are attached to our own idea, we object!

This is not to say that we do not exist. There is a level of 'I' in the relative state. We need phrases such as 'I go, I eat, I do this, you do that,' to communicate. This is the relative state which allows us to be orderly and functional. In a relative way we see how all things function, but then we misperceive them as independent, concrete and solid. And from that misunderstanding begins all the conflict.

Link Two – Mental Formation

Under the influence of ignorance is created the mental formation of the karma of afflicted virtues and nonvirtues. This is called "mental formation conditioned by ignorance."

Clearly karma is the cause for happiness, peace and harmony, and also the cause for suffering. As we create a physical, verbal, or mental action, it becomes the cause of a result—whatever that result may be. That action is called karma which is a vast subject.

While we live our daily lives and go through normal daily interactions, we create the causes for all the subsequent results we experience. We are always in the midst of causes and conditions. Every moment we create causes and every moment we experience results. Results can be due to an immediate previous cause that we created just moments earlier, or from causes created far back in our past such as from last year, or even last lifetime.

Consider a field of grass. Every moment it is growing; that growth is the result of the past. Then the present manifestation becomes the cause of the next growth and so on. Through this example we can see that the cause we create in this moment becomes a condition to manifest the next result, which can be a result of an experience of happiness, or a result of an experience of suffering. Karma is very subtle if you look at it in that way.

So these actions, these karmas, can be virtuous or non-virtuous. Virtues become the cause of temporary peace and happiness, and nonvirtues become the cause of suffering. Because we misperceive reality, ignorance is the foundation for all karmas and from that

manifests all the different causes and conditions. Because ignorance is always there, we call these, ‘mental formations conditioned by ignorance.’

Link Three – Consciousness

The seed of that karma is carried by the mind so that is called “consciousness conditioned by mental formation.”

The causes (seeds) of all karmas we create are stored in the consciousness, they are the habitual tendencies rooted in our mental continuum. We may wonder how a previous life could have existed, or how a next life can exist. Some may even say, “I don’t believe I had previous life, or will have a next life.” To study this we look at the continuity of consciousness, of the mind. The mind is a phenomenon that is non-material and not substantial and because of that, the mind cannot be created by anything material. It is a process of the continuation of our habitual tendencies. Through our own investigation and experience we become convinced of these conditions and realize it as a universal experience that everybody goes through. It is not merely a belief system.

For example, as soon as we are born, even though we do not know anything at all, we know how to drink milk from our mother. That reflex is deeply rooted in us. Once we start to grow, emotions of attachment, desire and hatred arise. Nobody taught us how to develop these and we did not go to school to learn them. These tendencies are just there. No matter how often people tell us not to have desire, attachment or anger, and in spite of the fact we know these are negative, we experience them anyway. These habits are deeply rooted in us through many lifetimes. Even within this present lifetime, you can distinguish that some mental habits are stronger than others. The continuity of the conscious is far-reaching.

The continuity of the consciousness is like when we are asleep. In our sleep we completely lose all awareness of what is happening. We have no perception of time during sleep, so in a way it is like being dead, isn’t it? The gap between one day and the next day is filled with sleep, which creates the conditions to forget. That does not mean that yesterday did not exist, but we forget yesterday as we sleep and remember it upon awakening. Forgetting is an obscuration and a form of ignorance. But as in sleep, as soon as we awaken from ignorance, it is purified and it is then that one remembers past lives, like waking up and remembering yesterdays’ events.

The very purpose of our Dharma study and practice is to change mental and emotional habits. That is why we meditate. To do meditation is not just to make the mind calm and peaceful. At the beginning, of course, that is necessary. However, the purpose of meditation practice is to change the habit of negative thoughts which are the root of suffering. That is why it is necessary to implement Dharma practice into our lives and, hence, into our mind. Since we do not desire suffering, we have to do this purposely and by choice in order to purify negative thoughts. At each step we are to look at the weakness of the mind and, instead of ignoring our customary negative responses, implement the Dharma practice to purify those negative habits. That becomes the

method to fulfill the very purpose of our Dharma practice and study.

Link Four – Name and Form

By the power of that karma, the mind is fully confused, enters into a mother's womb, and an embryo and so forth arise. This is called "name and form conditioned by consciousness."

Due to the karmic causes (the influences of confused mental and emotional habits and habitual tendencies imprinted on the mind) the consciousness enters into a mother's womb with the continuation of the mental and emotional habits from previous lives. As soon as conception occurs in the mother's womb, we call that 'name and form'. The 'form' is the embryo's body conceived through the union of two drops, one white from the father (sperm) and one red from the mother (egg). Even though there is not yet the whole body, like eyes, ears, nose, etcetera, there is form. The 'name' is the embryo's feeling and its awareness of the formation of consciousness. Name and form grow, on average, for nine months and ten days.

Link Five – Six Increasing Fields

By developing the name and form, all the senses of the eye, ear, and so forth are completed. That is called the "six increasing fields conditioned by name and form."

During the nine months and ten days of pregnancy, the baby grows every month, step by step and there appears eyes, ears, nose, tongue and physical appearance. These five, plus the mental, are called the "six increasing fields conditioned by name and form."

Link Six – Contact

The interaction of the eye organ and so forth, the corresponding object, and the consciousness is called "contact conditioned by the six increasing fields."

Through the six increasing fields we have contact with objects. When consciousness and a sensory faculty of eye, ear, nose, or tongue come together, three types of objects can be distinguished: attractive; unattractive; or neutral.

Link Seven – Feeling

Through contact, one experiences the feelings of joy, suffering, or indifference. That is called "feeling conditioned by contact."

The six increasing fields become the necessary condition to contact objects. From that contact feeling arises. Feeling is not independent; it arises through the conditions of the contact with the object. The feelings that arise are either: joy, suffering, or indifference.

When you are attracted to an object (delicious food, pleasant smells and so on) there is joy. When you dislike something, there is suffering. When an object does not cause any special reaction in the senses, there is indifference. That relation with form is called the 'feeling conditioned by contact.'

Link Eight – Craving

When there is feeling, there is joy, attachment, and stronger attachment. That is called "craving conditioned by feeling."

When we have a feeling of joy because we like something, there follows the thought, "I want more of this." We wish to recreate the feeling of joy and thus craving arises. In the same way, when we have a feeling of suffering because we do not like something, there follows the thought, "I do not want this." We experience aversion and then we wish to be separated from the object or situation and crave to be free of that experience.

Link Nine – Grasping

From that attachment, one craves more and more, and wishes to not be separated from the object of attachment. That is called "grasping conditioned by craving."

From attachment, craving increases and we want more and then even more. Sometimes there is hatred also when an obstacle develops between us and the object of desire. Then aversion arises towards the obstacle which stands between us and the object of joy. When we do not get what we desire, this brings on mental suffering. All interaction goes back and forth between attachment and aversion. This is called 'grasping conditioned by craving'.

If we do not know these teachings, we will continue to live in this manner, so this is something for every human being in the world. This is the nature of our lives. We really can discern from our own experience the fundamental cause of suffering and the cause of peace and happiness. When we study Dharma, we see that this is where we are at emotionally and mentally. We recognize what we are doing and see that we have struggled with this our entire lives. This awareness dispels ignorance and gives us wisdom to accurately perceive reality.

Link Ten – Existence

Through that grasping, karma and existence by body, speech, and mind are again created. That is called "existence conditioned by grasping."

Mental formations are first created at the second link, Ignorance. This is where because ignorance is always present, we misperceive reality and create different mental formations conditioned by that ignorance. Here in Link Ten, once again mental formations are created, but this time through our grasping. Due to our strong craving and

grasping, we physically, mentally and verbally create different karmas. From these karmas, combined with the proper conditions, arise the subsequent body, speech and mind. This is called 'existence conditioned by grasping.'

Link Eleven – Birth

That karma creates the five aggregates (Skt. skandas). That is called "birth conditioned by existence."

When we are born, we have this body which has five aggregates (skandas). These are form, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness. Through the physical body we perceive things, 'this is big, this is small, this is right, this is wrong, this has bright color' and so on. We have feelings about the things we see. Through that interaction of perception arise the mental formations with which we create different types of karma, different imprints in the mind. In fact, all karmas are imprints in the conscious mind.

Link Twelve – Aging and Dying

After birth, the aggregates which actually exist increase, ripen, and cease. "Ripen" means aging; "cease" means death. That is called "aging and death conditioned by birth."

After birth, the aggregates 'increase, ripen, and cease'. First the aggregates of the mental and the aggregates of the physical increase, then they ripen which means they age. They then cease, which is death. This occurs one after the other. This is called "aging and death conditioned by birth."

Summary

Due to ignorance, complete attachment, and craving, death causes the inner pain called sorrow. That sorrow causes expression in words, called lamentation. When the five consciousnesses experience unhappiness it is called suffering. Bringing that in the mind, that suffering is called "mental unhappiness." Furthermore, in this way and so forth, the entire afflicted sub-consciousness is called "disturbed mind."

Because we have ignorance, complete attachment and craving, death causes inner pain, sorrow. We grieve, lament and suffer. Because of this mental unhappiness our entire subconscious becomes disturbed which gives rise to ignorance, then to birth, then to death. So these are called the twelve interdependent links.

It is very helpful to know all the steps and how they depend on each other. When we are born, we are born with ignorance. Then in life we basically do, either successfully or unsuccessfully, whatever we want. Due to ignorance there are the mental formations. We have feeling, then craving and that creates karma and so forth – the twelve become a

wheel, the wheel of samsara with no beginning, no end. That is, no end until we realize this truth. Once we recognize how things really are, ignorance, which is the link that brings about the chain reactions of sufferings one after the other, can be “purified.” In other words, if we change our habitual thoughts and reactions, if we purify ignorance, then the chain can be disconnected, it becomes unlinked. This is the purpose of our practice of Dharma.

Contemplations and Analyses

As we study we need to really examine and analyze the material. We need to ask questions that will make us think about these ideas. Ask yourself, can increase, ripening and ceasing, all exist simultaneously in the same moment? Can mental and physical phenomena increase, ripen and cease concurrently? Birth and death, can they exist together? These questions concern not only mental phenomena, but physical phenomena as well.

Also think about how increasing, ripening and ceasing can simultaneously exist in both mental and physical phenomena. As we think about how birth and death can simultaneously exist, it seems that they cannot. We may come to that conclusion because we cannot understand how without the first moment coming to cessation, the second moment can exist, and how it can then increase, then ripen. We cannot understand how it can cease if it does not first ripen.

To answer this conundrum, we need to understand how everything exists concurrently, which is called ‘composed phenomenon.’ Take as an example the element of fire, or of water. If we are asked for the definition of fire, or the definition of water, we can answer that the definition of fire is the heat and burning together and the definition of water is the liquid and moisture together. The characteristic of fire is the burning and the heat, not just the heat alone. In the same way, the definition of composed phenomena is impermanence. Impermanence means changing. That which is changing is the composite phenomena. In this way, that which is composite in birth, or in increasing, or in ripening, or in ceasing, simultaneously exist. All are changing, all are impermanent. In any given moment if there is no increasing, there is no ceasing. Look deeply and profoundly and see how this is the penetrating nature of all. Without ceasing, there is no increasing, these do not exist side-by-side, but rather at the same instant. That is how we can say we are dying every moment and being born every moment.

There are different states of wisdom: perceiving the gross level; perceiving the subtle level; perceiving the very subtle level. When we practice and perceive impermanence well, we understand that every instance is of a momentary nature and in that momentary nature is non-existence of permanent, fixed phenomena. When we meditate, practice well and implement the teachings of impermanence, we recognize that what we see and what we experience does not independently exist. Once we realize that, we understand that the nature of all our inner conflicts and all our afflictive emotions are also impermanent. They are not solid, and are nonexistent of a permanent state.

This is a psychological analysis and through this analysis, if we implement it into practice, we can experience impermanence. The experience of impermanence holds great wisdom, because the experience of impermanence allows us to recognize it and not merely understand it intellectually. This is the purpose of our practice of Dharma, to free ourselves from delusion, which means to be free from suffering. The Dharma gives us the opportunity to be sincere with ourselves. Then at that level of knowing, our mind becomes totally peaceful. There is freedom from suffering. Our practice of the Dharma teachings is crucial. This is not just intellectual material. Intellectually we can collect vast amounts of information, but if we do not put it into practice, then it will not benefit us. To fulfill our expectation of these Dharma teachings, we have to implement them into practice.

Breaking the Twelve Links into Three Groups

Gampopa sorts the twelve links into three groups: the afflicting emotions; karma; suffering.

Ignorance, craving and grasping comprise the afflicting emotions group.

The afflicted emotions group include: ignorance, craving and grasping. The afflicted mind is unclear, confused and can be said to be crazy. In this sense ‘crazy’ means that the mind does not function in the reality of ‘the way things are’. Afflictive emotions make a mind unclear, confused and crazy. Conversely, if we use the word ‘normal’, we can ask, ‘What is normal?’ When you know these twelve links of interdependence well, then you realize that all the beings in samsara are not normal. Everything samsaric is artificial and contrived. To illustrate this point I have told the following story many times.

Once there was a king and his people. The king had an astrologer who foresaw that in one week’s time there would be a poisonous rain which would pollute all the water in the kingdom. Anyone who drank the polluted water would become crazy. And so, during the week leading up to the rain, the people stored up as much pure water as they could.

Then, as predicted, the poisonous rains fell and polluted the entire water supply throughout the land. The people were very careful to use the stored pure water. At first there was enough water, but after a month passed the pure water was depleted and eventually it was all gone. Then the people had no choice but to drink polluted water. All the people consumed the poisonous water and were driven mad one by one.

Soon the rich and powerful king, who had the largest store of pure water, was the only rational person remaining in the entire kingdom. All the people agreed that the king acted very strange. He was not like them at all. He seemed to be insane! So the king, who was the only normal individual left in the kingdom, was now looked upon as being a crazy

person.

We say this is a normal life we are living, but what is a normal life? It is especially important to develop the wisdom that allows us to analyze this kind of question. Because when we can correctly perceive our lives in an unpolluted and un-obscured way, we purify the causes of suffering. Suffering does not always mean being tortured. It means that we are not free from distress and discontent which means that suffering is bound to come.

Mental formation and existence are the karma group. Consciousness and so forth, all the remaining seven, are grouped as suffering.

These three groups were taught by Nagarjuna in *The Treatise on the Essence of Interdependence* which says:

The twelve interdependent elements should be understood in three groups. The Sage described interdependence as afflicting emotions, karma and suffering. The first, eighth, and ninth comprise the afflicting emotions. The second and tenth comprise karma. The remaining seven comprise suffering.

These three: afflicting emotions, karma and suffering can also be called mind, karma cause and result. Think about it in this manner – without the mind, we do not create karma cause; without karma cause, there is no suffering. This is sometimes easier to understand if you reflect on it in reverse order – suffering and undesirable conditions arise from the causes we create. The causes we create cannot come about without mind. So these three: suffering, causes, and mind link together. Thus the twelve interdependent links can be subsumed into three categories which may be an easier way to contemplate these teachings.

How to Avoid the Causes of Suffering and Create the Causes of Peace

As soon as a thought arises, that thought becomes a condition to experience either happiness or suffering. For example, when you have a sense of loving kindness, or compassion, or just a relaxed peaceful mind, that state of mind is the first stage of a thought. And that thought becomes the action that returns back to allow the mind to relax and be at peace. But when you have hatred or anger as the first thought, as soon as you have anger, that brings the mind to a ridged and narrow state and suffering is the result. Accordingly, the result of anger is the suffering that manifests the moment anger arises.

As soon as we think something, that thought becomes a condition to act on. The resulting action then becomes the condition and we experience a result. So the result, which can be desirable or undesirable, depends upon the preceding cause. The preceding

cause, which we ourselves created, depended on the motivation with which we cultivated the initial thought. So in this way, in one moment, we bring to fruition all twelve links of interdependent origination. Fruition, however, is not always instantaneous. It can sometimes be very long term. When we come to understand these processes, then we also can understand how to create the causes for happiness. This is the purpose of studying these twelve interdependent links.

Gampopa explains it like this:

The examples of these are: ignorance is like one who plants the seed, karma is like the field, consciousness is like the seed, craving is like moisture; name and form are like shoots, the others like the branches, leaves and so forth. If there were no ignorance, then mental formation could not appear. Likewise, without birth, aging and death would not happen. But because there is ignorance, mental formations are fully created. And so forth, when there is birth, aging and death occur.

Death is like the harvesting, once you harvest, the seed is dead. This is a very good analogy. So now you need to have the wisdom to know what to plant. Will you plant poisonous plants or edible and medicinal foods? We must carefully look at the seed before we plant it and make sure that it will result in what we wish to harvest.

In the same way, we need to look at our own mind and, knowing the causes of suffering and the causes of peace and harmony, work to reinforce and enhance the causes of what we wish to harvest. We need to develop positive thoughts to purify negative thoughts. And it is for this purpose that we have meditation. Meditation is absolutely necessary if we are to accomplish a peaceful mind. Just sitting for thirty minutes or one hour gives us the opportunity to reflect and look at the mind. Then when we continue on with our daily lives, we are reinforced with a little more strength.

Through meditation the mind becomes more calm and peaceful, there is more clarity. That clarity helps us realize the intrinsic reality, we can see how all phenomena in the world and beyond is conditioned; we see how it exists. We have an 'intuitive realization' and see how every thing exists like a mirage.

Meditation changes the habits of the mind. Negative habits of the mind are the cause of suffering, so they must be replaced with positive thoughts if we are to be liberated from suffering. Positive thoughts, loving kindness, compassion, bodhicitta and so forth, are the cause of peace and harmony. Therefore we need to practice these. Every individual who practices these achieves results.

Ignorance does not think "I will create mental formation," and mental formation does not think, "I was created by ignorance." Likewise birth does not think, "I will create aging and death," and aging and death do not think, "We were made by birth." But when there is ignorance, then mental formations appear and manifest. Likewise when there is birth,

aging and death appear and manifest. Thus, this is inner interdependence with cause.

In this passage Gampopa is saying we need to take individual responsibility. Ignorance does not independently think, "I am ignorance and I will create mental formation." Likewise mental formation does not think, "I am a mental formation created by ignorance." When the mind is deluded, the whole of samsara is created. It is we ourselves who are the creators and we must take responsibility. We know what our lives have been. We know where we are at now. And now we know what to do about it.

The Interdependence of Samsara

Inner Interdependence Supported by Conditions. Earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness are called the six elements. The earth element causes the solidity of the body. The water element causes the body to cohere. The fire element digests whatever you eat, drink, and so forth. The wind element moves the breath out and in. The space element creates the spaces within the body. The consciousness element creates the five consciousnesses and the afflicted mental consciousness. Without these conditions, a body cannot be born, and through the combination of these six elements, a body functions fully. These six elements do not think, "I will establish solidity" and so forth. The body also does not think, "I was created by these six conditions." But by these conditions, the body arises.

Gampopa asks us to examine from this point of view. And so from this point of view we ask, where is Self, where is the Ego? Is it in the earth, water, fire, air, space or consciousness element? The Ego does not exist in any one of these, does it? Reflecting in this way allows us to discover the interconnectedness of phenomena. This is what is called the relative level of phenomena. As we come to know the nature of phenomena, we gain a sense of wisdom. To develop wisdom we must investigate phenomena for ourselves. Try the mediation below and explore for yourself.

First think, 'I am here'. Look now just at the hand. Investigate carefully and ask which part of what you are looking at is the hand. Is it the thumb, or little finger, or what about the skin, or the bones? Is the hand contained in any one of these by itself? Then look at different parts of the whole body and think, 'this is my hand, this is my head, this is my leg,' and so forth until finally you think, 'this is my body.' After you divide your body into many separate pieces ask, 'where am I, where is the Self, which piece of this body is me?

From looking at things in this way we gain a sense of real wisdom. From that we come to know the root cause of suffering and the root cause of peace, harmony and joy. This gives us the opportunity to understand how to become free from suffering.

Furthermore, how many lifetimes does it take to complete these twelve elements of interdependence? The Ten Noble Bhumis Sutra says:

*Ignorance and mental formation are related to the past. Consciousness through feeling occur in the present. Craving and so forth through existence are related to the future.
Then the cycle continues.*

Without karma this life would not happen. That is why “*ignorance and mental formations are related to the past.*” Because of previous karma cause that we created, we obtained the life that we have now.

“*Consciousness through feeling occur in the present.*” We cannot function in this life without consciousness. With consciousness we have: name and form; the six increasing fields (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, physical appearance, mental); contact; and feeling. Through these we interact. We function and feel like and dislike; happiness and unhappiness; satisfaction and no satisfaction. We live with these and create karma cause.

“*Craving and so forth through existence are related to the future.*” How we do things in this life today, determines what comes afterwards. Related to what we do this year, is what we will experience next year. Likewise, the things we do in this life cause our experiences in the next life. Birth, aging and death are all part of this process and accordingly it goes around.

We can experience these twelve interdependent links in one moment, or in three lifetimes or more. Through our habitual tendencies we keep ignorance fresh and alive; this is samsara, our state of confusion, the unenlightened mind. The cycle continues until we disrupt ignorance and then when we do end ignorance, all the links cease. And with the cessation of samsara, arises the liberation of the mind of nirvana.

The Interdependence of Nirvana

The interdependence of nirvana is in reverse order. When one realizes all phenomena as the nature of pervading emptiness, then ignorance ceases. When that ceases, everything respectively ceases until aging and death.

Pervading emptiness does not exist outside of the twelve interdependent links. The whole nature of these twelve interdependent links is emptiness. Birth and growth, existence and ceasing, all exist together in a very contradictory nature, but they do all exist together.

What is birth and what is growth? What is existence and what is the ceasing? If you separate these pairs you cannot find either of them singly alone. There is no independence of existence of only birth, or of only growth. Death and cessation cannot be present independently from birth and existence which is why we use the term ‘illusionary existence’. Death does not exist independently from birth or aging, and since that nature does not exist independently, that nature is called emptiness.

It is the same when we investigate our own minds. Look at your mind when the mind is depressed and try to find where the depression is in the mind. Investigate and see if it exists independently. Or when you feel fear, does it exist independently? Because we are not enlightened and have no realizations yet, depression and fear are very strong and seem so solid and powerful. We may be able to understand intellectually that the nature of the depression or fear is illusory, but until we cultivate the mind of enlightenment and have some realizations, we will continue to suffer.

Through skillful analyses and reasoning, we can implement Dharma practice and the teachings. We can come to appreciate ourselves and realize that we are very fortunate to have a precious human life and to have met the Dharma teachings which guide us out of samsara. We can recognize that this opportunity of a human life is something very special. We are not attempting to delude ourselves and make something special out of something that is not. Rather, we recognize how very fortunate we truly are.

Once we have this understanding, we build confidence through the recognition that depression and fear are not permanent. They are not permanent because they are not independent. It all exists as illusory nature. A good analogy is smoke and fire. It is like having a lot of smoke coming right at you all at once. It can be overwhelming. But if you look carefully to see the cause of the smoke, the situation becomes clearer and instead of fighting the smoke, you can fight the source of the smoke. Look at your own mind in this way. Look beyond the feelings of depression or fear to see the cause, to see the fire of the disturbing negative mental habits. Then once you know the cause of the smoke, the smoke itself can be seen as illusory and insubstantial in nature.

We need to develop determination and strength of mind to purify our negative habits and not connect to them. If we attach ourselves to our negative habits, then no matter how much we work to free ourselves from suffering, it will not happen. We need to have the resolve to sacrifice our negative habits. If we do not have the strength to sacrifice our negative habits, then no matter how much we know, it will remain merely intellectual knowledge and will be nothing special. This is why we first must study and understand how things operate. Once we have some understanding, then we can build determination saying, 'I can do it, I *should* do it, I should do it *now*.' This determination becomes the tool to achieve knowledge of enlightened interdependence which causes ignorance and suffering to cease.

We should try to make things easy for ourselves, but instead we make them difficult. Suffering is difficult. Instead of remaining in samsara and suffering, work at making things easier for yourself. Work at appreciating your human opportunity. Work to develop confidence in yourself that you are something special and that you really can accomplish mental and emotional change. Do not become attached to being special, but rather utilize being special. Attachment just becomes another cause of suffering, so you need to develop skill.

...then ignorance ceases. When that ceases, everything respectively ceases until aging and death.

When ignorance ceases there is no craving and no grasping. We recognize the illusion as such and as a result do not create negative karma. It is like chasing a mirage, if we know it is a mirage we do not chase it because we recognize that it is nothing. But as long as we see the mirage as real, we chase it. As soon as we realize there is nothing solid, fixed and permanent, then we understand that we act and think due to complete confusion and delusion and this understanding weakens the delusion.

It is the same within all of samsara. We achieve enlightenment step-by-step. First we build determination and strength, next we work to sacrifice our bad mental habits at the very first moment they arise. No matter how much we listen to Dharma teachings and no matter how many books we read, we will not see any progress without breaking through our bad mental habits. We will not go one step further if we do not disrupt the negative mental patterns. So sitting in meditation for half an hour to an hour, chanting mantra, doing visualization and so on, are all methods to break the bad habits which are the causes of suffering.

As is said: When ignorance ceases, then mental formation ceases, and so forth. When birth ceases, then aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, suffering, mental unhappiness, and distress all cease. Thus, the vast aggregate of suffering ceases.

If there was no birth, then we would not have to worry about death and aging. But we do age and even if we lived a thousand years, we still would age. When we say that someone does not look their age, that they look so young, that is illusionary. People age and die no matter how young looking they appear. So live without this delusion.

With physical age, we grow old and will one day die. But negative emotions never grow old and will not die until we force them to age and die. I wish to emphasize this point as it is very important. We might think that as we grow old our negative emotions also grow old and that they will cease when we die. This is wrong. Our negative emotions are alive and remain fresh from life to life and continue to make us miserable and physically incapable.

Mentally our afflictions and emotions remain fresh and potent and we suffer because of them. So when we are physically capable of doing practice and meditation, of sitting and doing prostrations and so on, we should use this body to do as much as possible and purify negative thoughts. If we do this we will age beautifully and joyfully and then we will die beautifully and joyfully.

We do not become Buddhist for the purpose of creating a large number of Buddhists. Our purpose for becoming Buddhist is to learn the methods and practices to become a better person, to know how to live happily and in harmony. Without having peace in the mind, it is not possible to behave harmoniously in society or in the family. So first we must achieve harmony within our mind by practicing Dharma, by implementing it in our lives. Attending teachings, reading Dharma books, or chanting mantra, of course have

great blessing, but without putting an emphasis on purifying negative thoughts, it very difficult to get rid of harmful thoughts which are so stubborn and sticky.

I urge you to put these teachings into practice. For your own benefit work at weakening negative mental habits. Seek to develop and practice loving-kindness, compassion and bodhicitta. Become a person with wisdom. This is the purpose of the Dharma.

*Taught by Khenchen Konchog Gyaltsen at the TMC, date unknown.
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