

Introduction to Chapter 1 of *GongChig* and the Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma

One time, the Buddha said that monks who have been practicing for one hundred years should practice the same things as a monk who just started today. So for me, too, every day is a new beginning. When I start practicing each morning I think, “I am just a beginner.”

The first chapter of *GongChig* mentions that the minds of sentient beings are limitless. If we look at our individual minds, they are very mysterious. We cannot see the mind; we cannot grasp it. Yet mind is the basis of all our work and effort. It is the basis of our experience of happiness and suffering. Regardless of whether one studies and practices Buddhism, mind is the mode of abiding of all phenomena for *every* sentient being (meaning those who have consciousness or mind). Everything manifests from there. So the Buddha taught on that basis. The layers of the mind are so limitless! If we just look back at our own minds to see how many thoughts manifest every day, we cannot imagine the number. If we were to look to our own mind, we would be surprised at the countless varieties of thought that arise every moment. Therefore, the Buddha taught many varieties of teachings related to these different levels of the mind, so that the mind could be understood.

In actuality, there is only one basic mode of abiding, the nature of all phenomena, just as there is only one sky. Anywhere we go, space is space. North, west, south, east – any direction we go, space is there. But because we are in different locations, we see a large variety of different shapes and colors. In the same way, mind sees many different things and has limitless experiences depending on the location and level of our individual thoughts. In order for us to realize that quality of the mind, the Buddha taught the relative state of the teachings and the absolute state. All those teachings were manifested because the mind is limitless.

When we go through the teachings, we sometimes see that they are a little contradictory. The Buddha taught this one time, taught that another time, and the third time he taught something else entirely. So that later followers would not be confused by these apparent contradictions, the great commentators like Nagarjuna explained why the Buddha taught this way – for this level the Buddha taught this teaching, and depending on that level the Buddha taught that way. It is said that teaching are like the rain that falls from clouds in space. Basically, all rain has the same nature; it all consists of the same water. But depending on the place that the rain falls, the taste becomes different. Similarly, the Buddha always taught the same meaning from the level of the mode of abiding of the absolute state. But because of the listeners’ own states, they would hear and interpret it differently. We know this from our own experience. When you outside after a big lecture, you hear people say things like, “Oh, I didn’t hear *that*.”

The basic purpose of all this is to dispel confusion. When we are deluded about the real nature of phenomena and how they function, we encounter undesirable conditions and face suffering. This is because we are out of the mode of abiding, we go too far from our real nature, and then suffering manifests from this delusion. Peace and harmony manifest from the mode of abiding, the very nature of our minds. This can be demonstrated so well: when we have some kind of pure love and compassion, not related to emotions, peace and harmony naturally come in the mind. This is because love and harmony are the very mode of abiding of the nature of mind. When our minds are closer to the mode of abiding, the true nature of reality, then there is harmony and we feel comfortable, natural, and not artificial. When our minds are more artificial and emotional, that is, more deluded, then we feel uncomfortable.

The Buddha’s teachings are the main instrument for seeing the nature of reality. As long as we are not getting closer to the mode of abiding, the nature of reality, then we are going farther away and encountering obstacles, suffering – all the undesirable conditions. This is not just true for Buddhists, but for every sentient being, everyone who has a consciousness or mind. Whether the

Buddha explained it or not, it has always been this way. Since we are deluded as to this nature, we will experience suffering no matter how we try to get rid of it. No matter how much we work, there is no end; we just have to live with it. It is like the ocean. As long as there is an ocean, there will be no end of waves, no matter how much we build. We want the ocean and we don't want the waves, but this is not possible. This is the Buddha's essential teaching regardless of which level is being taught. As I mentioned, there are endless layers of mind, so a lot of teachings had to be taught. Every individual has different experiences, so the Buddha taught in ways that relate to them all.

What all this means is cause and effect. The Buddha said everything depends entirely on cause and effect. Whatever act we perform becomes a cause to bring about an effect, whether consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, we have to be aware of what we do and how we act. Always be mindful. Briefly, there is nothing that exists in this world that does not depend on causes and effect. No matter what we say about modern technologies – going to the moon or computers – they are all cause and effect. Nothing exists beyond that. Because everything depends on cause and effect, everything is free from duality, the two extremes of dualism and eternalism.

In Buddhist terminology, these are called *samsara* and *nirvana*. Samsara is the cyclic state of confusion. We go round and round just repeating the same things. We think we are doing so much, that we are so advanced but still we just repeat the same things day and night, year after year. For instance, the four seasons repeat all the time. No matter how powerful technology is, we cannot change the four seasons. Nirvana is the cessation of the cause of suffering. A mind that has dispelled delusion, which is clear, and which knows right from wrong stops creating the cause of suffering. At the moment the cause of suffering no longer exists in the mind, that mind is called the state of nirvana. But if that mind is deluded through ignorance and keeps creating the cause of suffering it is called samsara. So long as the delusion remains, one cannot be free from the suffering.

Since everything depends on cause and effect, it is all momentary and a lot of things can manifest. Some masters can show miracle powers, do a lot of special things, because everything depends on cause and effect. Sometimes, when there is enough space or a feeling of happiness in our own deluded minds, we feel the time is very short. When some suffering or undesirable conditions occur, we feel it lasts very long, even if the time is actually short. This shows how the mind projects.

This is very helpful to me even though I have been studying and practicing for many years. When I see these explanations, I find it very helpful to investigate our lives, our nature, carefully. It is not like a belief system where if you believe it, you'll get it and if you don't believe it, you won't get it. This is how our lives actually are. It helps so much to know that we are all the same. We are like one family. Everyone we see wishes to have happiness. It is helpful to know that every being wants to be free from suffering. It doesn't matter what you believe, what you eat, what you wear, who you are. Universally, we are all basically the same. That is why we say the prayer, "May all sentient beings, boundless as the sky, have happiness and the causes of happiness. May they be liberated from suffering and the causes of suffering."

The Buddha taught 84,000 categories of the teachings. Every individual has 84,000 types of afflicting emotions and the Buddha taught all these teachings to purify them. That number is used just to convey the idea. We really have limitless afflicting emotions and, therefore, the Buddha taught countless teachings. So, we have to study and practice all these teachings. For example, we may have some kind of sickness in the body that could be called a wind, phlegm, or bile disorder. In one person, these disorders can combine together, like having a fever and being cold at the same time. The doctor should know how to diagnose them all. When the diagnosis is done well, medicines that relate to all the different types of sickness can be given. If one is

missing, the person cannot be cured. Similarly, we need teachings related to all the different afflicting emotions.

Depending on the disciples, the Buddha turned the three wheels of teachings: the first, second and third turnings.

* The first is called the Four Noble Truths, which can be related to the Buddha's life story. He was born as a prince, a regular person from a rich and powerful family. In his life, he had everything he wanted or needed. His father gave him everything to make him happy. He remained in the kingdom this way until he was 29. Then he saw an old person who could not see or hear well. He saw someone very sick and full of pain. He saw someone who had died, and the suffering of their family and friends. He investigated why these particular people had these experiences while he was so comfortable. Through those investigations and contemplations, he decided that what was really needed was a way to be free of these sufferings. He thought to himself, "Right now, I am young, physically and mentally talented, but this will not last long. I will be the same as these suffering persons. There must be something to prevent this from happening." With this kind of wisdom, this big question mark, he left the kingdom. Not out of hatred, not out of weakness, but out of great wisdom and compassion.

For six years, he went through every hardship – going without clothes, without food, without drink. He thought, "This is not the solution to freedom from suffering. Neither were luxuries and comforts the way to freedom from inevitable sufferings." Finally, he realized that it is the mind that must be understood. This is extremely difficult to do. Just see, even these days – no matter how modern technologies have advanced, they cannot show your mind. Maybe some movement of the brain and nervous system can be shown, but the nature of mind itself cannot be shown directly. So, he put great importance on realizing that very nature and meditate. That's what is called "meditation" – familiarizing oneself with that nature, digging at that nature.

Such a profound, vast nature! And the Buddha was able to directly reveal the nature of the mind, limitless as space. There, he got unconditional love and compassion for all sentient beings. "As I need peace and happiness, so all sentient beings need the same things. There is no difference. As I dislike suffering, so all of them dislike suffering. There is not a single difference." On the basis of that great, powerful, pure, limitless, pristine wisdom, every single cause and condition was seen without mistake – that cause of suffering, the nature of suffering, the cause of happiness, and the nature of happiness. From that wisdom, the Buddha taught all those teachings. So, then, the Four Noble Truths – suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the cause of cessation – are the way it is, how reality manifests, and how we experience it. This was not just the Buddha's invention, but rather it is the law of the universe.

* When the monks and nuns had practiced these teachings, their experiences became more advanced. Then the Buddha explained the second turning of the Wheel of Dharma, that everything is an illusion. Illusion does not mean something negative. It refers to there being no inherent existence no independent existence. This is like a rainbow. You can see it very clearly, with vivid color, but if you try to touch it, it disappears. Our mind is the same. We'd like to have things like fame, but when we go toward them, they escape us. The farther we go, they go farther still, like chasing a rainbow. The Buddha advises us not to be attached to that nature, but rather to work hard. When we say this is illusion, it doesn't mean that we should just be submissive, not that at all. We have to work so hard, harder than anything, to realize that which is not easy to see. Our minds are so habituated in one direction. Our habitual tendency is so powerful, so real, that even when our intellectual minds say, "That is illusion" our habitual tendency says, "No. It is real and I want to go there." So, therefore, we have to work really hard. This is the way to free ourselves from suffering and illusions. The Buddha taught this in the second turning of the Wheel in a very detailed way.

* Then, in the third turning, the Buddha said that all this is mind. In the first and second turnings, he didn't say so much about how limitless and vast the mind is. However, in the third turning, he explained that samsara is a mental state and nirvana is a mental state. When we say, "I like that" it is the mind that makes it pleasant; when we say "I don't like this" it is also just out mental projection. Our habitual tendencies direct the mind to like and dislike. We think that the qualities e like or dislike exist externally, but it is not necessarily like that. Sometimes, when our minds are more peaceful, we can see this.

*Taught by Khenchen Konchog Gyaltsen at the TMC in approximately 2012.
Transcribed and edited by Khenmo Trinlay.*