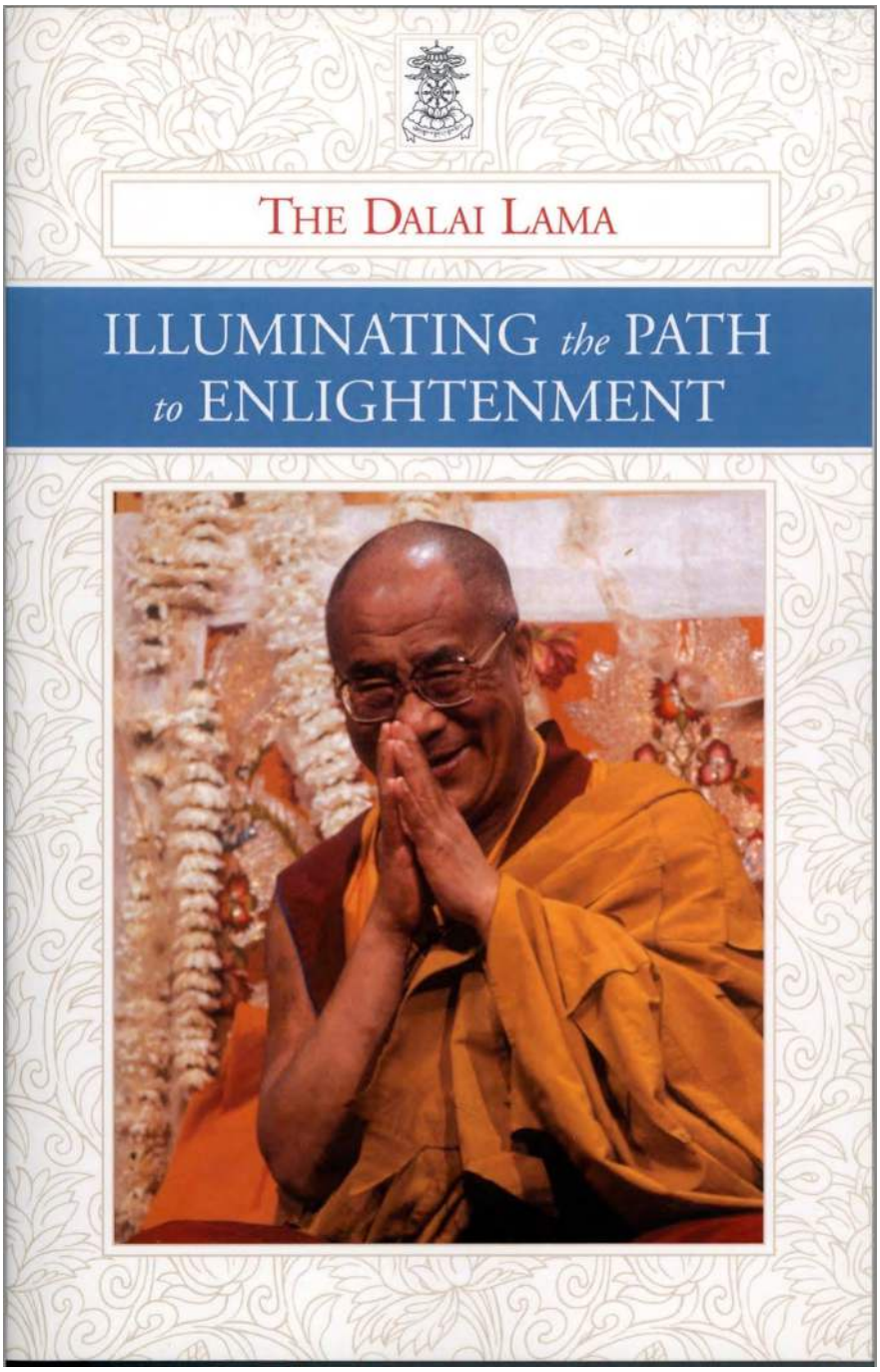

THE DALAI LAMA
ILLUMINATING the PATH to ENLIGHTENMENT

Chapter 1 General Introduction

Studying these teachings is a bit like doing construction work upon our mind. This kind of work is not always easy, but some of its aspects make it less difficult. For example, we don't need money, laborers, technicians or technology. Everything we require is already there, within our mind. Therefore, with the right kind of effort and awareness, mental development can be easy.

I sometimes feel a little hesitant about giving Buddhist teachings in the West, because I think that it is better and safer for people to stay within their own religious tradition. But out of the millions of people who live in the West, naturally there will be some who find the Buddhist approach more effective or suitable. Even among Tibetans, there are those who practice Islam instead of Buddhism. If you do adopt Buddhism as your religion, however, you must still maintain an appreciation for the other major religious traditions. Even if they no longer work for you, millions of other people have received immense benefit from them in the past and continue to do so. Therefore, it is important for you to respect them.

The teachings we are studying here are based on two texts: *A Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* by the Indian master, Atisha Dipamkara Shrijnana and *Lines of Experience*, by Lama TsongKhapa.

The skilful and compassionate Shakyamuni Buddha taught diverse types of Buddhadharma within a collection of 84,000 scriptures for the diverse mental dispositions and spiritual inclinations of his listeners. The essence of all these teachings is presented in such excellent treatises as Atisha's *Lamp for the Path*, which presents the systematic approach of an individual on the path to enlightenment.

With this as a basis, Lama TsongKhapa composed three versions of lamrim texts: an extensive version known as the *Great Exposition of the Path to Enlightenment*; a medium-length version known as the *Middling Exposition of the Stages of the Path*; and the text we are studying here, the *Short Exposition of the Stages of the Path*, which is also called *Lines of Experience* or *Songs of Spiritual Experience*.

Although I am the one explaining the texts we'll be studying here, you don't necessarily have to see me as your spiritual teacher. Instead, you can take my explanations to heart by relating to me more as a spiritual friend or colleague. Furthermore, don't simply believe what I say without question, but use it as a basis for personal reflection and, in that way, develop your understanding of the Dharma.

Whenever we engage in teaching, studying or listening to the Buddhadharma, it is very important to ensure that we adopt the correct motivation and attitude within our hearts and minds. We do this by taking refuge in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) and reaffirming our generation

of the mind of enlightenment (the altruistic intention) through reciting the following verse three times:

I take refuge until I am enlightened
In the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.
By the positive potential I generate
Through studying these teachings,
May I attain buddhahood for the benefit of all.

It is also traditional at the beginning of a teaching to recite verses making salutations to the Buddha, such as those that appear in Nagarjuna's text, *Fundamentals of the Middle Way*. At the conclusion of this text, there is a verse that states, **"I salute the Buddha who revealed the path that pacifies all suffering."** The Buddha presented the path that pacifies all suffering in the following way.

Since the sufferings we all wish to avoid result from fundamentally mistaken ways of viewing the world, the way we eliminate them is by cultivating a correct understanding of the nature of reality. Therefore, in this verse, Nagarjuna salutes the Buddha for revealing the path that shows us how to cultivate a correct understanding of the nature of reality.

1.1 The Purpose Of Dharma Practice

What is the purpose of the Dharma? Just like other spiritual traditions, Buddhadharma is an instrument for training the mind—something we use to try to work out the problems that we all experience; problems that originate mainly at the mental level. Negative emotional forces create mental unrest, such as unhappiness, fear, doubt, frustration and so forth; these negative mental states then cause us to engage in negative activities, which in turn bring us more problems and more suffering. Practicing Dharma is a way of working out these problems, be they long-term or immediate. In other words, Dharma protects us from unwanted suffering.

Buddhadharma means bringing discipline and inner tranquility into our mind. Therefore, when we talk about transforming our mind and developing inner qualities, the only way we can do this is to utilise the mind itself. There is nothing else we can use to bring about such change.

Thus, we should realise that much of what we do not desire—unwanted events, unhappiness and suffering—actually comes about as a result of our mistaken way of viewing the world and our destructive thoughts and emotions. These negative minds create both immediate unhappiness and future suffering as well.

Underlying all of this is a fundamental ignorance, a fundamentally flawed way of perceiving reality. In Buddhism, this is called "self-grasping," or "grasping at self-existence." Since this is the case, the way to eliminate negative aspects of mind and the suffering they create is to see through the delusion of these mental processes and cultivate their opponent—the wisdom that is correct insight into the ultimate nature of reality. Through culti-

vating this insight and applying it as an antidote, we will be able to dispel the suffering and undesirable events in our lives.

To succeed in this, we must first recognise what the negative and positive aspects of mind are and be able to distinguish between them. Once we develop a clear understanding of the negative aspects of mind and their destructive potential, the wish to distance ourselves from them will arise naturally within us. Similarly, when we recognise the positive aspects of mind and their potential benefit, we will naturally aspire to gain and enhance these mental qualities. Such transformation of mind cannot be imposed on us from the outside but happens only through voluntary acceptance and great enthusiasm inspired by a clear awareness of the benefits to be gained.

Time is always moving, minute-by-minute and second-by-second. As time moves on, so do our lives. Nobody can stop this movement. However, one thing is in our own hands, and that is whether or not we waste the time that we have; whether we use it in a negative way or a constructive way. The passage of time through which we live our lives is the same for all of us and there is also a basic equality between those of us who are a part of this time. The difference lies in our state of mind and motivation.

Proper motivation does not come about simply by our being aware that one kind of motivation is right and another wrong. Awareness alone does not change motivation. It takes effort. If we make this effort wisely, we will attain a positive, desirable result, but unwise effort is akin to self-torture. Therefore, we need to know how to act.

This issue of making a wise use of effort is very important. For example, even external development, such as the construction of a building, requires a tremendous amount of diligence and care. You need to take into account its exact location, the suitability of the environment, the climate and so forth. Having taken all those factors into account, you can then build a reliable and appropriate structure.

When you make an effort in the realm of mental experience, it is important to first have a basic understanding of the nature of mind, thoughts and emotions, and also to take into account the complexity of the human physiological condition and how it interfaces with the surrounding environment.

Therefore, it is important for you to have a wide, comprehensive knowledge of things so that you don't exert all your effort blindly pursuing your goal on the basis of a single point. That's not the way of the intelligent, the way of the wise. The way of the wise is to exert effort on the basis of much wider knowledge.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, there are more than one hundred volumes of *Kangyur*—sutras attributed to the Buddha himself—and more than two hundred volumes of *Tengyur*—the collection of authoritative commentaries written by such Indian masters as Nagarjuna and Asanga. If you were to distill the meaning of all of these sutras and their commentaries and incorporate them into your practice, you would make tremendous strides in

terms of realisation and spiritual progress, but if you treat all this great literature simply as an object of veneration and seek instead some smaller text on which to base your practice, then although you will receive some benefit, your spiritual progress will not be that great.

1.2 Intellectual and Experiential Understanding

It is important to be able to differentiate between two levels of understanding. One is the superficial, intellectual level, where on the basis of reading, studying or listening to teachings, we distinguish between negative and positive qualities of mind and recognise their nature and origin. The other is the deeper, experiential level, where we actually cultivate and generate positive qualities within ourselves.

Although it can be challenging to develop an intellectual understanding of certain topics, it is generally easier because it can be cultivated merely by reading texts or listening to teachings . Experiential understanding is far more difficult to develop, since it comes about only as a result of sustained practice. At the experiential level, your understanding is also accompanied by a strong component of feeling; your understanding is essentially a felt experience.

Because experiential understanding is thus accompanied by powerful emotions, you can see that although many emotions are destructive, there are positive emotional states as well. Actually, human beings could not survive without emotion. Emotion is an integral part of being human; without it, there would be no basis for life. However, we also know that many of our problems and conflicts are entangled with strong emotions. When certain emotions arise within our hearts and minds, they create an immediate disturbance, which isn't only temporary but can lead to negative long-term consequences, especially when we interact with other people. These negative emotions can also damage our physical health.

When other types of emotion arise, however, they immediately induce a sense of strength and courage, creating a more positive atmosphere in general and leading to positive long-term consequences, including our health. Putting aside the question of spiritual practice for the moment, we can see that even from the perspective of mundane day-to-day life, there are destructive emotions and those that are constructive.

The Tibetan term for Dharma is *chö*, which has the literal connotation of "changing," or "bringing about transformation." When we talk about transforming the mind, we are referring to the task of diminishing the force of destructive thoughts and emotions while developing the force of those that are constructive and beneficial. In this way, through the practice of Dharma, we transform our undisciplined mind into one that is disciplined.

1.3 The Basis for Transformation

How do we know that it is possible to transform our mind? There are two bases for this. One is the fundamental **law of impermanence**; that all

things and events are subject to transformation and change. If we examine this more deeply, we will realise that at every instant, everything that exists is going through a process of change. Even though, for example, we speak of yesterday's person as existing unchanged today, we are all aware at a gross, experiential level of the laws of impermanence; that, for instance, even the earth on which we live will one day come to an end.

If things and events did not have the nature of changing from moment to moment, we would be unable to explain how transformation takes place over time. When we reduce vast passages of time down to very brief ones, we can realise that things are actually changing from moment to moment. Modern technology helps us see some of these changes; the development of a biological organism, for example, can be observed through a microscope. Also, at a subtle theoretical level, certain observations indicate the extremely dynamic nature of physical reality. It is this fundamental law of nature—impermanence—that creates the potential for our own change, development and progress.

This transient and impermanent nature of reality is not to be understood in terms of something coming into being, remaining for a while and then ceasing to exist. That is not the meaning of impermanence at the subtle level. Subtle impermanence refers to the fact that the moment things and events come into existence, they are already impermanent in nature; the moment they arise, the process of their disintegration has already begun. When something comes into being from its causes and conditions, the seed of its cessation is born along with it. It is not that something comes into being and then a third factor or condition causes its disintegration. That is not how to understand impermanence. Impermanence means that as soon as something comes into being, it has already started to decay.

If you limit your understanding of impermanence to something's continuum, you will comprehend only gross impermanence. You will feel that when certain causes and conditions give rise to something, it remains unchanged as long as the factors that sustain its existence remain unchanged, and begins to disintegrate only when it encounters adverse circumstances. This is gross impermanence.

However, if you deepen your understanding of impermanence by approaching it at the subtle level—the moment-to-moment change undergone by all phenomena—you will realise how as soon as something comes into being, its cessation has also begun.

At first you might feel that coming into being and coming to cessation are **contradictory** processes, but when you deepen your understanding of impermanence, you will realise that coming into being (birth) and cessation (death) are, in a sense, simultaneous. Thus, the fundamental law of impermanence (the transitory nature of all phenomena) gives us one basis for the possibility of transforming our minds.

The second premise for the possibility of transforming our minds is again one that we can perceive in the reality of the external physical world, where we see that certain things are in conflict with others. We can call this the law of contradiction. For example, heat and cold, darkness and light and so forth are opposing forces—enhancing one automatically diminishes the other. In some cases this is a gradual process, in others, instantaneous. For instance, by switching on a light, darkness in a room is immediately dispelled.

If you look at the mental world of thoughts and emotions in the same way, you will again find many opposing forces, such that when you encourage and develop certain types of emotions, those that contradict them automatically diminish in intensity. This natural fact of our consciousness, where opposite forces contradict one another, provides another premise for the possibility of change and transformation.

When we take two types of thought or emotion that directly oppose one another, the question arises, which reflects the true state of affairs and which is a false way of relating to the world? The answer is that those thoughts and emotions that are strongly grounded in experience and reason are the ones with truth on their side, whereas those that are contrary to the way things exist, no matter how powerful they may be at any given time, are actually unstable. Since they lack valid grounding in experience and reason, they do not have a firm foundation.

Also, if we take two kinds of emotion that directly oppose one other and examine them to see what distinguishes one from the other, another feature we notice is that they differ in their long-term effects.

There are certain types of emotion that give us temporary relief or satisfaction, but when we examine them with our faculty of intelligence—the insight that enables us to judge between long- and short-term benefits and shortcomings—we find that in the long run they are destructive and harmful; they cannot be supported by reason or insight. The moment the light of intelligence shines on destructive emotions, they no longer have any support.

There are other types of emotion, however, that may seem a bit disturbing at the time but actually have long-term benefits, and are, therefore, reinforced by reason and insight, supported by intelligence. Therefore, positive emotions are ultimately more powerful than negative ones because their potential for development is greater.

These two premises—**the laws of impermanence and contradiction**—allow us to see the possibility of achieving transformation within ourselves.

1.4 Investigating the Nature of Reality

All this suggests the importance of having a deeper knowledge of the nature of the mind and its various aspects and functions in general, and the nature and complexity of emotion in particular. Also, since we realise that many of our problems arise from a fundamentally flawed way of perceiving and relating to the world, it becomes important for us to be able to examine

whether or not our perception accords with the true nature of reality. Understanding the true nature of reality is crucial, as it is our perception of reality that lies at the heart of how we relate to the world. However, reality here means not just the immediate facts of our experience and environment but the entire expanse of reality, because many of our thoughts and emotions arise not only as a result of the immediate physical environment but also out of abstract ideas.

Therefore, in the Buddha's teaching, we find a great deal of discussion on the nature of reality[1] in terms of the eighteen constituents, the twelve

---

[1] Understanding the **nature of reality** often involves analysing it through various frameworks. Three key frameworks used in this analysis are the **eighteen constituents**, the **twelve sources**, and the **five aggregates**. These frameworks help practitioners to deconstruct the conventional perception of self and phenomena, leading to insight into their true nature, which is characterised by impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta).

The Eighteen Constituents (Dhatus)

The eighteen constituents provide a detailed categorisation of the components of experience:

1. **Six Sense Bases (Ayatanas):**
   - Eye (cakkhu)
   - Ear (sota)
   - Nose (ghana)
   - Tongue (jivha)
   - Body (kaya)
   - Mind (mano)
2. **Six Sense Objects:**
   - Visible forms (rupa)
   - Sounds (sadda)
   - Odours (gandha)
   - Tastes (rasa)
   - Tangible objects (photthabba)
   - Mental objects (dhamma)
3. **Six Consciousnesses:**
   - Visual consciousness (cakkhu-vijnana)
   - Auditory consciousness (sota-vijnana)
   - Olfactory consciousness (ghana-vijnana)
   - Gustatory consciousness (jivha-vijnana)
   - Tactile consciousness (kaya-vijnana)
   - Mental consciousness (mano-vijnana)

These eighteen constituents cover the entire range of sensory and mental experiences, helping to analyse how perception arises and functions.

The Twelve Sources (Ayatanas)

The twelve sources are a subset of the eighteen constituents, focusing on the interaction between sense bases and sense objects:

1. **Six Internal Sense Bases:**
   - Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.
2. **Six External Sense Objects:**
   - Forms, sounds, odours, tastes, tactile objects, and mental objects.

The twelve sources emphasise the relational aspect of perception, showing how internal faculties interact with external stimuli to produce experience.

The Five Aggregates (Skandhas)

The five aggregates represent the components of personal experience and identity:

1. **Form (Rupa):** Physical form, including the body and external objects.
2. **Feeling (Vedana):** Sensations or feelings that are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.
3. **Perception (Samjna)**: The process of recognising and labelling objects.
4. **Mental Formations (Sankhara):** Volitional activities, including thoughts, emotions, and intentions.
5. **Consciousness (Vijnana):** Awareness of sensory and mental objects.

The five aggregates illustrate how what we consider to be the "self" is actually a collection of changing processes rather than a static entity.

Nature of Reality

By examining reality through these frameworks, practitioners can gain insight into the nature of existence:

- **Impermanence (Anicca):** All components are transient and subject to change.
- **Suffering (Dukkha):** Clinging to these impermanent components leads to suffering.
- **Non-Self (Anatta):** There is no permanent, unchanging self underlying these components.

sources, the five aggregates and so forth and how it relates to the practitioner's quest for enlightenment. If the Buddhist path were simply a matter of faith and cultivating deep devotion to the Buddha, there would have been no need for him to explain the nature of reality in such technical and complex terms. From this perspective, then, **the Buddha's teaching can be described as an exploration of the nature of reality**.

Just as scientific disciplines place tremendous emphasis on the need for objectivity on the part of the scientist, Buddhism also emphasises the importance of examining the nature of reality from an objective stance.

You cannot maintain a point of view simply because you like it or because it accords with your preset metaphysical or emotional prejudices. If your view of reality is based simply on fantasy or conjecture, there will be no possibility of your being able to cultivate that view to an infinite level.

When you are engaged in the Buddhist path of the exploration of the nature of reality, there are principally two faculties at work in your mind. One is the faculty of investigation, which subjects reality to analysis. In Buddhist language this is described as "wisdom," or "insight." Then there is the faculty of "method," or "skilful means," which is the faculty that allows you to deepen your courage and tolerance and generates the powerful motivational force that sustains you in your spiritual quest.

Question. Your Holiness, you said that all phenomena are subject to impermanence. Is the pure, unobstructed nature of mind also subject to impermanence? Does this nature of mind have a birth and a death?

His Holiness. When we speak about the nature of mind in a Buddhist context, we have to understand that it can be understood on two different levels—the ultimate level of reality, where the nature of mind is understood in terms of its emptiness of inherent existence, and the relative, or conventional, level, which refers to the mere quality of luminosity, knowing and experience.

If your question relates to the mind's conventional nature, then just as the mind itself goes through a process of change and flux, so does the nature of mind. This already indicates that the nature of mind is an impermanent phenomenon. However, if you are asking about the mind's emptiness, then we need to consider that even though the mind's emptiness is not a transient phenomenon—that is, not subject to causes and conditions—it cannot be posited independent of a given object.

In other words, the emptiness of mind cannot exist independently of mind itself. The emptiness of mind is nothing other than its utter lack of intrinsic, or inherent, existence. Therefore, as different states of mind come and go, new instances of the emptiness of mind also occur.