Chapter 5 Refuge, Karma And Precepts

5.1 Taking Refuge

Lines of Experience: Verse 11

> After death, there is no guarantee that you will not be reborn in one of the three unfortunate realms . Nevertheless, it is certain that the Three Jewels of Refuge have the power to protect you from their terrors. For this reason, your taking of refuge should be extremely solid and you should follow its advice without ever letting (your commitments) weaken . Moreover, (your success in) so doing depends on your considering thoroughly which are the black or the white karmic actions together with their results and then living according to the guides of what is to be adopted or rejected. I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate yourself in the same way.

Here, the text points out that the answer to the question of where you will go after death is determined by your own karmic actions, not only of this life but also of your previous lives. On this point, Vasubandhu has written that since all of us have enormous collections of karma accumulated over many past lives, we all have karmic potentials to take rebirth in the lower realms of existence as well as in the more fortunate realms.

What factors determine which karmic collection will ripen first? Vasubandhu said that the strongest, or most dominant, karmic collection, will ripen first. If your positive and negative karma are of equal strength, then the karmic actions to which you are most habituated will ripen next. If the level of familiarity of your karmic actions is also equal, then the karma that will ripen next is whichever you accumulated first. This is how karma determines your future rebirths and whether, for example, you will be reborn in one of the three lower realms, that is the hell, hungry ghost [Skt: preta] or animal realms. Although explanations of these unfortunate realms of existence may be found in abhidharma texts such as Vasubandhu's Treasury of Manifest Knowledge (Abhidharmakosha), you should investigate the descriptions of the location and nature of these realms to see how literal and accurate they are.

The second sentence of Verse 11 reads, "Nevertheless, it is certain that the Three Jewels of Refuge have the power to protect you from their terrors." This obviously refers to the practice of taking refuge in the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. To take refuge, two conditions must be present—fear of rebirth in the three lower realms and faith in the power of the objects of refuge to protect you from this threat.

Therefore, to take refuge successfully, you must have some understanding of what these objects of refuge are. As Buddhist practitioners, we must first understand the possibility of there being such a thing as a Buddha, and also the possibility of enlightenment. The key factor here is an understand-

ing of the nature of Dharma, because Dharma is the actual refuge. Once you understand the nature of Dharma, you can also understand the possibility of Sangha and its perfected state, the Buddha.

Generally speaking, we do not want to experience fear, apprehension or anxiety. However, fear is a complex emotion involving many factors. There is one category of fear or anxiety that is totally groundless and is born from an over-active imagination or some kind of paranoia or overly suspicious mind. This kind of fear is completely unnecessary and needs to be eliminated. Then there is another type of fear, which stems from encountering a real threat. If there is no possibility of overcoming this danger and you have to face it no matter what, fear is not an appropriate response and is, in fact, quite pointless; all it does is paralyse you.

However, the type of fear that arises because you are alert to a particular danger can also motivate you to act—for example, to seek protection or escape. This type of fear is not only justified; it can be positive and beneficial. This is the kind of fear you need in order to take refuge properly. We deliberately cultivate a sense of fear of rebirth in the three lower realms, and this inspires us to seek refuge from this danger.

The text speaks about having a "solid" refuge in the Three Jewels; this means a refuge that is stable and firm. The key thing in developing a stable and firm practice of refuge is a good understanding of dependent origination and, to a certain extent, emptiness.[22] By contemplating the teachings on dependent origination and emptiness, you will see clearly the possibility

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[22] **Emptiness** (Sanskrit: śūnyatā, Pali: suññatā) is a profound and central concept that refers to the absence of inherent, independent existence in all phenomena. This teaching challenges the perception that things have a fixed, intrinsic nature and instead posits that everything is interconnected and contingent upon various conditions.

Key Aspects of Emptiness

1. **Absence of Intrinsic Existence:**
   - Emptiness means that all phenomena lack inherent existence; they do not possess a permanent, independent essence. This understanding stems from the doctrine of dependent origination, which states that everything arises in dependence upon causes and conditions.
   - Example: A table is empty of inherent existence because it depends on wood, craftsmanship, and other conditions for its existence.
2. **Madhyamaka Philosophy:**
   - The Madhyamaka (Middle Way) school, founded by Nagarjuna, is a primary source for the philosophical exposition of emptiness. Nagarjuna's seminal work, (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way), systematically deconstructs the notion of inherent existence and affirms that emptiness is the true nature of reality.
   - Emptiness is often expressed as "the emptiness of emptiness," meaning that even emptiness itself is not an absolute or independent entity.
3. **Practical Application:**
   - Realising emptiness is key to overcoming attachment and aversion, which are rooted in the mistaken belief in inherent existence. This realisation helps dissolve the ego and the dualistic perception of self and other, leading to compassion and wisdom.
   - In meditation practice, contemplation on emptiness helps to deepen insight and move towards enlightenment.
4. **Emptiness and Form:**
   - The Heart Sutra, a well-known Mahayana text, succinctly states, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." This paradoxical statement highlights that while phenomena are empty of inherent existence, they do appear and function in the conventional world. Emptiness is not a nihilistic void but a dynamic interdependence.

Conclusion

Emptiness is a profound teaching that reveals the interconnected and contingent nature of all phenomena. Understanding and realising emptiness is crucial for dissolving ignorance and delusion, leading to liberation from suffering and the attainment of enlightenment. Through philosophical study and meditative practice, one can gradually develop insight into this essential aspect of the Buddhist path.

of buddhahood. In this way, you will gain a deep understanding of the nature of Dharma and a recognition of Sangha and Buddha. Once you have developed full confidence in the power of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha to protect you from the suffering of the three lower realms and entrusted them with your spiritual care, your refuge is solid and you have truly become a practicing Buddhist.

If, however, your confidence in the Three Jewels weakens and doubts about their ability to protect you arise, you can no longer claim to be a true practitioner of Buddhadharma. (Dependent Origination)[23]

5.2 Observing The Law Of Karma

Once you have taken refuge in the Three Jewels, your main responsibility is to observe the law of karma and abstain from the ten negative actions. Verse 11 concludes: "Moreover, (your success in) so doing depends on your considering thoroughly which are the black or the white karmic actions together with their results and then living according to the guides of what is to be adopted or rejected. I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate your- self in the same way."

There are different kinds of karmic actions and various ways of categorising them. Since we all share the same fundamental nature, which is the natural aspiration to be happy and not to suffer, actions leading to happiness are generally considered to be positive (virtuous) while actions leading to

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[23] **Dependent origination** is a fundamental principle that explains the interconnected nature of reality and the process by which suffering arises. It posits that all phenomena arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions, and nothing exists independently or in isolation. This teaching is central to understanding the nature of existence and the path to liberation.

Key Aspects of Dependent Origination

1. **Interdependence:**
   - Everything arises from a web of interdependent causes and conditions. This interconnectedness means that no single entity or phenomenon exists in isolation.
   - Example: A tree depends on soil, water, sunlight, and other conditions to grow.
2. **The Twelve Links:**
   - Dependent origination is often illustrated through the twelve links which depict the cycle of samsara (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). These links demonstrate how ignorance leads to suffering through a chain of dependent events.
   - **Ignorance** leads to **formations**, which lead to **consciousness**, and so on, ultimately resulting in **aging and death**.
3. **Causality:**
   - The principle emphasises causal relationships. Each phenomenon arises due to specific causes and conditions, and these conditions themselves are also dependent on other factors.
   - This is encapsulated in the formula: "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases."
4. **Impermanence and Non-self:**
   - Dependent origination reinforces the concepts of impermanence and non-self. Since everything is dependent on other factors, all phenomena are in a constant state of flux and lack an intrinsic, permanent self.
5. **Application to Suffering:**
   - Understanding dependent origination is crucial for understanding the nature of suffering (dukkha) and its cessation. By comprehending how suffering arises through dependent conditions, one can also understand how to dismantle these conditions to achieve liberation (nirvana).

Importance in Buddhist Practice

- **Wisdom and Insight:**
  - Insight into dependent origination is key to developing wisdom and is considered essential for attaining enlightenment. It involves seeing through the illusion of inherent existence and recognising the true nature of phenomena.
- **Ethical Conduct:**
  - Recognising the interconnectedness of all things fosters a sense of compassion and ethical responsibility. Understanding that our actions have wide-ranging consequences encourages mindful and compassionate behaviour.

Understanding dependent origination is crucial for grasping the Buddhist worldview and the path to overcoming suffering. It provides profound insights into the nature of reality and the means to achieve spiritual liberation.

pain and suffering are generally considered to be negative (non-virtuous). It is in their causal relationship to happiness and suffering that the distinction between positive and negative, or virtuous and non-virtuous, actions is made. With respect to the medium through which these positive and negative actions are created, we have actions of body, speech and mind.

Karmic acts involve multiple factors, such as initial motivation—the state of mind that impels an action—object of the action, execution of the act itself and state of mind on completion of the act. The nature of the karma created by an action differs depending upon whether these factors are virtuous, neutral or non-virtuous during the four stages. There can be thoroughly non-virtuous actions and thoroughly virtuous actions, but also actions that are partly virtuous and partly non-virtuous, and actions that are neutral as well.

The law of karma falls within the general law of causality. What distinguishes the karmic law of cause and effect from the more general one is the involvement of sentient beings. The law of karma refers to a causal nexus within which a sentient being acts with intelligence and motivation. This motivation sets certain actions in motion, which then lead to certain causations and results.

In discussing karma, therefore, the multiple factors such as motivation, execution of the act and so forth mentioned above must be taken into account. All these factors play a role in determining the nature of the karma created. Whenever a karmic act occurs, be it physical, verbal or mental, the act itself lasts only until its completion, but its consequences can arise much later on. Certain karmas ripen during the life in which they were created, others in the very next life and the rest in subsequent lifetimes. An important question in Buddhist philosophical discourse asks what is the factor that links the initial karmic act to its fruition? To explain this, is the notion of karmic "propensities," or "imprints," which means that even though an act is over once it has been completed, its imprint, or potentiality, remains.

There is much discussion in the Buddhist literature where this imprint is stored. Many Buddhist thinkers maintain that karmic propensities are stored and carried in the consciousness. When we look at the teachings on the twelve links of dependent origination, we find that fundamental ignorance gives rise to volitional acts; karma leaves an imprint on the consciousness; and consciousness gives rise to the subsequent links. Therefore, in this context, consciousness is the repository of karmic imprints.

However, there are times in one's existence when one is totally devoid of conscious activity, such as when a meditator is completely absorbed in single-pointed meditative equipoise on the direct realisation of emptiness. In that state, not a single part of the person's mind is polluted, because the meditator is in a state of uncontaminated wisdom. At such times, where could the karmic traces reside?

One of the most profound answers to this question is that the imprints are maintained simply on the basis of the mere sense of I that we all naturally have. This mere I is the basis of the imprints left by the karma that created them and is the link between the initial execution of the act and its fruition at a later stage. This issue is discussed extensively in Nagarjuna's Fundamentals of the Middle Way.

Lines of Experience: Verse 12

> The fullest strides (of progress) in actualising the supreme paths will not come about unless you have attained the working basis (of an ideal human body) that is complete with (all eight ripened favourable) qualities. Therefore, you must train in the causal (virtuous actions) that will preclude (your attainment of such a form) from being incomplete. (Furthermore) as it is extremely essential to cleanse away the stains of black karmic debts and downfalls (from broken vows) tarnishing the three gateways (of your body, speech and mind), and especially (to remove) your karmic obstacles (which would prevent such a rebirth), you should cherish continually devoting yourself to (applying) the complete set of four opponent powers (which can purge you of them). I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate yourself in the same way.

As I mentioned before, when we reflect upon the potential of our human life and the opportunity it affords us of attaining the highest spiritual aspiration of full enlightenment, we will realise the preciousness of our human existence, particularly that which is endowed with all favourable conditions. Therefore, we read in Verse 12, "The fullest strides (of progress) in actualising the supreme paths will not come about unless you have attained the working basis (of an ideal human body) that is complete with (all eight ripened favourable) qualities." The eight favourable qualities, or conditions, include longevity, physical attractiveness, high family, great wealth and power, trustworthy speech, fame and strength of body and mind.

The eighth favourable condition is birth as a male, but this needs to be understood in its proper context, because the ultimate aim of human existence is to attain full enlightenment with its omniscient wisdom. Should the opportunity to do this during a particular culture or era be greater as a female, this favourable condition would be reversed. Without this perspective, you might consider this point to be sexist.

5.3 Purification Of Negative Karma: The Four Opponent Powers

We then read, "(Furthermore) as it is extremely essential to cleanse away the stains of black karmic debts and downfalls (from broken vows) tarnishing the three gateways (of your body, speech and mind), and especially (to remove) your karmic obstacles (which would prevent such a rebirth), you should cherish continually devoting yourself to (applying) the complete set of four opponent powers (which can purge you of them)." With respect to

refraining from negative actions in the future, you can determine to maintain an ethical discipline that will protect you from committing negative acts in future, but what about the negative actions you have already committed? The only way to deal with these is to purify them.

There is a Tibetan saying, "If there's one good thing about negativities, it's that they can be purified." However, there are different degrees of purification. One possibility is to completely eliminate the potency of a karmic act such that it can never ripen at all. Another is to diminish the gravity of a serious negative karma such that its fruition will be less damaging. A third possibility is to delay the fruition of a negative karma that cannot be entirely purified.

The text refers to the four opponent powers that should be used when practicing purification:

1. The power of regret, or repentance.
2. The power of reliance.
3. The power of virtuous activity.
4. The power of resolve.

Of these four, the most important is the power of repentance. From the depths of your heart, you must feel a deep sense of regret for the negativities you have created, as if you had ingested poison.

The second power is that of reliance. If you look at the many negative actions you have created, most of them are related to either higher beings , such as the Buddha , or fellow sentient beings. Therefore , you practice the power of reliance by taking refuge in the Three Jewels and generating bodhicitta, feeling strong compassion for all sentient beings.

Third is the power of engaging in virtuous acts specifically aimed at purification. Whenever you engage in a virtuous act, you can direct it towards the purpose of purifying your negative karma. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the general custom is to engage in practices specifically associated with purification, of which six are often cited: reciting the names of buddhas, especially in the bodhisattva's confession sutra with prostrations to the Thirty-five Buddhas; reciting certain mantras , especially the one hundred syllable Vajrasattva mantra and the mantra of Vajra Akshobhy a (Mitukpa); reciting sutras; meditating on emptiness; making offerings; and commissioning the creation of images.

The fourth power is a deep sense of resolve that you will not indulge in such negative actions in the future, even at the cost of your life. During this practice, you may be aware that you might not be successful in completely abstaining from all of these negative actions or from a particular negative act, but while you are actually practicing purification, you should generate the strong determination that you will not indulge in such acts in future.

5.4 Question And Answer Period

Question. If a person is struck by an illness and commits an act of murder, what can that person do to purify his or her karma?

His Holiness. If by "illness" you mean some kind of psychological or emotional disturbance that leads to insanity, then from the Buddhist ethical point of view, such an act carries less karmic weight than a premeditated murder committed with full knowledge of the consequences. It is also lighter than a murder committed out of powerful negative emotions, which, again from the Buddhist ethical point of view, is also considered a complete act of murder.

Whatever the nature of the non-virtuous act, however, the practice you should do to purify the negative karma is universal and must contain the four opponent powers. When you practice the power of regret, remember the being against whom the act was directed and, employing all four powers, engage in virtuous acts, such as profound meditation on bodhicitta or emptiness. There are also general purification practices that apply in such cases as well. If you are not capable of cultivating the four powers and engaging in an act of purification, an alternative is simply to recite mantras or engage in some other positive act with the intention of purifying the karmic deed.

Question. With our knowledge of karma and the effect of good and bad deeds, how would a Buddhist society treat criminals?

His Holiness. From the Buddhist point of view, it is important to distinguish between the act and the individual who commits it. You can totally reject the act but you must maintain compassion towards the individual who did it, always recognising the person's potential for transformation and correction. Whatever method that society uses as a corrective means needs to be applied. However, the individual needs to be corrected in such a way that he or she learns to recognise that what they did was wrong; that it was a negative act. It is only on the basis of such recognition that correction can truly begin. From the Buddhist point of view, therefore, the death penalty is out of the question. Even the idea of life imprisonment is problematic, because it, too, fails to recognise the possibility of correction.