Chapter 6 Seeking Freedom From Cyclic Existence

6.1 Renunciation

Lamp for the Path: Verse 4

> Those who seek peace for themselves alone,
> Turning away from worldly pleasures
> And avoiding destructive actions
> Are said to be of middling capacity.

In this reference to turning away from worldly pleasures, we have to understand that according to Buddhism, even things and events that are conventionally regarded as pleasurable are ultimately all dukkha, that is they are of the nature of suffering and dissatisfaction. When the Buddha explains the path that transcends suffering, he is referring not only to painful experiences but also to conventionally pleasurable ones. This understanding is not unique to Buddhism, but is common to both Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools in India.

We can see this by looking at some of the meditation practices found in non-Buddhist traditions, particularly those aimed at cultivating the four levels of concentration.[24] The fourth level of concentration, in particular, is said to be a state where, for the meditator, pleasurable and painful experiences no longer exist. Then, of course, the higher levels of the four formless absorptions[11] are also beyond any sensations of pain or pleasure. Even though some non-Buddhist schools accept that one needs to transcend even pleasurable sensations, the unique understanding of Buddhism is that

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[24] The **four levels of concentration**, also known as the f**our dhyanas** (Sanskrit: dhyāna, Pali: jhāna), refer to progressive stages of deep meditative absorption. These levels are characterised by increasingly refined states of mental focus and tranquility.

The Four Dhyanas

1. **First Dhyana:**
   - **Characteristics:** Initial absorption where the mind is free from the five hindrances (sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, doubt).
   - **Factors:** Applied thought (vitakka), sustained thought (vicāra), rapture (pīti), pleasure (sukha), and one-pointedness (ekaggatā).
   - **Experience:** The practitioner experiences joy and happiness born from detachment and seclusion.
2. **Second Dhyana**:
   - **Characteristics:** A deeper state where applied and sustained thought are dropped, leading to a more unified and concentrated mind.
   - **Factors:** Rapture (pīti), pleasure (sukha), and one-pointedness (ekaggatā).
   - **Experience:** The practitioner experiences a profound inner tranquility and joy, with mental unification.
3. **Third Dhyana:**
   - **Characteristics:** Further refinement where rapture fades, leaving a state of deep equanimity and pleasure.
   - **Factors:** Pleasure (sukha) and one-pointedness (ekaggatā).
   - **Experience:** The practitioner experiences a calm, unruffled pleasure and equanimity.
4. **Fourth Dhyana:**
   - **Characteristics:** The highest level of meditative absorption where all sensation of pleasure and pain is transcended.
   - **Factors:** Equanimity (upekkhā) and one-pointedness (ekaggatā).
   - **Experience:** The practitioner experiences pure equanimity and mindfulness, free from emotional disturbances.

Importance in Practice

- **Path to Liberation:**
  - These meditative states are not the ultimate goal but serve as powerful tools for cultivating mental clarity, stability, and insight, which are essential for achieving enlightenment.
- **Foundation for Insight (Vipassana):**
  - The stability and concentration developed through the dhyanas provide a firm foundation for the practice of vipassana (insight meditation), where the nature of reality is investigated and understood.

the very condition upon which these experiences arise is also of the nature of suffering and therefore the basis of dissatisfaction.[25]

"Destructive actions" means all karmic actions that perpetuate the cycle of conditioned existence; practitioners of middling capacity generate the genuine aspiration to seek freedom from it. They seek to engage in a path that undercuts the process generated by fundamental ignorance and to reverse the whole causal nexus of ignorance, volitional karmic acts and their subsequent sufferings. All the practices related to this spiritual goal are common to practitioners of middling capacity, the term "common" indicating that these practices are preparatory, or preliminary, stages for the Mahayana practitioner.

When practitioners cultivate the recognition that the emotional and mental afflictions[4 & 15] are the true enemy and that underlying them is fundamental ignorance, they then engage in the methods for eliminating this ignorance. Practitioners recognise that as long as they remain under the control of the afflictions, they will never be free of dissatisfaction and suffering. If, based on this recognition, practitioners then generate a genuine and deeply felt aspiration to seek liberation from this bondage, that is true renunciation. This is a sentiment and practice unique to the Buddhist path.

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[25] The **four formless absorptions** are advanced meditative states that go beyond the four dhyanas, leading to progressively subtler levels of mental absorption. These states are characterised by the meditator's detachment from physical form and materiality, focusing instead on formless mental phenomena.

The Four Formless Absorptions

1. **Infinite Space:**
   - **Description:** In this state, the meditator transcends the perception of material form and focuses on the boundless nature of space. The mind perceives an infinite, all-encompassing space.
   - **Experience:** The meditator's consciousness is absorbed in the limitless expanse of space, transcending the physical body and material world.
2. **Infinite Consciousness:**
   - **Description:** Moving beyond infinite space, the meditator focuses on the boundless nature of consciousness itself. The infinite nature of the mind's awareness becomes the primary object of meditation.
   - **Experience:** The meditator experiences an all-encompassing awareness, with consciousness itself perceived as boundless and infinite.
3. **Nothingness:**
   - **Description:** The meditator then transcends the perception of infinite consciousness and focuses on the concept of nothingness or the absence of anything substantial.
   - **Experience:** The meditator's consciousness becomes absorbed in a state where there is a perception of "nothingness," a profound sense of the absence of any objects or phenomena.
4. **Neither Perception nor Non-Perception:**
   - **Description:** This is the most subtle and refined of the formless absorptions. The meditator enters a state where it is difficult to distinguish between perception and non-perception. It is an extremely subtle level of consciousness.
   - **Experience:** The meditator's awareness is so refined that it transcends the ordinary distinctions of perception, resulting in a state that is neither fully perceptive nor completely non-perceptive.

Importance in Buddhist Practice

- **Advanced Concentration:**
  - These formless absorptions represent advanced stages of meditative concentration, which require a high degree of mental discipline and tranquility.
- **Preparation for Insight:**
  - While the formless absorptions themselves are not the ultimate goal, they prepare the mind for deep insight (vipassana) by providing a stable and refined focus.
- **Path to Liberation:**
  - Understanding and mastering these absorptions can help practitioners transcend the cycle of rebirth (samsara) and move towards enlightenment (nirvana).

6.2 Understanding The Nature Of Cyclic Existence

Lines of Experience: Verse 13

> If you do not make an effort to think about true sufferings and their drawbacks, you will not properly develop a keen interest to work for liberation. If you do not consider the stages whereby (true) origins of all suffering place and keep you in cyclic existence, you will not know the means for cutting the root of this vicious circle. Therefore, you should cherish exuding total disgust and renunciation of such existence by knowing which factors bind you to its wheel. I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate yourself in the same way.

The sufferings referred to in the first sentence are t**he three levels of suffering**. **The first is the suffering of suffering**—the obvious and evident painful experiences and sensations that we all experience. **The second is the suffering of change**; **the third, the suffering of pervasive conditioning.**[26] In the context of cultivating true renunciation, we are really looking at

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[26] T**he suffering of pervasive conditioning** refers to the fundamental suffering inherent in conditioned existence, rooted in ignorance and the afflictions that arise from it.

Pervasive Conditioning

Pervasive conditioning refers to the omnipresent nature of suffering within the cycle of samsara (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). This type of suffering is not necessarily about immediate physical or emotional pain but is a more profound and subtle form of suffering embedded in our very existence due to being under the influence of karma and mental afflictions.

- **Conditioned Existence:** Everything in samsara is conditioned, meaning that all phenomena arise dependent on causes and conditions. This conditioned nature makes them impermanent, subject to change, and ultimately unsatisfactory (dukkha).
- **Omnipresent Nature:** This suffering is "pervasive" because it affects every aspect of our existence. Even pleasurable experiences are tinged with this form of suffering because they are impermanent and arise from conditions that will eventually change.

Fundamental Ignorance

Fundamental ignorance (Sanskrit: avidyā) is the root cause of suffering in Buddhism. It is a deep-seated misconception about the nature of reality.

- **Misunderstanding of Reality:** Ignorance involves a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of self and phenomena. It manifests as seeing the self and other phenomena as inherently existent, permanent, and independent, which contradicts the Buddhist teachings of anatta (non-self) and dependent origination.
- **Root of Afflictions:** This ignorance is the source of all mental afflictions (kleshas), such as attachment, aversion, pride, jealousy, and delusion. These afflictions distort our perception and actions, leading to the creation of negative karma and continued suffering.

Consequential Afflictions

Afflictions (Sanskrit: kleshas) are mental states that cloud the mind and lead to suffering and unwholesome actions.

- **Types of Afflictions:** Common afflictions include greed (rāga), hatred (dveṣa), and delusion (moha). These afflictions arise from ignorance and perpetuate a cycle of suffering by leading to unwholesome actions (karma) that result in further negative experiences.
- **Impact on Perception and Behaviour:** Afflictions distort our perception, making us see things in a way that leads to suffering. For example, attachment causes us to cling to impermanent things, and aversion causes us to push away experiences we dislike, both leading to dissatisfaction and suffering.
- **Cycle of Samsara:** These afflictions are the driving forces behind the cycle of samsara. They bind beings to the cycle of birth and rebirth by generating karmic actions that result in future rebirths, perpetuating the suffering of pervasive conditioning.

How to Overcome This Suffering

- **Wisdom (Prajna):** Developing wisdom involves understanding the true nature of reality, particularly the concepts of emptiness (śūnyatā) and dependent origination. This wisdom counteracts fundamental ignorance.
- **Ethical Conduct (Sila):** Practicing ethical conduct helps to reduce the negative actions driven by afflictions, thereby reducing the creation of negative karma.
- **Meditative Concentration (Samadhi):** Through deep meditation, practitioners can cultivate mental stability and clarity, allowing them to directly perceive the nature of reality and overcome afflictions.
- **Path to Liberation:** Following the Noble Eightfold Path and other Buddhist practices leads to the cessation of ignorance and afflictions, ultimately resulting in liberation (nirvana) from the cycle of samsara and its pervasive suffering.

the third category—the suffering of pervasive conditioning, which refers to the simple fact that our existence is controlled by fundamental ignorance and the afflictions to which it gives rise. As long as we are bound by these afflictions, there's no room for any lasting happiness. It is crucial, therefore, that we develop a deeply felt recognition of the afflictions as our true enemy; without it, we will not develop a genuine aspiration to seek freedom from them.

The Sanskrit term *bhagavan*, which is sometimes translated into English as lord, as in Lord Buddha, has the connotation of someone who has conquered and gone beyond the state of negativity and limitation. "Conquered" refers to the Buddha's victory over the four "demons," or obstructive forces [Skt: mara]:

1. **The afflictions** [Skt: klesha mara].
2. **Death (caused by conditioned existence)** [Skt: marana mara].
3. **The** five aggregates **(conditioned existence itself)** [Skt: skandha mara].
4. **The obstacles to overcoming the previous three,** the "divine youth demon" [Skt: devaputra mara].

Of these four obstructive forces, the main one is the afflictions. A buddha is someone who has totally overcome, or conquered, these four maras.

There are both gross and subtle forms of the four maras, as there are gross and subtle obscurations. The subtle are explained in terms of the subtle obscurations to knowledge [Skt: jneyavarana; Tib: she-drib].

Actually, the obstructive, or demonic, forces are the afflictions and anything that voluntarily embraces them, and when the afflictions and virtue come into conflict and we take the side of the afflictions, we ourselves run the risk of becoming a part of the obstructions. Also, if somebody willingly and enthusiastically embraces the afflictions and relishes the experience of having them in his or her life, that person will see practitioners trying to combat their own destructive, negative emotions as misguided or even crazy. Such a person, too, becomes a part of the obstructive forces. As Tibetan masters like to say, "Negative friends don't necessarily appear with horns on their heads." Negative friends are simply those who interfere with the spiritual practice of others.

If, then, you have a deeply felt recognition of the afflictions as the true enemy, the aspiration will naturally arise within you to free yourself from them and gain liberation. However, simply having the aspiration to be free is not enough. You also need to develop an understanding of whether such freedom is possible and whether you can cultivate it within yourself.

The afflictions and the karmic actions they produce are the cause of suffering; underlying them is fundamental ignorance. You need to develop a deep understanding of how the cause of suffering actually leads to its result. If you do not understand how cyclic existence comes into being and

how its sufferings arise, then even though you may want to gain freedom, you won't be able to understand how it can come about. Then you might become disheartened, because although you realise the nature of your bondage, you can't see the possibility of release.

There are many subtleties in the nature of fundamental ignorance, the ultimate cause of the afflictions and suffering, but basically, it is a flawed perception of our own existence and the world around us. The subtlest explanation of fundamental ignorance is that it is the mind that grasps at the true, inherent existence of our self and all other phenomena. We gain complete liberation by eliminating this fundamental ignorance from its root.

There are grosser levels at which we can understand no-self, such as the absence of the person as some kind of autonomous agent. Grasping at the self as an autonomous agent serves as a basis for other afflictions such as attachment and hostility, which can be eliminated, but true liberation can only occur by eradicating the subtlest grasping at self. Therefore, the text reads, "If you do not consider the stages whereby (true) origins of all suffering place and keep you in cyclic existence, you will not know the means for cutting the root of this vicious circle. Therefore, you should cherish exuding total disgust and renunciation of such existence by knowing which factors bind you to its wheel."

There are two key elements in the practice of renunciation—the cultivation of a sense of disillusionment with cyclic existence and an understanding of the causal mechanism of the origin of suffering. When you have generated this combination of disillusionment and understanding, you can envision the possibility of freedom. With this, you will experience a sense of joy, because not only can you see the possibility of release; you also have the confidence that there exists a path by which you can attain it.

It is in this context of the practice of the middling scope that the teachings of the Four Noble Truths are explicitly relevant. As we discussed earlier, the Four Noble Truths encapsulate the essence of the unique teaching of the Buddha. Lama TsongKhapa, in both the Great and Middling Expositions of the Stages of the Path, observed that the principle of the Four Noble Truths has been repeatedly stressed in many scriptures, both Mahayana and non-Mahayana, and that through the teachings on the Four Noble Truths, we can develop a deep understanding of the process of causation in both samsaric and liberated existence. Therefore, Lama TsongKhapa recommends that teachers impart to their students an understanding of the path on the basis of the Four Noble Truths.

The process of causation of the Four Noble Truths is explained in greater detail in the teachings of the twelve links of dependent origination, which we discussed earlier. It is possible to contemplate these teachings at three different levels. On one level, we can contemplate the twelve links in relation to the process of taking rebirth in the three lower realms, beginning from

fundamental ignorance obscuring the true nature of reality, which leads to the volitional negative acts that precipitate lower rebirths.

We can also contemplate the twelve links in relation to cyclic existence in general, because even positive karma can give rise to rebirth in cyclic existence. Finally, it is possible to contemplate the twelve links specifically in the context of the subtle obscurations to knowledge, where although the individual may have gained freedom from the afflictions, there is still continuity in physical, or conditioned, existence.

When we think of liberation, we should not feel that it exists somewhere outside of us, like some physical domain. Liberation has to be understood in terms of our own state of mind. We have already mentioned natural nirvana—the natural purity in all of us that serves as the basis of true liberation once all the afflictions have been eliminated [see pages 16 ff.]. When we go deeper into the meaning of the nature of liberation, or moksha, therefore, we understand it in terms of the ultimate nature of our own mind when all afflictions have been removed.

What lies at the root of our unenlightened[27] existence is our fundamental misconception of the ultimate nature of reality. Therefore, by cultivating correct insight into true nature of reality, we begin the process of undoing unenlightened existence and set in motion the process of liberation. Samsara and nirvana are distinguished on the basis of whether we're in a state of ignorance or wisdom. As the Tibetan masters say, when we're ignorant, we're in samsara; when we develop wisdom, we're liberated. The ultimate antidote for eliminating fundamental ignorance is the wisdom realising emptiness. It is this emptiness of mind that is the final nirvana.

Therefore, our ignorance of emptiness as the fundamental nature of reality, our ignorance of the emptiness of mind, is what traps us in cyclic existence, and knowledge of the emptiness of mind is what will set us free.

The Buddha taught the path that enables us to eliminate the afflictions and gain liberation on the basis of the Three Higher Trainings.[12] The direct antidote to fundamental ignorance is the wisdom realising no-self, the wisdom realising emptiness. This is not a mere cognition of emptiness but to a heightened realisation where we can experience emptiness directly.

To have such a direct and powerful experience of emptiness, we need single-pointed concentration. That's why we need the higher training in concentration, or meditation. To progress in the higher training in concentration, we need to observe the ethical basis—the higher training in morality.

The practice of morality enables us to accumulate merit and purify negativity, but in the context of the Three Higher Trainings,[12] its main purpose is to develop mindfulness and introspection. When we lead an ethically disciplined life, we are constantly applying these two faculties. As we sharpen

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[27] The term unenlightened existence is used by established Theravada scholars and other academics to denote life in samsara, considering shravakas and pratyekabuddhas to have attained enlightenment, although not the complete, fully-perfected enlightenment of buddhahood.

our mindfulness and introspection, we lay the foundation for the successful realisation of single-pointed concentration. The practices of morality, concentration and insight are all essential. The sequence is also definite: first, morality; then, meditative concentration; then, insight into emptiness.

6.3 Question and Answer Period

Question. You said that emotional afflictions[28] are the causes of suffering. Can we remove our afflictions without removing our emotions?

His Holiness. Definitely. For example, one of the antidotes to emotional afflictions[27] is meditation on emptiness. As we deepen our experience of emptiness, we get a powerful surge of emotion, which itself acts to counter the negative, or afflictive, emotions. We also find in Buddhist practice specific antidotes to specific problems. For example, we meditate on loving kindness to counter hatred and hostility, and on impermanence to counter strong attachment. In other words, the emotion of love is generated as an antidote to anger and the experience of impermanence as an antidote to attachment.

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[28] **Emotional afflictions**, also known as kleshas (Sanskrit) or kilesas (Pali), are mental states that cloud the mind and lead to suffering and unwholesome actions. These afflictions are obstacles on the path to enlightenment and are to be recognised, understood, and overcome through practice and insight.

Primary Emotional Afflictions

1. **Attachment (Raga/Lobha)**
   - **Description:** Excessive desire and clinging to pleasurable experiences, people, objects, or ideas.
   - **Impact:** Leads to greed, possessiveness, and dissatisfaction.
   - **Remedy:** Cultivating detachment and understanding the impermanent nature of things.
2. **Aversion (Dvesha/Dosa)**
   - **Description:** Hatred, anger, and ill will towards people, situations, or objects that cause discomfort or pain.
   - **Impact:** Leads to hostility, resentment, and aggression.
   - **Remedy:** Developing patience, loving-kindness (metta), and compassion.
3. **Ignorance (Moha)**
   - **Description:** Delusion or lack of understanding about the true nature of reality, ie the nature of self & phenomena.
   - **Impact:** Leads to confusion, misperception, and continued cycle of suffering.
   - **Remedy:** Cultivating wisdom (prajna) and insight into the nature of impermanence, suffering, and non-self.

Secondary Emotional Afflictions

Arise from primary afflictions and include a variety of mental states that further hinder one's progress on the spiritual path.

1. **Pride (Māna)**
   - **Description:** Overestimation of oneself and undervaluation of others.
   - **Impact:** Leads to arrogance, competition, and isolation.
   - **Remedy:** Practicing humility and recognising the interconnectedness of all beings.
2. **Doubt (Vicikicchā)**
   - **Description:** Skeptical uncertainty about the teachings, the path, or one's own ability to progress.
   - **Impact:** Leads to indecision, lack of commitment, and procrastination.
   - **Remedy:** Cultivating confidence through study, reflection, and practice.
3. **Wrong Views (Drishti/Ditthi)**
   - **Description:** Holding false beliefs or views that are contrary to the teachings of the Dharma.
   - **Impact:** Leads to misguided actions and further entrenchment in samsara (cycle of birth and death).
   - **Remedy:** Developing right understanding through learning and applying the correct teachings.

Additional Emotional Afflictions

Buddhist teachings often categorise various other mental states under the umbrella of kleshas, depending on the tradition and interpretation. These include:

1. **Jealousy (Īrshyā)**
   - **Description:** Envy towards others' success, happiness, or possessions.
   - **Impact:** Leads to resentment and unhappiness.
   - **Remedy:** Practicing sympathetic joy (mudita) and celebrating others' good fortune.
2. **Shamelessness (Ahrīkya) and Lack of Moral Dread (Anapatrāpya)**
   - **Description:** Disregard for ethical conduct and the consequences of one's actions.
   - **Impact:** Leads to unwholesome behaviour and harm to oneself and others.
   - **Remedy:** Cultivating a strong sense of ethics and moral responsibility.

One difference between the destructive, negative emotions on the one side and constructive, positive emotions on the other is that constructive, positive emotions have a strong grounding in valid experience and reasoning. In fact, the more we analyse these positive emotions, the more they are enhanced. Negative, afflictive emotions, by contrast, are usually quite superficial. They have no grounding in reason and often arise out of habit rather than reasoned thought processes.

Question. Does love dilute pain and suffering in the same way that light dispels darkness?

His Holiness. Perhaps the parallel is not that close, because light dispels dark directly and instantaneously; darkness vanishes the moment you switch on a light. The effect of love on pain and suffering is more complex and indirect. When we cultivate love and compassion, they promote within us strength and courage, allowing us to be more tolerant and able to bear hardship. This is how love helps us deal with and overcome pain and suffering. It's an indirect relationship.