Chapter 18 The Six Types of Suffering

(b) Contemplating the six types of suffering[24]

(i) The fault of uncertainty

Although you make big plans to insure your current and future pleasure in this world, and you work hard to realise those plans, you can never be certain how things will turn out. To illustrate this you should look at the relationships between yourself and others. As you cycle through samsara, passing from one life to the next, relationships change in totally unpredictable ways. Your close relatives, such as your father and mother in this life, become your enemies in a future life. People who are enemies to you now become your dearly loved parents later on. Every imaginable relationship is possible because you have been cycling through samsara since beginningless time, and you will continue endlessly until you attain emancipation. You have no control over these changes because it is all under the control of your karma.

Since relationships are constantly turning over in this way, there is nothing that you can count on. You cannot establish any relationship that is not destined to change in ways that you cannot foresee. Nāgārjuna said in his *Friendly Letter*:

> The father becomes the son, the mother becomes the wife,
> The enemy becomes a friend.
> Since everything turns around,
> There is nothing certain in cyclic existence.

Out of ignorance your mind perceives someone as an enemy; that person appears to be a definite, absolute, real, permanent enemy. All kinds of negative thoughts about this person arise, and you generate fierce anger and hatred. But in reality, as Nāgārjuna says, there is nothing essential that makes that person your enemy. It is merely a temporary perception or imputation based on transient causes and conditions. It is the same way with those you love. You perceive their closeness to you as their true, ultimate nature, and this brings attachment. But here, too, nothing is permanent. Eventually, "everything turns around".

Once you are under the power of hatred and attachment, you act in innumerable unwholesome ways to destroy those you hate and cling on to those you desire. The negative karma of these unwholesome actions is what drives you through unending, miserable lifetimes. All of this begins with ignorance: not knowing the true nature of cyclic existence. Once you see that this ignorance is the root cause of your suffering, you realise that there is no way to change those conditions without eliminating that cause.

If you had a relationship that was perfectly and unalterably reliable (something like an absolute, unchangeable, permanent friend who was completely favourable toward you and whose nature was completely trustworthy) then no matter what you did, no matter what happened to that person, no matter how long you were in relationship, his or her positive feeling and wish to bring you pleasure would never diminish. The friendship would never end because it was permanent, and it would never change because it was absolutely reliable. The sad thing is that you cannot find anyone like that within cyclic existence. That is the faulty nature of samsara. That is **the suffering of uncertainty**.

A famous story from the sutras illustrates how relationships change. It is the story of how Śāriputra, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, saw a family sitting down to dinner. The father of the family had his baby son sitting on his knee and was eating a fish he had caught in a pond behind the house. When he finished, the family dog got hold of the bones and was trying to eat them when the father noticed and began beating the dog.

With his supernatural knowledge, Śāriputra could see the previous lives of all of these beings, and he explained the scene this way. In the past the father had discovered his wife cheating with their neighbour and had killed the neighbour. The father's parents were deceased, but when they had been alive his the father had loved fishing in the backyard pond, and his mother

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[24] Tsongkhapa mentions here that in the text called *Clear Words: Explanation of the "Friendly Letter"* by Mohāmati, it says that there are *seven* types of suffering. However, because the seventh merely gives a detailed explanation of the other six, he will explain six types of suffering, and that is the way you should do this meditation.

had been extremely attached to the family and home.

What Śāriputra saw, and explained to his disciples, was that the dead neighbour, who had been the man's worst enemy, had been reborn as the man's son and was sitting on his knee. The man's father had been reborn as a fish, which he had just caught and eaten. The man's mother, who was so attached to the family, had been reborn as the family dog and, having grabbed the fish bones, was now gnawing on her former husband. When the man beat the dog for taking the fish, he was beating his own mother.

That was the scene as Śāriputra perceived it. Looked at on one level, samsara appears to be a very funny place; Śāriputra even said that looking at this samsaric scene made him laugh. But in reality all the suffering of the world is rooted in the ignorance that misunderstands the nature of our relationships. The afflictions of attachment, hatred, and jealousy instigate a vast amount of harmful action, committed without any understanding of whom you are attacking and whom you are defending. There is no comprehension that the relationships with your worst enemies and your best friends are constantly changing; that **there is not a single relationship in cyclic existence that you can establish firmly, rely on, or trust.**

Even within this one short life everything changes back and forth. Friends become enemies and enemies become friends and you have no control over it. You are under the power of karma and afflictions. *The Tantra Requested by Subāhu* says:

> In a short span of time an enemy becomes a friend,
> And a friend becomes an enemy.
> Likewise, some become neutral,
> While those who were neutral become enemies,
> Or close friends.
> Knowing this, the wise never become attached.
> Rejecting the notion that they can find happiness in friends,
> They rest their minds in the pleasures of virtue.

Meditating on this, you should prevent the arising of attachment and hostility, which develop from making false distinctions between friends and enemies. You should recognise that there is nothing that is stable in cyclic existence. That will enable you to produce disenchantment with samsara and a sincere thought of renunciation. That is the main thing.

Instead of making these distinctions between friends and enemies, which have no basis in reality, you should **direct your mind in the virtuous direction. This means cultivating a feeling of caring, concern, friendship, and equanimity toward all living beings.** Such feelings grow naturally when you realise that **all beings are enmeshed in suffering as a result of their sharing this fundamental misunderstanding about how the world is constantly changing, not realising that all the relationships and objects they rely upon for their happiness are ultimately going to disappoint them.** Once you gain a glimpse of this reality you want to free yourself from that situation. You also want to help others because you see that they are stuck in the same condition. That attitude is the basis of virtuous action, and that is the direction in which you should turn your mind.

(ii) The fault of insatiability

Cyclic existence is a suffering condition because no matter where you turn you will not find any lasting satisfaction. Nāgārjuna's *Friendly Letter* says:

> Each one of us has drunk more milk
> Than would fill the four oceans.
> Those in samsara who follow the ways of ordinary beings
> Will seek to drink much more than that in the future.

From the Buddhist point of view, each one of us has been cycling through life after life since beginningless time. Countless times we have been born as humans or as animals suckling at our mother's breast. If you collected all the mother's milk that just one of us has drunk in those numberless lifetimes, it would more than fill all the oceans of the world. Now, consider how much mother's milk you will need to drink in the future if you do not begin to practice the path to emancipation. If you do not find a way out of this endless cycle, you will never drink your fill.

This, of course, is merely one example. Think of all the innumerable sources of pleasure and comfort you look to for satisfaction during one lifetime. Of all the so-called "wonders" of samsara (good food, beautiful clothes, a grand house, a devoted spouse, and so forth) there is not one that you have not experienced some time in the past. And think of the measureless pain, disappointment, and sorrow that you have experienced from beginningless time up to now; there is not one suffering that you have not tasted as well. Nevertheless, after all that experience of pleasures that bring no lasting satisfaction, and all the sufferings that arise from the ignorant quest for those pleasures, you still just want to enjoy yourself. None of these experiences has changed your attitude; you are still thinking about things the same way you have always done. It is as if all that endless experience of pleasure and pain has been completely wasted. It hasn't gotten you anywhere. You are still craving the same things, although by now it might have dawned on you that in the past those things never brought you satisfaction. It is the same routine, always craving more, and it just goes on and on.

When you think this way, you should begin to feel some disenchantment, some sorrow, some sadness. You should wonder, "How can I get out of this situation? How can I renounce this endless trap of cyclic existence"? Such questions will arise when you begin to see that all the wonders of cyclic existence have never brought you satisfaction and are only the basis for trouble.

Nāgārjuna says in the *Friendly Letter*:

> Know that attachment to your desires
> Is just like a leper afflicted with maggots,
> Who resorts to fire in hopes of relief,
> But finds no respite.

If a leper burns himself to relieve the pain of his disease it may help for a short while, but the resulting burn will only make things worse in the end. That is the kind of transient relief you get from indulging in sensual pleasures: it may diminish the pain of cyclic existence for a short while, but in the long term it makes things worse.

The *Compendium of the Perfections (Pāramitā-samāsa)* says:

> When you have obtained your desire,
> And indulged in it every day,
> Piling it up, but still you are not satisfied—
> What pathology is greater than that?

When you think about the sensual pleasures you seek to enjoy (such as food and sexual contact)) you are never satisfied by experiencing them just once. You always need to indulge in them over and over again. The problem is that no matter how many times you enjoy these pleasures, you can never get enough of them. You can accumulate vast quantities of food, clothes, or treasure, but you will never be satisfied. Often, the more you get the more you want, so that the craving for satisfaction actually leads to more and more dissatisfaction. Can you think of any sickness that is worse than that?

To a practitioner (one who meditates, who applies discriminating wisdom in order to understand how this process works) this perpetual dissatisfaction will appear to be a very great sickness indeed. Then the question becomes, "How can this sickness be cured"? The only treatment for this disease is the practice of the path.

Candragomin's *Letter to a Student* says:

> What realm of rebirth have we not visited hundreds of times?
> What pleasure have we not enjoyed many times before?
> What luxury have we not obtained, like a splendid white-tail fan?
> Yet, even though we have such things, still our desire increases.
>
> There is no suffering we have not experienced many times in the past.
> There is no desire that provides any being with complete satisfaction.
> There is no sentient being in whose womb we have not lain.
> Then how is it we samsaric beings are not free from attachment?

Today, people are so busy, scurrying around in such a rush; but for what? What is it they

spend their whole lives running after? The main thing they are seeking is a source of happiness that will finally bring them a full measure of satisfaction. That is the goal they all have in the back of their minds. But no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, no matter how many places you look; you never find complete satisfaction. Why? Because all of the actions you take in order to find this satisfaction are actually misleading you. All of these actions are done out of ignorance and bring you further under the power of attachment and hostility. Instead of bringing satisfaction, they only deliver more unhappiness and suffering.

But then, what is the best way to get full satisfaction, perfect satisfaction, everlasting and unchanging happiness? Where is the pure cause of pure satisfaction? That is what you should be looking for. The root of all the sufferings of cyclic existence is ignorance. From there, the obscuring afflictions and karma lead you down the road of endless sorrow. Therefore, to get at the cause of samsara you must remove ignorance from the root, and you do that through the cultivation and realisation of wisdom. **All of these meditations are designed to reveal the true causality of cyclic existence, and the true causality of emancipation. Is it possible to achieve complete cessation of the cycle of samsara? What is the method to do that? These are the things you need to concentrate on. When these are realised, all of your actions will be turned around and you will begin to behave in ways that ultimately lead to genuine, lasting happiness, instead of endless disappointment and pain.**

If you contemplate the following passage from *Aśvaghoṣa's Alleviating Sorrow (Śoka-vinodana)*, you will gain a deeper feeling of disenchantment with cyclic existence:

> Again and again in hell
> You drank boiling molten copper,
> In a quantity that would exceed
> Even the water in the ocean.
>
> When you were a dog and a pig,
> The filth that you ate
> Amounted to a great deal more
> Than Meru, the king of mountains.
>
> Because of separating from friends and relatives,
> You have cried in the realms of cyclic existence.
> The ocean would not be a big enough vessel
> To contain the tears that have fallen from your eyes.
>
> The heads that have been cut off,
> Due to strife between one side and another,
> If piled up, would reach so high,
> They would surpass the world of Brahmā.
>
> When you were a worm you were so hungry,
> You ate so much dirt,
> That if you poured it into the milky-white ocean,
> It would fill it to the brim.

And the *Array of Stalks Sutra (Gaḥḍa-vyūha-sūtra)* says:

> Remember all the bodies which in the past
> Were wasted due to your senseless desires.
> From now on, with the practice that aims for enlightenment,
> You should conquer desire with disciplined practice.
>
> Remember all the bodies which in the past
> Were wasted due to your senseless desires.
> Though as many buddhas as grains of sand in the Ganges have appeared,
> You have not pleased them, nor listened to what they taught.

You should contemplate this and understand it. All of the wonders of cyclic existence that you have experienced were all illusory. You have spent so much mental and physical energy over so many lifetimes, undergone so many hardships, just to enjoy those deceitful pleasures.

What a waste! All that effort has done nothing to help you; you remain in the same unhappy situation. Therefore, if you do not make an effort to change direction in this life, you will just continue going around again and again, endlessly wasting life after life. Contemplating this reality, you should generate regret and disenchantment with cyclic existence, and determine that in the future you will turn down a different path.

The famous Kadampa Geshe Chenngawa said:

> Noble teacher, since beginningless time how many different bodies have we taken? But up until now we have not had the experience of practicing the Mahayana teachings. Therefore, we must apply ourselves with diligence.

And Geshe Sangphuwa said:

You have had to face many ups and downs in this cyclic existence; do not place your hopes on this kind of experience.

> You should contemplate these ideas until an attitude of disenchantment with samsaric attractions arises, and even after it arises you should continuously cultivate it in practice. This means that you should survey the scope of your whole life (and then go beyond that to past and future lives) contemplating the cause and effect of the entire samsaric cycle. **You need to see clearly how samsara is a state of sorrow and disappointment, in which you have no freedom and no power over your own experience. When you see your true conditions very deeply, with the attitude that finds these miserable circumstances to be totally unsatisfactory, then you need to hold that thought, develop it and deepen it by continuously making it part of your practice. Once you have fully cultivated this attitude, wisdom will naturally lead you to a mode of behaviour that will take you in the right direction.**

(iii) The fault of repeatedly losing one's life

Once you take birth in a particular life form, in a particular body, you become attached to it, and you apply all your life's energy toward nourishing and protecting it. However, that body cannot be preserved and will not remain as you wish. As you travel through cyclic existence you will have to cast off your beloved body over and over again. As Nāgārjuna says in his *Friendly Letter*:

> Each one of us has left a pile of bones
> That would surpass Mount Meru.

If you piled up all the bones from all the bodies you have had in all your previous lifetimes, they would form a pile much greater than Mount Meru.

(iv) The fault of having to take rebirth repeatedly

Not only do you have to lose your body over and over again, but each time you have to be born again. Even though you may want this to be your last life, the cycle won't stop. Why not? Because you have created the causes and conditions to be reborn out of attachment, hostility, and ignorance. That karma will ripen, whether you wish it to or not. Nāgārjuna says in the *Friendly Letter*:

> If you tried to calculate the limit of mothers by counting
> With pellets the size of juniper berries, the earth would not be big enough.

Here Tsongkhapa comments that earlier scholars interpreted this quotation to mean that one single sentient being has been your mother countless times. Although that is also true, it is not the meaning of this particular quotation. Mahāmati's commentary, the Clear Words: *Explanation of the "Friendly Letter" (Vyakta-padā-suhṛl-lekha-ṭīkā),* cites a sutra that says:

> For example, monks, if someone took small pellets the size of juniper berries from this great earth, and set each one aside counting, 'This is my mother; this is the mother of my mother" and so forth; then, O monks, the ground of this great earth would be exhausted long before he reached the end of the lineage of mothers.

This direct quotation from the sutras shows that this image is meant to refer to the lineage of mothers and not to the number of times that one single being has been one person's mother, or how many different mothers one person has had over many lifetimes. Nevertheless, it is also

true that since beginningless time we have all been reborn numberless times, so **it is possible that all sentient beings have been your mother innumerable times in the past, and this is the way this teaching is often presented.**

Contemplating the endless cycles of suffering in this way will lead you to recognise the faults of cyclic existence and to become disenchanted with it. As Āryadeva says in the *Four Hundred Stanzas*:

> When you cannot see the initial cause
> Of even a single result,
> Then you see how vast are the causes of even one result.
> Who would not be frightened?

When you try to isolate the single, initial cause of a particular result (for example, your rebirth in this realm) you discover it cannot be determined. There are so many causes and conditions that contribute to that result. The web of intertwined causes and conditions, and of the causes of those causes, is so vast and deep that, if you could see this network in its entirety, you would certainly feel fear and aversion toward cyclic existence.

The commentary on this passage by Candrakīrti explains the meaning this way:

> It is correct to cultivate a constant disenchantment and to meditate on the true nature of this great lonely wilderness of samsara, in which it is so difficult to make one's way because of the dense thicket whose dimensions are impossible to grasp.

Cyclic existence is compared to a wilderness that seems almost impossible to escape from because it is filled with and surrounded by a multitude of obstacles. It is as if there were mountains, rivers, thorns, fire, and every imaginable obstruction, making it virtually impossible to get through this wilderness to the other side. As soon as you overcome one set of obstacles, you confront a completely new problem. Once you are born into samsara, you are trapped in just such a situation; although you want to get out, it is difficult to move.

But there is a way out. It begins by cultivating disenchantment with those circumstances. This leads to a powerful determination to find a way out. What you discover is that the way out is to "meditate on the true nature" of samsara, which means to reverse the ignorant conceptions that got you into that situation in the first place. Ordinarily, you perceive objects that produce suffering to be sources of pleasure and you become attached to them. You perceive things that are constantly changing to be permanent and reliable. You perceive impure, contaminated objects to be pure and wholesome. From these misconceptions arises the panoply of afflictions: attachment, aversion, pride, jealousy, and all the rest. When you meditate on their true nature, however, you begin to see these things as they really are: in the nature of suffering, impermanent, impure, and empty of any absolute, essential reality. If you meditate on these attributes, you will find your way through the thicket of cyclic existence to the other side.

(v) The fault of constantly fluctuating from high to low states

Not only are you compelled to take birth in cyclic existence over and over again, but you are constantly fluctuating between high and low states in a way that is totally out of your control. Nāgārjuna's *Friendly Letter* says:

> You may become Indra, worshiped by the world,
> But by the power of karma you will fall once more to earth.
> You may become a universal monarch,
> But once again you will become a lowly servant in cyclic existence.

Within the desire realm are a number of different classes of devas, or gods. The highest of these devas dwell at the peak of Mount Meru in a place known as the Heaven of the Thirty-three. It is given this name because there are thirty-three primary gods residing there. Chief among them is Indra, called the Lord of the Gods. He is said to ride upon a giant elephant that emanates thirty-two heads in order to carry the remaining gods of this realm. In this quotation Nāgārjuna is saying that you may have been born many times as this glorious and lordly Indra, and on those occasions you were worshiped by many beings. But when your life as Indra in the Heaven of the Thirty-three comes to an end, you will "fall once more to earth", meaning that by

the power of karma you will take a suffering rebirth, perhaps as a human, or perhaps as an animal or even a hungry ghost.

On a less exalted level, many human beings acquire great fame, wealth, and honour, and live in luxury comparable to that of the gods. All this is the result of their previous good karma. However, when the fruit of that good karma is exhausted, it will be their accumulated negative karma that is then ready to ripen. According to the Buddhist teachings, you may be born in a "heaven" or in a "hell", but these are not permanent conditions. It is your previous karma that causes any particular rebirth; when that karma is exhausted, that lifetime will end. Then you will take a new rebirth, which will depend on whichever karmic potential is strongest at the time. You may be born and live for many thousands of years as a deva in the blissful form or formless realms, where you experience no pain or any other form of gross suffering. But eventually that life will end and your brief respite from samsaric misery will abruptly end with it. Until you cut off karma at the root through the direct realisation of the wisdom that cognises the truth of the self and the truth of phenomena, there is no way to end the misery of fluctuating up and down within cyclic existence.

The *Friendly Letter* continues:

> You may linger long, tasting the joys of caressing
> The breasts and waists of heavenly maidens,
> But then again you will know the unbearable sensation
> Of the grinding, cutting, scraping engines of hell.
>
> You may reside at the peak of Mount Meru,
> Enjoying the feel of cushioned ground beneath your feet,
> But then again, think of the unbearable pain
> Of walking upon hot coals and rotting corpses.

These verses remind us that there is not much distance between the most blissful sensuous pleasures and the most hideous sufferings we can imagine. One night you are in a godly realm where the very ground is as soft as a feather bed and heavenly maidens await your pleasure; then you wake up the next morning sunk to your knees in a bed of hot coals. Between those two experiences there is not much distance; by the power of karma it can happen suddenly, just like that. When you awaken to that sudden, disastrous change, you desperately try to escape from that hellish scene, but there is nowhere to go. You are trapped in the misery of your own experience.

The images in this quotation come from descriptions we find in the scriptures. The "grinding, cutting, scraping engines of hell" refer to machine-like mechanisms that operate in, respectively, the Crushed Together Hell, the Black Line Hell, and the Very Hot Hell. In the god realms it is said that the ground is soft and bouncy, like walking on cushions. The "hot coals and rotting corpses" refer to two of the sixteen subsidiary hells surrounding the eight primary hot hells. The first is called Burning Ash Pit, where you sink up to your knees in hot coals. The second is Putrid Corpse Swamp, where you sink in corpse-filled mud up to the neck while sharp-beaked insects bore into your body.

Again, these hells are not permanent states of existence, but are experienced as a result of actions that an individual has taken in the past. For example, if you harmed other beings by burning them, that karmic potential might ripen into the experience of walking, for a long, long time, through a wasteland of burning hot coals. That agonising experience may last a long time, but eventually the karma that produced it will be exhausted.

Nāgārjuna continues:

> You may frolic in beautiful groves,
> Sporting with heavenly maidens,
> Then again, you find yourself in the forests of hell,
> Where the leaves are like swords slicing off feet, hands, nose, and ears.[25]

[25] This is another subsidiary hell called the Grove of Sword-leaves *(asipattravana; ral gri lo ma'i nags tshal),* where the leaves are swords, and when these are blown about by the wind they cut up one's body.

With beautiful goddesses
You may enter limpid waters decorated with golden lotuses,
Then again, you will be plunged into the scalding hot waters
Of the unbearable River with No Ford.[26]

You may attain the sensual ecstasy of the desire realm gods,
Or even the detached bliss of Brahmā,
Then again, you will meet unrelenting agony
As fuel for the fires of Avīci Hell.

All the beings of the desire realm crave and indulge in sensual pleasure. There are six levels of desire realm gods, beginning with the Heaven of the Thirty-three, and they all enjoy a very intense and blissful degree of pleasure.

The abodes of the Brahmā-level gods are part of the form realm. One is born there by attaining the meditative absorption of the *first concentration*. Beings in that state of existence still experience physical pleasure, but it is not sexual in nature. It is much more subtle and superior to sexual pleasure because it is a blissful bodily feeling that arises in association with the mental happiness of meditative absorption. In connection with that deep peacefulness of mind, the body also experiences this special kind pleasure. This feeling is called pleasure *free of sensual attachment*, and during that life beings have no experience of pain.

It sometimes happens that practitioners who attain this level of meditative absorption mistake the first concentration for actual emancipation, because they become attached to the blissful mental happiness and concomitant bodily pleasure they experience there. This is the highest physical pleasure one can have in the samsaric world; it is the most subtle, most peaceful, most blissful level of bodily pleasure. Above the level of the first concentration, feelings of physical pleasure do not exist; there is only mental happiness.

And yet, even if you attain that most subtle, blissful feeling, which is free of attachment to sensual experience, it is only a matter of time before you fall again into the agony of burning for millions of years in the fires of Avīci Hell where your body becomes like a burning log or the wick of a lamp. "Avīci" means "unrelenting", and this hell is given that name because from the time you are born there until that karma is exhausted there is not the slightest moment of respite from pain.

The quotations from Nāgārjuna conclude with the following stanza:

You may attain the status of the sun or the moon,
The radiance of your body illuminating the entire world,
Then again, you have to return to the pitch black darkness,
Where you cannot even see your own outstretched hand.

Though this stanza says that you may attain "the status of the sun or the moon", it does not mean that a being could literally become the sun or moon. This quotation is referring to the ancient Indian myth in which the light of the sun and the moon was thought of as radiating from celestial palaces contained within these heavenly bodies. According to this myth, the sun produces hot light because the palace it contains is made of glass whose nature is to produce heat, like a magnifying glass. And the moon produces *cool* light because its celestial palace is made of crystal glass, whose nature is to produce *cool* light.

Tsongkhapa makes the point that the light that illuminates the world is not made by a living being, and one cannot be born as the sun or the moon. However, in Buddhist cosmology there are beings whose bodies naturally emanate light. The devas of the second concentration in the form realm have bodies like that, and the three types of devas there are called Little Light, Limitless Light, and Bright Light. Also, during the *eon of evolution*, when the universe is coalescing and coming back to life, the first humans here in the southern continent of Jambudvīpa have very subtle bodies. They are born by *miraculous birth* and not from wombs; they consume *mental joy* instead of solid food; they have the power to travel in space; they have immeasurably long life spans; and light emanates from their bodies.

But even if you could attain a body so powerful it illuminated the whole universe, it would be

[26] This is another subsidiary hell consisting of an extremely hot river of ashes, difficult to cross.

just a matter of time until you were born into a place of utter and absolute darkness, such as the cold hells, where you cannot even see the end of your own outstretched hand.

This passage from the *Friendly Letter* offers many illustrations of how you are tossed up and down between the various conditions of cyclic existence. In one lifetime you may be enjoying divine bliss, but in the next moment find yourself immersed in agony. So it goes: up and down, up and down. The lowest and poorest become the highest. The highest fall to an in-between state, or to a lowly one. The main point is that there is nothing reliable about any condition in cyclic existence. There is no way to know where you will be in the next moment, and no way to control the process. Within cyclic existence there is nothing stable, permanent, worthy of attachment, worth making the central object of your whole life. No matter how much energy and effort you put into it, there is no worldly purpose that can ever bring everlasting peace and happiness. All of the apparently attractive objects and goals within cyclic existence are, in their very nature, unreliable, ready to collapse at any moment, and therefore in the nature of suffering.

Contemplating these circumstances, **you should see the entire range of cyclic existence as one huge jail. You should generate strong disenchantment with the reality that you are trapped within this prison, and make a powerful determination to get out of this situation. That is the main object of these meditations.**

In the section of the Vinaya called the *Bases of Discipline*, we find the story of four merchants from Śrāvastī, each of whom had his own special interest. The first was out to amass great wealth. The second wanted to build a fabulous house. The third wanted to make many friends. And the fourth wanted to find a pill for rejuvenation and longevity. The first merchant achieved his goal, became very wealthy, but then had every penny stolen by a powerful king, and finally ended his life as a beggar. The second merchant built a magnificent mansion, but it caught fire and was utterly destroyed. The third merchant became very popular and made many friends, but eventually they all deserted him and left him lonely and miserable. The fourth merchant, who wanted to live a very long time, ended up dead. Commenting on this parable the Buddha said:

> All accumulation in the end is spent.
> The elevated in the end falls down.
> The end of meetings is separation.
> The end of life is death.

Regardless of how rich, splendid, or beloved you may be, it all ends. No matter what you build, it finally deteriorates and declines. All things come to an undesirable end. This is the nature of cyclic existence.

(vi) The fault of having no companions

In the *Friendly Letter* Nāgārjuna tells his friend, the king:

> Thus, please understand that you will come to grief.
> Seize the light of the threefold lamp of merits.
> Otherwise you will be cast alone into endless darkness,
> Which neither sun nor moon can pierce.

He is telling the king that even though you have great wealth, power, and splendour, it is all destined to disintegrate. "You will come to grief" means that you have to die; you have to leave all of this behind. Rather than grasping at these worldly goals, he tells the king, seize the **"threefold lamp of merits". This metaphor can refer to maintaining pure ethical conduct of body, speech, and mind, or to the three trainings of pure ethical conduct, meditative stabilisation, and the wisdom that realises the true nature of reality. These latter three are the lights of the lamp clearing away the darkness of cyclic existence.** Without such light, even if you own the whole universe, in the end you will go alone into the darkness. Here, "endless darkness" refers both to the pitch black world of the lower realms, and to the darkness of ignorance, which entraps you in those suffering states.

In *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*, Śāntideva says about how we are alone in the end:

Although this body arose as one thing,
The bones and flesh with which it was created
Will break up and separate
How much more so will friends and others?

At birth I was born alone,
And at death too I shall die alone.
As this pain cannot be shared by others,
What use are obstacle-making friends?

At the time of birth you cannot bring friends along as companions. At the time of death you cannot say to your loved ones, "I am going to die now; you must die with me!" You have to go alone. No one can take a share of your misery. Therefore, what use are friends who only create hindrances?

Do not misunderstand what is being said here. Śāntideva is certainly not saying that you should not be friendly to other people, or look at other people as mere hindrances. Cultivating love and compassion for other beings is at the heart of the bodhisattva path. What is being criticised here is one's attachment to friends and loved ones based on the unrealistic expectation that they are the source of stable happiness. That attachment is the hindrance; that is the enemy. Out of that attachment you perform all kinds of negative actions, which create all the sufferings and all the obstacles to liberation. That is the point of this stanza.

The object here is to understand the situation of both yourself and others. This leads to developing compassion for others because you recognise how they are suffering just as you are. When you come to understand the nature of cyclic existence, it does not produce aversion to other living beings. Quite the contrary. It produces concern for their welfare and the determination to find liberation not just for yourself, but for all of the beings in the world, who are equally your friends.

The real friend, the best friend in cyclic existence, is virtue; virtuous mental qualities and virtuous actions. This is what leads to a better life, a higher rebirth, and finally to the total cessation of this suffering, samsaric life. That is the kind of friend you can rely on. That is where you should place your trust.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these six types of suffering can be sorted into three categories, which can be stated as follows:

1. **There is nothing in cyclic existence that can be trusted or relied upon to provide true and lasting benefit.** This can be divided into four parts:

1a. **There is no security in obtaining a body.** Wherever you are born in cyclic existence, your condition (whether high or low) will eventually change and you will have to take a new body. This corresponds to "the fault of having to take rebirth repeatedly"; the **fourth** of the six types of suffering.

1b. **There is no security in things that benefit or harm you.** Relationships with friends and enemies are not static and cannot be trusted. The dearest friend can suddenly change into the most undesirable enemy. This corresponds to "the fault of uncertainty"; the **first** of the six types of suffering.

1c. **There is no security in obtaining the wonders of cyclic existence, because high things eventually become low.** This corresponds to "the fault of constantly fluctuating from high to low states"; the **fifth** of the six types.

1d. **There is no security in companions, because when you die, you go without companions.** This corresponds to "the fault of having no companions"; the **sixth** type of suffering.

2. **However much you indulge in the pleasures of cyclic existence, in the end you will never find perfect satisfaction.**

- Corresponds to "the fault of insatiability"; the **second** of the six types of suffering

3. **You have been experiencing this suffering, samsaric nature since beginningless time.**
    - Corresponds to "the fault of repeatedly losing one's life" the **third** of the six types of suffering.

This condensed presentation gives you another format for meditating on these six unattractive qualities of cyclic existence. We have now considered the disadvantages of samsara in terms of eight types of suffering and the six types of suffering. In the next chapter we learn how to meditate on the nature of cyclic existence in terms of three types of suffering.