Chapter 19 Further Meditations on Suffering

(c) Contemplating the three types of suffering

All the sufferings of cyclic existence can be included within three types: the suffering of change, the suffering of suffering, and the suffering of conditionality.

(i) The suffering of change

The suffering of change is exemplified by the following example. When you have a painful open wound on your skin, the pain can be temporarily relieved by applying cool clean water. That relief from pain is experienced as a pleasant feeling. It is not really pleasure; it is just that the discomfort has lightened up a bit. And that relief, that feeling of pleasure, will not last long; soon it will change again into the suffering of pain.

In the same way, the experiences we ordinarily think of as pleasurable (eating, drinking, touching, or lying down) are not inherently, by their very nature, pleasant. There is no real, abiding, reliable pleasure there. What you experience as pleasure is really the temporary relief of a pain or discomfort, such as hunger or thirst. This temporary relief is what we experience as, and label as, pleasure. As soon as that relief stops, the underlying suffering reemerges, just as the pain of a wound returns a few moments after you have applied cool water. This is the suffering of change: all feelings of pleasure eventually change into suffering again.

The suffering of change does not only refer to the feeling itself (pleasant and unpleasant sensual feelings) but also includes other mental processes that arise together with those feelings, such as the main mind and the associated mental factors. Furthermore, it includes those contaminated objects that, when experienced, produce those feelings. All of these are included in the suffering of change.

Take, for example, your experience of being hungry. To soothe that discomfort you eat something. There arises as a result the mere feeling that you are experiencing pleasure. Concomitant with that sensory feeling of pleasure are various minds and mental factors. The entire body-mind complex that you experience as pleasure, as well as the food that generates the feeling of pleasure, is the suffering of change. It is the nature of this entire conditioned web of cause and effect that it will eventually change into more suffering. That is the suffering of change. In fact there is no real pleasure there; it is only the degree of suffering that has changed.

(ii) The suffering of suffering

Now consider what would happen to that open wound if you put some irritating substance on it, like salt water. The pain would flare up, becoming sharp and intense. This feeling is what we identify as suffering. Whenever something like this happens, the body or mind experiences an increased level of pain or anguish. That is what constitutes the suffering of suffering.

As we explained for the suffering of change, the suffering of suffering also includes the main mind and the mental factors that arise together with the feeling of suffering, as well as the contaminated objects that produce such a painful feeling.

The Abhidharma speaks of five types of feelings that beings can experience. There are two types of bodily feeling, which are based on the sense faculties. These are termed: (1) *unpleasant feeling*, a disagreeable bodily experience of pain; and (2) *pleasant feeling*, an agreeable bodily experience. Then there are two types of mental feeling. These are: (3) *mental happiness*, an agreeable mental experience; and (4) *mental unhappiness*, a disagreeable experience. Finally, there is (5) *neutral feeling*, an experience in between agreeable and disagreeable, which can be either physical or mental.

What we have seen in this and the previous section is that (2) pleasant feeling, along with its concomitant (3) mental happiness, are the *suffering of change*, because by their nature they change into suffering. And (1) unpleasant feeling, along with its concomitant (4) mental unhappiness, are the *suffering of suffering*; this is the pain and anguish we ordinarily speak of as "suffering". Now we turn to the *suffering of conditionality*, and as we shall see, this form of pervasive suffering also includes (5) neutral feeling.

(iii) The suffering of conditionality

You have an open wound. We know that if you put cool water on it, the pain will be reduced, and we call that experience a *pleasant feeling*. At the other extreme, if you rub salt into the wound, the pain sharply increases, and we call that *unpleasant feeling*. However, even without either of these two actions, you still have a big open wound. The very nature of that wound (its condition) is suffering. This is the suffering of conditionality, and it pervades all experience within cyclic existence; including neutral feeling, when you do not have a strong reaction one way or another to a stimulus. Another name for the suffering of conditionality is *pervasive suffering*, because all of cyclic existence is pervaded by this suffering nature.

The suffering of conditionality encompasses even neutral feelings, because they are inseparably connected to the so-called "negative tendencies". As we explained previously,[27] these negative tendencies refer to the potential you carry with you, in the form of karma and afflictions, to experience undesirable circumstances. Even neutral feelings are produced by karma, which itself was instigated by obscuring afflictions. And, as was the case with the other two types of suffering, the suffering of conditionality refers to the feeling itself (whether it be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral) and includes the entire psycho-physical complex (i.e., the body-mind continuum) that accompanies this feeling. **Every feeling, and the web of experience in which it is embedded, is the product of karma and afflictions.** Not only that, **this moment of experience carries with it the potential, in the form of afflictions, for future suffering**. **In this way, all experiences, including neutral feelings, are inseparable from the negative tendencies, the afflictions that will produce future suffering. This is why the suffering of conditionality is pervasive: there simply is no experience within cyclic existence, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, which is not rooted in, and carrying the future potential for, suffering.** From the highest formless realms down to the lowest hells, wherever sentient beings are born under the power of karma and afflictions, this is the pervasive condition.

Even when the present moment of experience is a neutral feeling, the potential for future suffering is embedded in that moment. **The very condition of being born into cyclic existence means that your psycho-physical aggregates are the results of previous karma and afflictions, and are the seedbed of future suffering experience. Until you completely get rid of obscuring afflictions from the root, that will remain your condition.**

Because you are entangled with these negative tendencies, when a pleasant feeling arises attachment increases; when a suffering feeling arises hostility increases; and when a neutral feeling arises ignorance increases. This ignorance manifests, for example, in your perceiving impermanent things like the body as permanent; or impure things as pure; or suffering things as truly pleasurable; or perceiving all things (which equally lack any inherent existence) as being ultimately, essentially, real.

Attachment causes rebirth in future lives among the six realms of sentient beings. Whether you are born in the lower realms of the hell beings, hungry ghosts, or animals, or whether you are born in the higher realms of the humans, demigods, or devas; desire and attachment are the precipitating cause of all rebirth within cyclic existence. Hatred and anger give rise to many forms of misery, beginning with sorrow and grief in this life, and leading to rebirth in the terrifying conditions of the lower realms in future lives. Ignorance is the basis of attachment and hostility, the other two root afflictions; it supports them and acts as their foundation. **It is due to ignorance that the other afflictions thrive, and ignorance makes it extremely difficult to escape their influence. Therefore, when a pleasant feeling arises, do not become attached to that pleasure, but see it in its true nature: as suffering. This is the way to eliminate attachment. When an unpleasant, suffering feeling arises, instead of reacting with hatred or anger toward some external source, consider how this body itself is like a wound whose very nature is to be a source of pain.** If you touch fire, get burned, and the burn hurts, it serves no purpose to get mad at the fire. Instead of surrendering to anger, understand that this is the nature of your body; realise that once you take a body like this, pain will

[27] Birth is suffering because it possesses the negative tendencies.

naturally arise. This is the way to eliminate hostility. When neutral feelings arise, recognise that their nature is impermanent and perishable. This is the way to overcome ignorance.

Ordinarily, you allow pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings to become causes of the three poisons: attachment, hostility, and ignorance. This is the powerful engine that drives you through endless cyclic existence. By applying these instructions you transform the way you view these three types of feelings so that, instead of giving rise to the three poisons, they lead to disenchantment with samsara, patience, and the wisdom that realises the true nature of things. This is the way to gain liberation from cyclic existence. Tsongkhapa says that he has explained these points in accordance with Asaṅga's *Compendium of Determinations* and Levels of *Yogic Deeds*.

When people have to carry a heavy burden, they will not feel comfortable as long as they have that burden on their back. In the same way, as long as you carry the burden of these five appropriating aggregates (this combination of body and mind) you will experience suffering and you will not find enduring happiness. As we explained earlier,[28] **these aggregates are appropriating because they are attached to things of the present and they grasp after things of the future.** These aggregates are inextricably bound up with the negative tendencies: that is, (1) karma and afflictions, which are the cause of the aggregates, and (2) the subtle propensities, which are afflictions in their potential form and which will give rise to karma and suffering in the future. In other words, it is the nature of the appropriating aggregates that they have within them the potential to manifest pain and suffering. Although there are times when the overt feeling of pain or discomfort does not manifest, it is always present in a potential form, and at any moment may emerge from any number of causes.

This is the pervasive nature of the suffering of conditionality. The human body is delicate and it is easy to recognise the presence of suffering in human life. Even small stimuli, such as a little too much hot or cold, bring on feelings of pain. But even if you consider the devas (the life forms abiding in the highest heavenly realms where there is no such thing as painful feelings) they still have not removed the subtle propensities that, like seeds, will act as causes of suffering in the future; they are still entwined in the negative tendencies. The devas are enjoying a brief respite in their journey through samsara, and during this respite the gross forms of pain are not manifest. Nevertheless, the conditions for the experience of suffering are still with them. **The pervasive conditions of suffering are with every being until the causes of suffering are removed from the root.** Because of the suffering of conditionality, from the perspective of the Dharma practitioner, the blissful life of a deva must be renounced just as much as rebirth in a suffering realm, because they are the same in having this nature of pervasive suffering.

The suffering of conditionality pervades all forms of suffering. It is the root of the suffering of change and the suffering of suffering. When you have a wound you can make it feel better by applying medicine or cold water, or you can make it flair up in pain by applying an irritant like salt. But the wound itself is the base, the root, of those other experiences. It is the fundamental condition enabling the temporary relief of pain (which we call "pleasant") or the intensification of pain (which we call "unpleasant") to arise. **The fundamental condition for all of these experiences is your birth into these aggregates, which are inextricably intertwined with karma and afflictions.**

You need to meditate on this fundamental samsaric condition with intense effort and determination, because the suffering of conditionality is very subtle and extremely hard to see. Beings like us, who are enmeshed in cyclic existence, cannot see it because it is too close to us, because we are right in the middle of it.

The effect of fully realising the suffering of conditionality is that you actually understand the first noble truth: the truth of suffering. It is not enough to gain an understanding of a particular occasion of pain, or how the suffering of change works, **you must gain a deep insight into the pervasive nature of suffering, the way it encompasses the whole samsaric situation**.

Pleasurable feelings in the present (for example, those that arise from eating good food,

[28] The suffering of the appropriating aggregates.

hearing beautiful music, or making physical contact with another) increase desire and attachment. But there is really nothing in any of these experiences that has an essential nature of pleasure. Most of those pleasant feelings arise from the temporary relief of suffering feelings. This produces a sense of pleasure, a lightening of the burden, which is then labeled "happiness". There is no such thing as a pleasant feeling which is, in its own nature, true pleasure. Pleasure does not exist independent of the occasional relief from suffering. Pleasure is the feeling you get when the pervasive feeling of pain or dissatisfaction stops. Pleasant feeling is actually just a comparison with the previous unpleasant yearning or discomfort, and we label that comparative feeling "pleasure".

Here is an example that makes it very clear. You go for a walk. You enjoy walking and so you walk and walk, until finally you get tired of walking. Your legs are sore; you feel that you've done too much walking. Because of that pain in your legs (the suffering of suffering), you sit down to rest. Ahhh! Sitting there you feel the pleasure of just sitting. That is a pleasant feeling; that is what we call "pleasure", or "happiness".

But is sitting itself a natural cause of pleasure? Is that the nature of sitting? Isn't the pleasure of sitting merely the gradual reduction in the pain from walking? It appears, deceptively, to be pleasure, but pleasure is not an intrinsic quality of sitting. Why not? Because if you continued to sit, and sit, and sit, gradually the pleasant feeling would fade and a painful feeling would increase (the suffering of change). Then look what happens: you want to get up and walk again! Too much sitting, just like too much walking, leads to pain and trouble. If sitting were intrinsically pleasurable, then as long as you sat the pleasure would continue, or even increase. But it doesn't work that way. Therefore, the pleasant feeling does not reside in the activity, but rather in the relief from suffering that the activity offers. And that relief is invariably short-lived.

You can apply the same analysis to all the activities that give us pleasure: lying down, eating and drinking, sitting in the sun or the shade, and so on. Eating is another good example of what we've been discussing. When you are hungry, eating a good meal gives so much pleasure. But that pleasure will not continue to increase if you keep eating, and eating, and eating. In fact, it will quickly turn into pain and discomfort. Eating is not intrinsically pleasurable and cannot provide everlasting happiness. In fact, the only kind of pleasure it can offer is to end the misery of being hungry. **Think of any of the sensory experiences that give you pleasure. Is there even one that will continue to be pleasurable if you continue to do it endlessly? That is not the nature of experience in samsara. The nature of samsaric pleasure is that it will eventually turn into suffering.**

The Buddha himself explains this in the *Descent into the Womb Sutra*:

> Nanda, you must understand that physical activities such as walking, sitting, standing up, or lying down are each in the nature of suffering. When meditators examine such activities and their nature, they find that if you pass the entire day walking, and you never stand still, sit down, or lie down, then you will experience that walking purely as suffering. And that suffering experience will be intense, harsh, difficult to bear, and unpleasant. The idea that walking is pleasurable will not arise.

After explaining the other three physical activities in the same terms, the Buddha continues:

> However, Nanda, in order to interrupt that suffering of physical activities, beings engage in other, new activities, and then they conceive those other activities to be pleasure. Nanda, when that feeling of pleasure arises it is only suffering arising. When it stops, it is only this suffering nature that stops. Also, when it arises, it arises in the nature of a produced phenomenon. When it stops, it stops in the nature of a produced phenomenon.

In order to bring an end to the discomfort of the activity you are currently involved in, you try to do something else. That brief respite gives you the perception of pleasure. But that samsaric pleasure is in the nature of suffering. You decrease one kind of suffering only by increasing another. This is the nature of cyclic existence. Whatever samsaric activity stops one pain by providing temporary relief is itself just another form of suffering. While one type of suffering is ceasing, the cause of another, new type of suffering is starting. In this sense, the ceasing of suffering itself, when it is produced by contaminated or samsaric activities, is itself in the nature of suffering.

In this passage the Buddha also points out that the feeling of pleasure is not a permanently pleasant state. It is a "produced phenomenon",[29] arising in dependence on causes and conditions, and is therefore impermanent. The new condition, which brings about its cessation, is itself a produced phenomenon, also impermanent, also dependent on karma and afflictions. But because that new condition brings relief from the previous painful feeling, you perceive it as pleasure. As the cycle continues, that pleasure too will change into suffering, which will persist until another condition arises to relieve that suffering. This is the rising and passing away of all conditioned existence, & with this understanding you can see how suffering pervades it all.

Āryadeva says in his *Four Hundred Stanzas*:

> For pleasure, when it increases,
> Is seen to change into its opposite.
> When pain increases,
> It does not similarly change into its opposite.

If you are doing something pleasurable, and you do more, and more, and more of it, it finally turns into pain and suffering. But when you take something painful and do more of it, does it turn into pleasure? Of course not. Whatever you experience within cyclic existence, when you examine it in this light, you find that its underlying nature is suffering. When you view all of cyclic existence with this perspective, the feeling of disenchantment toward samsaric pleasure begins to develop, and this is the beginning of the thought of renunciation. That is the correct way to view your circumstances, and it will lead you along the pure, right path.

Here, we need to distinguish between this thought and another superficial thought of renunciation. The superficial thought is a reaction to some short-term pain or sorrow, or it can arise out of the fear of death or some other looming misery. This is merely an emotional reaction to some specific, temporary pain you do not want to encounter. This is not a reliable or stable thought of renunciation, because it is not rooted in an encompassing vision of the entire nature of cyclic existence. You are not really renouncing all of cyclic existence, but merely some particular unhappiness that you do not want to experience.

To develop the true thought of renunciation, you need the proper foundation of understanding the whole samsaric situation in its true nature. That is the only way to produce the thought that sees cyclic existence as a big wound, as nothing but a source of suffering, and causes you to renounce all of samsara. That pure thought is what transforms your practice into the true path leading to emancipation, and any virtuous actions you perform, with that view as the motivation, become the actual path of emancipation.

It is not so easy to produce that thought of renunciation truly and completely. Some people think that they can direct their practice onto the pure path without that genuine thought of renunciation. Some people take high tantric initiations, engage in the most profound Mahayana meditations, and grasp at these methods for gaining liberation without developing sincere renunciation. This kind of practice is really just another form of attachment, and is turning the path of liberation into something else.

But these meditations on the suffering nature of cyclic existence are the foundation for the pure path of emancipation. When you understand your own situation in its totality by means of these trainings, it becomes easy to apply that understanding to the circumstances of others. It becomes easy to see how others are in exactly the same straits you are in, and when you see that deeply, it becomes easy to produce great compassion. Seeing this can produce almost depthless compassion.

Without this broader vision you will only produce a kind of superficial, self-serving kind of compassion. If you just sit peacefully, merely wanting to enjoy a blissful experience, not wanting to engage in any unpleasant thoughts, you may end up with the paradoxical result of creating more unhappiness for yourself instead of true, stable happiness; and you will have no basis for understanding the suffering of others, which is the prerequisite of genuine compassion.

These practices are important. It may take many years, but this kind of meditation does not require you to sit down somewhere with an unmoving body. You can do it while you are walk-

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[29] A "**produced phenomenon**" (**samskrta-dharma**) refers to any phenomenon that arises due to specific causes and conditions. Also known as "conditioned phenomena".

ing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are eating. You can do this kind of meditation anytime, all the time. What you see, what you experience every day, all contributes to the development of this understanding. This is the way to put it all together. This is the way to make your unpleasant thoughts very productive. You can think about how the whole samsaric situation is ugly, miserable, full of sorrow and disappointment. When you think about this using the proper methods and reasons, although it is not pleasant, it will bring good results.

2" Contemplating specific sufferings

There are six types of specific sufferings, corresponding to the six realms of cyclic existence. We discussed the details of life in the lower realms in chapter 10 of the first volume of this series. In the context of the trainings of the being of small scope, we discussed the nature of their sufferings, their environment, the length of their lives, and so forth. In this section we will discuss the quality of life in the three higher realms: the realms of human beings, demigods, and devas.

(a) The suffering of human beings

In the discussion of the general sufferings of cyclic existence, which we just completed, we mentioned many of the sufferings that human beings face. We are familiar with such common human miseries as hunger and thirst, heat and cold, searching after goals such as wealth, fame, or friends, and becoming exhausted from the effort. All of the miseries we discussed under the eight types of suffering apply to human life, and you can meditate on the nature of birth as a human by contemplating those eight points as they were explained earlier. Vasubandhu says in his *Discussion of the Requisite Collections (Sambhāra-parikathā)*:

> All of the sufferings of the lower realms,
> It seems, are also known to humans.
> They are like the hell beings when afflicted by pain;
> When destitute, like the hungry ghosts in Yama's world.
> They have the sufferings of animals;
> As the powerful use force to oppress
> And persecute the powerless,
> The sufferings flow on like a river.

And he further states:

> Some, due to poverty,
> Others, because they are never satisfied,
> Suffer unbearably from always seeking more,
> And are filled with animosity and murderous thoughts.

Some people can never be satisfied. Even if they owned all the continents, still they would crave more. This unending dissatisfaction and selfishness leads to animosity toward all those who have what they want, or stand in the way of getting what they want. This kind of uncontrolled craving can lead to murder, and even great wars grow out of this dissatisfied mind.

Āryadeva says in the *Four Hundred Stanzas:*

> Those with high status have mental suffering,
> For low-class people it comes from the body.
> Day by day, these two kinds of suffering
> Overwhelm people in this world.

Kings, millionaires, the rulers of the world; they do not have to do strenuous physical work like peasants and manual labourers. They may have all the wealth and luxuries anyone could imagine, but these do not bring them any lasting peace of mind. They are still tormented by jealousy, insecurity, dissatisfaction, and every manner of mental unhappiness. In fact, you may find that the poorest beggar, who has to go out into the heat of summer and the cold of winter to beg for a little bit of food, is happier than the man who controls a vast empire but is afflicted with anxiety for his position and a dissatisfied mind.

Wherever you look in the world of humans, everyone is eventually stricken by the physical pains of the body and mental unhappiness of one sort or another. You can meditate on how these two forms of suffering arise in your own life, and then you can extend your meditation to

consider the lives of others. You should contemplate how humans of every social class, race, and religion suffer from these two types of misery. Whether they cover their bodies in rags or wrap themselves in the finest silks and jewels, they are equal in terms of the pain and sorrow they will meet in the end. In fact, you could say that a human being is a pile of suffering wrapped in cloth; a king is a pile of suffering, wrapped in silk, and wearing a golden crown!

(b) The suffering of the demigods

On the suffering of the demigods, Nāgārjuna's *Friendly Letter* says:

> And the demigods, by nature, suffer with intense envy
> For the splendour of the devas.
> Due to the afflictions of that realm, even the intelligent ones
> Cannot see the truth on the path of seeing.

Though some explanations count the demigods as a type of animal, Asaṅga's *Levels of Yogic Deeds* includes them in the realm of the devas, and in general they are considered a low level of devas who reside in the desire realm.

These demigods are mentally tormented by their unbearable jealousy toward the wealth, power, and luxury of the superior desire realm devas. Driven by this powerful antipathy, they are constantly attacking the desire realm devas and trying to steal their wealth and their goddesses. This brings them all manner of misery. First of all, in these heavenly wars the demigods always lose.

Because of the subtle nature of their bodies, they do not die unless their heads are cut off at the neck, so after they get hacked to pieces in battle the pieces reassemble and heal. Then, under the control of their overpowering envy, they are ready to start fighting all over again, heedless of the misery they will face. The demigods also have a kind of supernatural vision that enables them to see their own friends and relatives getting cut up in battle, and this too causes great sorrow. Because of the particular afflictions of this level of existence, even the most intelligent of these beings cannot attain the realisation of the truth that comes on the path of seeing. Although it is possible for demigods to undertake a spiritual practice, their progress on the path would be limited during that lifetime, even if they were to meet the Buddha himself. The devas, on the other hand, *are* capable of attaining the path of seeing.

(c) The suffering of the devas

The devas reside in three different realms: the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm. We will discuss them one by one.

(i) The suffering of the devas of the desire realm

The devas who belong to the desire realm have three types of suffering. The first one is:

(a') The suffering of dying and falling

(1') The suffering of dying

Nāgārjuna says in his *Friendly Letter*:

> Though they experience great bliss in the heavenly realms,
> When they die the suffering is so much greater.
> Considering this, the wise do not crave
> The perishable pleasures of a heavenly rebirth.

Beings born in the upper realms, such as desire realm devas, experience what we might call heavenly pleasure. It is a level of mental and physical happiness that is far beyond what we know as humans. They also do not meet the physical hardships and mental challenges that we humans constantly have to face. However, when their time to die approaches they meet with a particularly intense distress. It is a mental anguish that is far more unpleasant than the ordinary sufferings of human beings.

Mental sufferings can be more subtle and, at the same time, more disturbing than physical ones. Sometimes, when physical pain is mentally accepted, or even embraced, it does not bother a person very much. Certain people can be in pain right up to the point of death without experiencing it as great misery. But when the pain is mental (when you don't accept it but resist it with fear and aversion) this kind of suffering can be the most terrible of all. This is the kind of pain that the deities experience at the time of death. Therefore, as Nāgārjuna says, wise people

do not covet the sublime-sounding pleasures of the devas, because they know that they are transitory and do not last; and when these pleasures come to an end, the pain is intense.

As death approaches the devas experience the five signs of death, and this experience causes great suffering to arise. These five signs of death are described in the *Friendly Letter*:

> Their complexion turns an unattractive colour,
> They become unhappy with their abode,
> And their flower garlands wither,
> Their clothes become soiled, and their bodies
> Break out in an unprecedented sweat.
> These five signs, which foretell their death,
> Appear to the heavenly beings who reside in the god realms,
> Just as signs of impending death appear
> To humans who are about to die on earth.

Some commentaries speak of ten signs of death: five distant signs and five proximate signs. The five proximate signs are explained in these verses. They begin to appear about one week before the devas are going to die.[30] First of all, the beautiful radiance of their body fades and their complexion turns an unattractive, pale colour. Second, their dwelling place, which has been a splendid and luxurious abode up to this point, becomes uncomfortable and unpleasant to them. Because of their excellent previous karma, devas always have beautiful ornaments and flower garlands adorning their bodies, which naturally change and stay fresh without any effort on their part. But as devas approach death their flower ornaments wilt and begin to rot. Their heavenly garments, which previously remained pristine, now become soiled and begin to smell. Finally, they begin to sweat, which has never happened to them before.

The five distant signs of death, found in other sources, are:

1. Devas ordinarily radiate a natural light, which means they do not need to rely on a sun or moon to illuminate their environment. But as death approaches, the light of their body grows dim.
2. Devas bathe in beautiful pools filled with special water, and when they emerge they do not need a towel because the water does not cling to them. But as death approaches, their body stays wet when they emerge from the water.
3. Unpleasant sounds, which they had never heard before, begin to emanate from their clothing and ornaments.
4. Ordinarily, devas never blink; their eyes are always open. As death approaches, they begin to blink.
5. Devas ordinarily do not become attached to any particular location, but as death approaches they desire to be in just one special place.

Humans also experience a series of signs of impending death as the elements of the body dissolve and the coarser minds dissolve into more and more subtle levels. If you have not trained, through meditation practice, to pass through those experiences as you die, they can be extremely frightening. As the body and clothes of dying devas begin to get dirty and smell bad, all of their friends and companions become disgusted and move away, leaving them all alone. Being deserted at their moment of greatest fear is itself a terrible form of suffering. Now they have lost everything: their splendour is gone; they are uncomfortable in their home and in their own body; they feel great fear; and even their best friends and relatives have deserted them. That is the suffering of dying for the devas.

(2') The suffering of falling to a lower state

Nāgārjuna says in the *Friendly Letter*:

> When they have to depart their heavenly worlds,
> If they have no merits left,
> Helplessly they will go wherever they belong:

[30] The length of a day for the devas is quite a bit longer than a human day. For the lowest gods of the desire realm, the group of the four great kings, fifty human years is equal to one deva day and night. Thirty of these days equals one month; twelve of those makes one year, and their life span is five hundred of those years. This is equivalent to 9,000,000 human years. For each higher level of devas, the length of their life span doubles.

To the animals, hungry ghosts, or hells.

When devas die they can be born in any of the six realms of cyclic existence. But the most likely future is rebirth in a life that is far less pleasant than the one they are leaving, because during their long stay in the heavenly realms they have exhausted most of the virtuous karma they had accumulated in past lives. All of that merit has now ripened. What is left is mainly negative karmic potential, which is now ready to ripen into a suffering rebirth.

At that time of death they are powerless to change the course of their next life. Every being has the power to change his or her destiny, but that power comes from applying the antidotes that destroy negative karma while you are still alive and vigorous. The effort must be made long before you are about to die. While they had so much time available to them, the devas did not understand what they needed to do. They just wasted their lives away, using up their vast storehouse of virtuous karma. Finally, at the time of death, they see what lies in store for them, but there is no way for them to do anything about it. All they can do is suffer the unbearable anguish of knowing what is about to happen to them.

When we humans are about to die, we do not see the rebirth we are headed toward. Although this power can be cultivated through yogic practice, in general we don't fear our future rebirth because we cannot see what it will be. Devas, on the other hand, have a natural capacity to see where they are about to go. One epithet for the devas is *three-timers*, which means they have the ability to perceive three lifetimes: the one just past, the present one, and the one about to arise. The power to see where they are going in their next life arises particularly when they near death, and this is the source of the fear they experience at that time. They see that from their current bliss in a splendid heaven they are about to fall into a hideously ugly body in a terrifying place. Even if they are merely headed for an animal realm, the life of a dog or cat is a tremendous fall from the glory of a deva.

This is why devas experience such intense mental anguish when they become aware of their future circumstances. As their body loses its lustre and their friends desert them, they see clearly what is going to happen. They want to do whatever they can to change their fate, but it is too late. They have no chance to apply any antidotes as they move swiftly toward death. Though they do not suffer any physical pain as they die, their mental suffering is unbearable.

(b') The suffering of being frightened

In general, the demigods are the ones described as those who are possessed by jealousy toward beings having better circumstances than they. But this kind of mental unhappiness is found among the devas as well. Between the different classes of devas, and even within one deva world, these beings experience various levels of good fortune based on their individual karmic accumulations. This produces envy among the devas, just as it does among the demigods and among humans.

Of course, this is the nature of the desire realm. It is a place where beings are constantly hankering after sensual objects. We desire beautiful things to see, sweet sounds to hear, delightful fragrances to smell, delicious food to taste, and pleasant things to touch. Among the devas, those with greater accumulations of merit will end up with more, or more pleasant, sensory objects. Those with less merits suffer from dissatisfaction, distress, and jealousy when they see others whose lives appear more wonderful.

(c') The sufferings of being cut, gashed, killed, and banished

This is another way in which the experience of the devas is similar to that of the demigods. As mentioned, demigods attack certain types of devas out of jealousy, and these devas suffer the miseries associated with fighting, such as having their body cut to pieces. Again, devas only die if their heads are cut off. If their limbs are severed or their bodies are cut in two, the parts come back together and regenerate. When there is a battle between devas, the most powerful expel the weaker ones from their dwelling place and push them off to less desirable locales. Speaking of the sufferings of the devas, Vasubandhu says in his *Discussion of the Requisite Collections*:

Devas who enjoy sensual pleasures,
Do not possess mental happiness.
They are burned by the inner fire

Of the infection of attachment to sensual desire.
Where is the happiness
For those whose minds are distracted?
They do not have the power
To make their minds undistracted for even one moment.

The minds of beings in the desire realm are always under the power of distraction by the senses. The senses have such a strong effect on the mind. Though the devas are a little better than humans in this regard, they still spend most of their time indulging in their particular objects of attachment, their minds always under the power of these distractions. For them there is not even a moment of undistracted, fully controlled, perfectly peaceful mind. While beings of the upper realms do possess a more concentrated, unwavering mind than humans, they still do not govern their own minds, and they are never truly undistracted.

Vasubandhu continues:

Their nature is to be agitated by distraction.
They are never at peace,
Like a fire spread by a blazing wind,
When it meets the fuel of the forest.

Their mind is always unsettled, stirred up by this kind of distraction. It is like a forest fire whipped up by the wind. In the desire realm, the winds of karmic propensity and obscuring afflictions whip up the fire of craving and attachment. The available sensory objects are the fuel, ready to feed the flames of desire. All the necessary causes and conditions are there to keep this fire of desire burning in the mind, and it is just as difficult to control as a big forest fire. In that situation, how can the mind find an undistracted state of complete peace?

Another set of verses from the same text says:

They are like someone recently recovered from an illness,
Who returns to eating unhealthy food.

The devas enjoy some relief from the painful aspects of wandering through cyclic existence. They enjoy all kinds of pleasurable feelings and mental happiness. But the objects they indulge in become the cause of future suffering. They are sick people who recover from a dangerous disease, only to use their good health to indulge in desires that will make them sick again.

When you think of the splendours and pleasures of the upper realms, it is easy to develop great attachment to them. When you first hear about the bliss of the deva realms, you might want to be born there right away. But by practicing these meditations you come to understand their experience in more depth; that it is actually a mixture of happiness and intense suffering. With this understanding you recognise that there is no worldly pleasure worth getting attached to, even in the most enjoyable realms of cyclic existence.

By means of these meditations on the sufferings of samsara, you come to see in a step-by-step fashion how there is no place, no mode of experience in all of cyclic existence, that is totally free of misery; that there is no realm that offers anything like reliable peace and happiness. When you look at all the levels of existence with the wisdom that understands their causes and conditions, you come to see the whole of samsara as a vast ball of suffering. With that realisation arises the desire to throw that ball away, because you want something else.

(ii) The suffering of the gods of the form and formless realms

The devas of the form world and the formless world do not have the gross forms of suffering that we have been discussing thus far. They do not suffer from the physical pain of the human realm or the mental unhappiness of the desire realm gods.

Birth as a deva in these upper realms is purely the result of virtuous karma. Although they are still bound by karma and afflictions, and carry innumerable subtle propensities accumulated in past lifetimes, during their life in one of these realms they only experience the result of virtuous karma.

The *Treasury of Knowledge* by Vasubandhu says: “There are 3 types of karma: meritorious, demeritorious, and immoveable". “Immoveable” is a designation given to virtuous karma that ripens in the form and formless realms. For humans and devas of the desire realm, experience switches back and forth from pleasant to suffering feelings, depending on the ripening of meri-

torious or demeritorious karma. But in the two upper realms the karma does not "move" in this way; these devas experience purely the ripening of meritorious karma. From the time they are born until they die they have no unpleasant or unhappy experiences. Their lifetime is very long, with a subtle level of consciousness experiencing only a peaceful state of mental tranquillity.

Nevertheless, they are still within cyclic existence and they still possess afflictions and obstacles to achieving wisdom. They do not possess all the afflictions that desire realm beings have; for example, they do not have hatred or jealousy. But they do retain a certain kind of ignorance, a certain kind of desire, and pride. These afflictions are quite subtle, so they do not produce enough mental agitation to disturb the tranquillity of that lifetime. But the afflictions are still there, and they will yield their effects in future lives.

Although they are able to enjoy the fruition of their virtuous karma for the duration of that life without disturbance, these devas do not have the power to remain in that happy state forever. When the result of the virtuous karma that projected that existence is exhausted, they have to die. Still possessing mental afflictions and karmic propensities, they will take birth in accordance with their previous karma. In this sense, just like the beings in all the other realms, they have no freedom. That lack of control over their own destiny is itself a cause of suffering. As with all other beings, the devas of the upper realms do not have control over their own futures because they are under the influence of the negative tendencies, under the power of karma and afflictions. That is the source of their suffering.

In his *Discussion of the Requisite Collections*, Vasubandhu goes on to say:

> Those beings of the form and formless realms
> Are beyond the suffering of suffering and the suffering of change.
> They naturally reside for eons, undistracted,
> In the bliss of meditative equipoise.

Let us recall what we discussed when first speaking about the suffering of suffering: that there are five kinds of feeling. There are two types of bodily feeling based on the sense faculties: an unpleasant feeling is a disagreeable bodily feeling of pain; a pleasant feeling is an agreeable bodily experience. There are also two types of mental feeling: mental happiness is an agreeable mental experience; mental unhappiness is a disagreeable one. Finally, there is neutral feeling, which is an experience in between agreeable and painful; neutral feelings can be either physical or mental.

All five of these types of feeling are experienced in the desire realm. But in the first concentration of the form realm there are neither unpleasant bodily feelings nor mental unhappiness. Additionally, in the second concentration there is no experience of bodily pleasure. In the fourth concentration there is neither pleasure nor mental happiness, but only neutral feelings. In the formless realm, where beings have no physical faculties, the situation is similar to that in the 4th concentration of the form realm. There is no pleasure or suffering, and there is also neither mental unhappiness nor mental happiness; there are only neutral feelings in the formless realm.

Beings in the formless realm remain in a deep state of meditative equipoise, a very subtle state of mental concentration. Any kind of mental feeling of happiness is actually a coarse and distracted state, but these beings remain in a very even, undistracted, neutral feeling. From our point of view that might appear to be a dull, monotonous type of existence. But you can think of it as similar to a very deep, subtle, undisturbed dream state. The life of a formless realm being passes in that way.

We see that from the first concentration of the form realm on up, all the beings are beyond any form of gross physical suffering or mental unhappiness. For most, their "bliss" is an inner mental experience of meditative concentration. For some of them, when they are first born into that realm, they have some awareness of where they came from, but soon they settle into their meditative trance, and there they remain, undisturbed, for a very long time. They do not need to apply any effort because this state is the ripening of previous karma, the result of previous effort. They spontaneously enter the meditative equipoise of their level, and remain there with nothing to disturb them for their whole life in that realm.

Vasubandhu continues:

> Yet this is most certainly not liberation,

For they will have to fall again from there,
Though it appears as if they have escaped
The waves of suffering in the lower realms.

Though they might try, they cannot stay forever.
Like a bird soaring across the sky,
Like an arrow shot with the strength of a child,
They must come back down in the end.

Just as butter lamps that burn for a long time
Are perishing with every moment,
They are afflicted by the suffering
That all conditioned phenomena are in a state of change.

The main point of these stanzas is that the life of a deva in the upper realms may appear to be ideal, but it is still within cyclic existence and is still caused by karma and afflictions. Such a rebirth is a conditioned phenomenon, possessing all the marks of conditionality: it is subject to change; it is impermanent; and it has a suffering nature. Though they may have risen very high within cyclic existence, their blissful lives will not last forever. Like birds flying across the sky, eventually they have to come back down to earth. Though their lives may go on for eons, with every moment they get closer and closer to the end, just like a burning candle.

Life in the form and formless realms is so peaceful, the consciousness is so subtle, and the afflictions are operating on such a subtle level that it can seem as though the beings there do not have any faults. Some meditators, practicing at very high levels of meditative concentration, confuse these states for total emancipation. For example, meditators who attain the absorption of nondiscrimination experience a cessation of the functioning of the mind and mental factors, which they mistake for liberation. The karmic result of entering this meditative level is to be born in one's next life among the beings of nondiscrimination on the level of the fourth concentration. During that life (which lasts approximately five hundred *great eons*), there is active consciousness only at the moment of birth and at the moment of death. In between those two moments the mind is completely dormant. After that lifetime one is born back into the desire realm. Āryas view this state of nondiscrimination as a pitfall and so they do not enter the absorption of nondiscrimination; it is attained only by ordinary individuals who mistake the state of nondiscrimination for the state of liberation.

In the end we need to realise that even the longest and most blissful lives in cyclic existence are still conditioned phenomena, subject to the causes of suffering: karma and afflictions. Although the devas enjoy a prolonged respite from the gross miseries of lower rebirths, they are still living a conditioned life, dominated by karma and subject to suffering, and it is only a matter of time before they awaken to that sad reality. Therefore, there is nothing to be desired in these higher rebirths. The only sensible goal is to get out of cyclic existence altogether by eliminating its causes from the root.

This is why you need to meditate on the lives of the six types of beings in cyclic existence. You need to learn and contemplate the details of their situation, the conditioned nature of their lives, and the cause and effect relationship that controls their experience. Once you realise this you will become disenchanted by even the most attractive levels of cyclic existence and your mind will become dominated by the thought of renunciation. You will be ready to renounce samsara in its entirety.

Once this thought of renunciation arises spontaneously for yourself, it becomes easy to see how others are trapped in exactly the same cycle of pain and confusion. On that basis it will become easy to generate a powerful feeling of love and compassion for all other beings. But first you must produce this disenchantment with cyclic existence and the determination to attain liberation from it.

The thought of renunciation does not mean having a brief or occasional glimmer of disenchantment with samsara. As Tsongkhapa describes it in his T*hree Principal Aspects of the Path (Lam gyi gtsobo rnam gsum):*

If you contemplate, over and over, karma and its inexorable results,
And the sufferings of cyclic existence,

It will counteract the illusory appearances of future lives.
Meditating this way, when your mind does not entertain even an instant
Of admiration for the wonders of cyclic existence—
When day and night your mind is focused on liberation—
Then the thought of renunciation has arisen.

When you have become utterly disgusted and fed up with the miserable conditions of cyclic existence, which you have recognised in your meditation, and you spontaneously focus your mind, your actions, and your energy on getting out of that trap; that is the real thought of renunciation: the determination to leave cyclic existence. That is the beginning of the path of emancipation. Once that thought arises, you have actually entered the path.

That spontaneous attitude of aversion to cyclic existence, coupled with the single-minded intention to escape from it, naturally leads to one question: what is the cause of this cyclic existence? Therefore, the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering, is the next topic discussed in Tsongkhapa's Lamrim Chenmo.