Chapter 20 The Origin of Suffering

2' Contemplating the process of cyclic existence in terms of its origin

a" How the obscuring afflictions arise

In order for cyclic existence to arise (i.e., in order to produce a samsaric rebirth) karma and afflictions are necessary. Of these two, the afflictions are the principal, most important cause of such a rebirth. Why? Because if there are no obscuring afflictions, then even if you have accumulated incalculable karmic seeds in the past, these karmas will not be able to ripen and yield results. Examples of this are arhats or bodhisattvas, who have taken rebirth in cyclic existence since beginningless time and have created limitless karmic seeds during those infinite numbers of rebirths. However, these karmas cannot ripen because the afflictions (the indispensable cooperating conditions) are absent. Those karmic potentials will be like dry seeds; even though you plant many seeds, if they do not meet necessary conditions such as moisture, they will never produce sprouts. All of the samsaric sufferings we have been describing (birth, aging, and so forth) cannot arise without these special conditions, even when the karmic seed has been planted.

On the other hand, if the afflictions are there, then karma will immediately be created, and from that combination you will take rebirth. This is why we say that the afflictions are the primary cause of samsara. Even if the karmic cause for rebirth in cyclic existence has not been created, once the afflictions are present you will create that karma. Then all the conditions necessary for cyclic existence to arise will be present.

Dharmakīrti says in his *Commentary on the "Compendium of Valid Cognition"*:

> The karma of those who have transcended attachment to cyclic existence
> Lacks the power to project another birth,
> Because the cooperating conditions have been extinguished.

And he also says:

> When attachment is there, the aggregates will arise again.

The āryas (those who have gained direct insight into the nature of reality) will still take rebirth in cyclic existence until they obtain arhatship, at which point they completely eliminate their obscuring afflictions. For arhats, although they have accumulated many many karmic seeds in past lifetimes, those seeds become incapable of producing another samsaric rebirth because the primary conditions for them to ripen (the afflictions) have been completely eliminated.

We have been concentrating on the faults of cyclic existence in order to develop a powerful determination to escape from those sufferings. Of course, in order to escape you must get rid of the causes of samsara. As we have just seen, **between the two causes, karma and afflictions, afflictions are the primary, most important cause. Therefore, the most important thing is to apply an antidote to those afflictions.**

In order to make use of a powerful antidote, you must first identify the target that the antidote is intended to counteract. Once you identify and understand the nature of the afflictions, you will find that some antidotes are useful to weaken them and temporarily suppress them, while others are effective in eliminating them from the root. But it is always necessary to identify the enemy and then, recognising when it arises, apply an effective antidote. Therefore, in order to master the obscuring afflictions there are four topics to consider:

1" Identifying the obscuring afflictions

We begin with a definition that points us to the distinguishing characteristic of obscuring afflictions in general. Then each of the **ten main afflictions** will be explained. According to Asaṅga's *Compendium of Knowledge:*

> An obscuring affliction is defined as a phenomenon which, when it arises, arises with the characteristic of being unsettling; and due to its arising the mental continuum becomes unsettled.

This is a general definition, which applies to all the obscuring afflictions as a class. It says that **an obscuring affliction is an inner mental event whose nature is to disturb or unsettle the mental state**. **Its action or function is to create a restless, non-tranquil mind.** Such is the general characteristic of every affliction, whether it is desire, **hatred, jealousy, pride,**

wrong view, or any of the others. **Each one leads to mental disturbance, destroying mental peace and calmness. It always creates some kind of problem (some kind of agitation in one direction or another) and it always brings bad results**.

Based on this general definition we have specific details of the ten fundamental afflictions. These details are compiled in the Abhidharma literature, which gathered together and systematised the Buddha's explanations found in the sutras. There are many different divisions of afflictions (for example, the root afflictions and the branch afflictions) but here we are establishing the main, most common, fundamental afflictions. The explanation presented here is from Asaṅga's *Compendium of Knowledge*, which speaks of ten basic obscuring afflictions.

Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Knowledge* presents these basic afflictions slightly differently. It says, "The root of existence is the six polluting tendencies...". "Polluting tendencies" is another term for the afflictions, and five of these six are the same as the first five in the presentation by Asaṅga. The sixth affliction in the Treasury of Knowledge is wrong view, which can be further divided into five distinct types. When you subdivide wrong view in this way you get Asaṅga's ten afflictions: five which are views and five which are *non-views*. And when you condense those five wrong views into one and then add on the initial five, you get Vasubandhu's six polluting tendencies. In the present text Tsongkhapa follows Asaṅga's presentation of ten basic obscuring afflictions, beginning with the five non-views as follows:

1. Attachment

The first is ***attachment***, which focuses on an outer or inner object, and seeing it as attractive, wants to have it, pursues it, and attaches to it. When you are attached to an object, if you do not already have it, you desire it; if you already possess it, you do not want to separate from it. In general, attachment functions a little differently from harsh, explosive afflictions like hatred, in that it arises slowly, then gradually attaches or becomes stuck to its object, almost like glue. Then it tends to seep into its object, going deeper and deeper. Once it becomes attached, it is difficult to separate. It is like a piece of cloth that has been stained with oil: the oil soaks deeply into the cloth, spreads, and becomes very difficult to remove. In the same way, **attachment grasps at its desired object and then extends and penetrates deeper and deeper until it is very difficult to separate from that object**.

Underlying attachment and the rest of the afflictions is a fundamentally incorrect way of perceiving the object. You see impure objects as pure, or impermanent objects as being permanent, or objects with a suffering nature as pleasurable. Through the force of ignorance you impute characteristics onto the object; you superimpose attractive qualities (or, in the case of hostility, repugnant qualities) that are not truly there. Then, based on this mistaken perception, you grasp at the object and become attached to it. That ignorance, that wrong perception, is the direct cause of your attachment or hostility.

Of course, you can also desire virtuous objects such as compassion, love, bodhicitta, and liberation. In that case, the mind functions in a similar way, in that you see the object, you are attracted to it, you grasp at it, wanting to possess it, and then the mind goes deeper and deeper into the chosen object. This is the same type of consciousness we just described, except for one fundamental difference: instead of being based on a mistaken perception of the object, this attraction to virtue is based on a correct perception of the actual nature of the object. Instead of superimposing qualities that are not there and becoming attached to that distorted view of the object, you are perceiving the object correctly, and aspiring toward a realistic goal. The first case, based on a fundamental misperception, inevitably leads to a bad result; the second case, which accords with reality, brings results that accord with your aspirations.

2. Hostility

Hostility is a mind of ill will, directed toward a source of suffering, wanting to harm or destroy that object. The object of hostility is a source of one's own suffering; it is often another sentient being, but it can also be pain itself, or the immediate cause of pain, such as weapons or thorns. Whatever unhappiness you feel, or whatever causes that unhappiness, can become an object of your anger and hatred. **Hostility is your observing one of these objects with a harsh attitude of ill will that desires to damage, harm, and destroy it.** When the object of

hostility is another sentient being we can say it is an attitude that wants to **make that being suffer**. This attitude of ill will has **different degrees, which we can call "anger" or "hatred", but they all share this hostile thought that wants to damage or destroy its object.**

Again, the underlying cause of this affliction is the superimposition, stemming from ignorance, of qualities that are not there. Something extra has been added onto the object so that you see it as unattractive, and you want to harm it or get rid of it. **This kind of consciousness is very destructive and harmful to both oneself and others. Anger and hatred have the power to "burn up" many roots of virtue.** The merits you have accumulated over many lifetimes can be destroyed in one moment of anger, just as a powerful fire can incinerate all the grass, bushes, and trees in a forest. Anger not only destroys virtues, it completely upsets all inner peace and outer social harmony. The devastating effects of anger and hatred will be discussed later, when we look at the disadvantages of the afflictions.

3. Pride

***Pride* is a mind that is puffed up and conceited; it comes from comparing yourself to others and viewing yourself as having superior qualities.** This seeing yourself as higher and others as lower is based on the view of the transitory collections (see number 6 below), the **wrong view that clings to a false, over-inflated sense of self**. **Pride gives you a puffed up, grander view of yourself by superimposing superior qualities on a self that does not in fact exist the way you perceive it.**

With this type of **arrogant pride** you may compare yourself to others in terms of external qualities, thinking, for example, "I have much greater wealth then they do", or "I have a much nicer body", or "I have much finer clothes". Or you may see yourself as having superior inner qualities, such as intelligence, or spiritual attainment. The main point here is that **you are elevating yourself by superimposing a superior value onto your own qualities and superimposing an inferiority on someone else. Once you cling to this image of yourself as superior, many problems and much unhappiness arise,** especially when you are confronted with evidence that contradicts this image. Furthermore, such pride becomes an obstacle to increasing your understanding and your virtue. In Tibetan we have the expression, "You can't pour the water of virtues into a balloon filled up with pride". This means that when you are filled up with arrogance (like a balloon filled up with air) it becomes impossible to pour in any new virtuous qualities, with the result that you become an unsuitable vessel for the Dharma.

In his *Treasury of Knowledge* Vasubandhu analyses pride into seven types. These are the puffed up minds: **that think (1) when considering those who are inferior to you in some way, "I am superior to them"; (2) you are superior to your equals; (3) you are superior to your superiors; (4) "I" when directed at the appropriating aggregates; (5) you have attained virtues you have not attained; (6) you are just a little bit inferior to those who are greatly superior to you; and (7) you have acquired virtues, when what you have acquired are not virtues at all, but faults.**

We see that **pride can take many forms, but it always has this character of over-inflating your image of yourself by attributing qualities that you do not really have.**

4. Ignorance

In general, ***ignorance* is defined as possessing a mistaken understanding of the four noble truths, the cause and effect of karma, and the nature of the Three Jewels.** As a mistaken understanding, ignorance is a kind of mental darkness, because the mind is not clear with regard to the nature and qualities of these things.

On another level, ignorance in connection with ultimate reality takes on a deeper meaning. In that context *knowledge* or *gnosis* is the direct realisation of the ultimate nature of self and phenomena. **Ignorance, then, means lacking that direct realisation of the truth, not seeing reality as it is, not knowing the nature of ultimate truth. This definition emphasises that ignorance holds to a true, inherently existent, essential self. This ignorance is not merely a *not knowing*, but an actual holding on to a mistaken conception of self; it is a grasping at a wrong view. In that way ignorance is the root of all the obscuring afflictions.**

This fundamental ignorance leads to all kinds of incorrect conceptions: grasping impermanent things as permanent, viewing impure things as pure, believing objects whose nature is suffering to have a pleasurable nature. When you grasp at objects through the lens of these misconceptions, desire, attachment, hostility, and all other afflictions naturally emerge. The ignorance that grasps at a mistaken conception of self is the fundamental root of them all.

5. Doubt

***Doubt* is an attitude of wondering whether the four noble truths, the cause and effect of karma, and the Three Jewels are true or not.** The affliction of doubt implies that one is leaning toward the wrong conclusion, thinking, "This is probably not true" or "This probably does not exist".

As the first Dalai Lama, Gendun Drub, says, doubt damages your ability to find any stable certainty, and in this way it is the great antagonist to the life that leads to liberation. Doubt raises questions in your mind about whether there is such a thing as liberation, or whether there is a path or method that can lead you there. This kind of doubt always undermines the kind of faith, confidence, and certainty that is vital to have if you are to achieve emancipation.

We have now talked briefly about the **first five rudimentary afflictions: attachment, hostility, pride, ignorance, and doubt.** As we explained, these first five are *non-views*. In the presentation of six obscuring afflictions, the sixth one is *wrong view*. Here, in the presentation of ten, *wrong view* is subdivided into **five distinct erroneous *views*.**

All of these views are described as forms of what is known as "**afflictive wisdom".** This term (*sherab nyon mong* chan in Tibetan) could also be translated as "**incorrect wisdom**", or "**mistaken understanding**". **The "wisdom" referred to here is the mental factor whose function is to discriminate or distinguish the object before it and thereby to determine its qualities.** In terms of this definition, each of these five views is a form of wisdom, but **in this case it is mistaken or wrong. Instead of leading to purification and happiness, it leads to further affliction and suffering. Since it leads to further affliction, it is called an "afflictive wisdom"..**All of the five *wrong views* are types of afflictive wisdom, as follows:

6. View of the Transitory Collections

The first is the ***view of the transitory collections***.[31] **This is an afflictive wisdom that, based on observing the appropriating aggregates, grasps at an inherently existent "me", "I" and "mine".** In other words, this discriminating mind takes the aggregates, or some portion of the aggregates, as its object. Then, based on observing that conventional object, it **imputes an inherently existent "me" or "I"; a self that exists inherently**. Grasping at that inherently existent "I", the mind goes on to impute all kinds of other objects, such as the aggregates, which are held to be inherently existent "mine"; inherently belonging to or part of the self.

In realising the emptiness of inherent existence, there are two kinds of grasping at a self that must be addressed: *grasping at a self of persons* and *grasping at a self of phenomena*. Of these two, the view of the transitory collections is a case of grasping at a self of persons.

Tibetan commentators then raise the issue of whether things that are "mine" (which are phenomena, and apparently not the person) can be included in the view of the transitory collections. Sera Jetsunpa, the textbook writer for Sera Je Monastery, solves the problem this way. He says that, of course, in the most basic sense, "mine" refers to phenomena; everything that is produced is a phenomenon. But in the context of the dichotomy in which everything has to be either self or phenomena, "mine" does not indicate phenomena. The nature of the grasping at "mine" is that it can only arise together with the grasping at "I". Without the grasping at "I" there is no grasping at "mine" alone. You can only think "mine" by first thinking "me". Without connecting with "me" or "I", there is no way of thinking that something is "mine". If you take "my nose" as an example, then it is true that the nose itself is not a person. But grasping at it as an inherently existent "my nose" can only be done by first thinking "me". Therefore, this type of grasping is grasping at a self of persons.

[31] Also called the five aggregates.

Afflictive wisdom grasps at "I" and "mine" and experiences them as inherently existent when in fact they are merely imputed by the mind. They only exist as imputations that arise based on observing the aggregates; they are empty of any inherent existence from their own side. The mistaken view that grasps at "I" and "mine" as inherently existent is called the view of the *transitory* collections because the aggregates are **constantly perishing, moment by moment**. It is a view of transitory *collections* because the aggregates are a combination of many different mental and physical phenomena that come together and are constantly evolving. **The name of this wrong view is pointing directly at the impermanent, perishable nature of the aggregates, and emphasising that they are not inherently existent things.**

In the tenets of many other religions, there is a permanent, partless, independent self, soul, or *ātman*. According to those tenets, the self is imperishable and is not an aggregation of many parts; it is a real unity; an ultimate, inherently existing I. **What is being asserted here is that *no such self exists*. The self, or I, is nothing but an imputation arising from looking at the aggregates. The view of the transitory collections is the deep-seated, instinctive grasping at a unitary, inherently existent self based on a mistaken view of the aggregates.**

That does *not* mean that there is no self at all. The aggregates do arise in dependence upon causes and conditions, and we can conventionally speak of our own particular mind-body continuum as a "self". This self is an imputation and does not exist the way the view of the transitory collections mistakenly holds that it exists. The self that is projected by the view of the transitory collections is nonexistent. It is the nonexistence of that "inherently existent" self that we try to realise when we meditate on the emptiness of the conventional self.

Once you grasp onto that false conception of self, that self naturally becomes the centre of all your concern and attention, your "self-centred view". From there, all the remaining afflictions emerge. You become attached to this self. You become attached to things belonging to this self, which you view as "mine". You imagine a large separation between those things that are "I" and "mine" and all other beings and phenomena. Anger and hatred arise when the "I" is frustrated and the "mine" is not respected. And so it goes.

7. View Holding to Extremes

The ***view holding to extremes*** is an afflictive wisdom observing the self as perceived by the view of the transitory collections, seeing it either as permanent, or as something that will not take a future rebirth after this life. These are two extreme views: on the one hand, viewing the self as eternal; on the other hand, not believing that, due to karma, there will be future rebirths.

Many people believe that the physical body dies but the essential self or soul is imperishable and eternal. This is the extreme of permanence. Others believe that the psycho-physical being that is present right here and now is all there is, and once this being dies all traces of it are permanently extinguished. This of course means that there is no rebirth, no cycling through samsara, no going beyond samsara, no nirvana, and no buddhahood. This is the extreme nihilistic view because it holds that after death there is nonexistence.

8. Esteeming Unworthy Views

Esteeming unworthy views is the afflictive wisdom that observes either the view of the transitory collections, the view holding to extremes, or wrong view (which will be explained below), together with the aggregates upon which these views are based, and holds these mistaken views to be superior and excellent, i.e., to be right view.

Of course it is not uncommon to find people who hold that the correct and superior view is the belief in an eternal soul. There are also many who believe that this present life is the only life, and that this view is absolutely correct and unassailable. Pride and attachment arise naturally once you believe that your own view is superior. But when it is also wrong, and leads to further affliction and suffering, esteeming such unworthy views can do a lot of damage.

9. Esteeming mistaken morality and asceticism

Esteeming mistaken morality and asceticism is an afflictive wisdom that holds that various misguided religious practices are superior and lead toward emancipation. There are many practices that people engage in because they believe that to do so will lead them out of suffer-

ing and to liberation, but in fact these practices lead in the opposite direction. There are many examples of such misguided practices, such as sacrificing the lives of animals or even committing ritual suicide. Then there are various ascetic practices such as burning the body in the sun in order to purify it, exposing it to fire, standing for a long time on one foot, going naked, or never speaking. One may also attempt to wash one's sins away by bathing in special bodies of water. There are also practices that involve certain types of dress or special implements, such as wearing a human or an elephant skin, or carrying a rosary of human bones.

Sometimes non-Buddhist practitioners attain some level of supernatural knowledge through the common practice of meditative absorption. For example, they may gain the power to see the next rebirth of a particular animal, such as a pig. They see that the pig is going to attain a good rebirth in its next life and they conclude that behaving like a pig is the proper method to attain a higher rebirth. Based on that misunderstanding they encourage pig-like behaviour. Or they see a human who has died in a fire and taken rebirth in a deva realm. They conclude that burning the body is the way to a heavenly rebirth. These are examples of the way a limited amount of supernatural knowledge (such as seeing one or two lifetimes ahead) can produce erroneous conclusions. Based on that limited understanding, these practitioners put a high value on practices that will actually lead to more suffering. Many different types of mistaken practices can arise from these misunderstandings. When a practitioner, perceiving the aggregates on which these practices are based, sees these practices as a proper method for purifying negative karma and leading to emancipation, that is what is meant by "esteeming mistaken morality and asceticism".

10. Wrong View

The last afflicted wisdom is known simply as ***wrong view***. All four of the views listed above are wrong views, but **here wrong view specifically means the nihilistic view that denies the existence of previous and future lives or the cause and effect of karma.** Wrong view can also take the form of holding certain positive assertions about the nature of reality. One example would be holding that a prime deity or divine creator is the cause of cyclic existence and all sentient beings. And another, propounded by the Sāṃkhya school of Indian philosophy, holds that some kind of universal principle is the cause of everything. In general, when we speak of wrong view we are referring to the nihilistic view that holds to the nonexistence of karma and rebirth, because that is the biggest obstacle to practice and progress on the path.

Tsongkhapa concludes this general identification of the ten primary afflictions by saying that his main sources were Asaṅga's *Compendium of Knowledge and Levels of Yogic Deeds*, as well as Vasubandhu's *Explanation of the Five Aggregates (Pañca-skandha-prakaraṇa)*, and that he has explained this topic in accordance with those texts.

2" The process of their production

1. Ignorance driven

Now we have identified the ten primary afflictions, we look into the sequential process that gives rise to them. After that we will examine the causes of the afflictions, and then their faults.

There are two systems for explaining this process, depending on whether **ignorance** is taken to be a separate affliction from the view of the transitory collections, or whether they are considered to be identical. The first system represents the understanding found in the Abhidharma system as laid out mainly by Vasubandhu and Asaṅga. They held that ignorance was a generalised mental dullness or darkness, while in contrast, the view of the transitory collections is an afflictive wisdom, a mistaken discrimination. Later, the Yogācārins under Dharmakīrti, as well as the Mādhyamikas, held that ignorance and the view of the transitory collections were one and the same thing.

We begin with the first system, which **considers ignorance to be a generalised mental dullness** (distinct from the view of the transitory collections) **acting as the root of all the other afflictions.** As an analogy, consider a dark, gloomy place with a coil of rope lying on the ground. In the darkness it will be unclear whether it is a coil of rope or a snake, and the mistak-

en thought may arise, "This is a snake". Once you apprehend a snake, other thoughts and emotions naturally follow, such as fear, hatred, and so forth.

In the same way, the obscuring darkness of ignorance prevents us seeing the true nature of the aggregates clearly. In the darkness we misconstrue that psycho-physical continuum to be a substantial self. From that mistaken view of the aggregates (from mistakenly seeing those changing collections as a substantial, unitary self) all the other afflictions naturally emerge.

According to the second explanation, **ignorance and the view of the transitory collections (the aggregates) are identical.** In that case, **the view of the transitory collections is itself the root of the other afflictions**. Once you hold the **aggregates to be an inherently existent self**, that misconception becomes the basis for the self-centred attitude that makes the discrimination between "self" and "other". What is "I" and "mine" is seen as essentially distinct from everything else, which is "other". Once you have made that distinction, you develop *attachment* and feel beneficially inclined toward everything that is on your own side. Hostility emerges toward everything that is on the other side. *Pride* develops from grasping at the self and feeling that what is "mine" is superior and more worthy of support than what is "other."

You observe that "self", and come to believe it either as eternal and having an indestructible essence (permanence), or you believe it is nothing more than what is immediately present and that it is subject to complete extinction at the time of death (annihilation). **Grasping at these erroneous views is the *view holding to extremes***. You come to admire the erroneous views of the self that you hold, and at the same time you pursue various harmful practices and behaviours that flow from those views; in this way both *esteeming unworthy views* and *esteeming mistaken morality and asceticism* arise.

On this **path of doubt**, **you develop *wrong view*, denying the Buddha (the teacher who taught selflessness) along with his teachings of karma, rebirth, the four noble truths, and the Three Jewels**, including the highest attainment of buddhahood and the path leading to that attainment. When you fall under the influence of nihilistic wrong view, you come to believe that these teachings of the Buddha do not describe reality as it is. Even if not absolutely convinced that the Buddha's teachings are not valid, you develop serious **doubt** about them, and that doubt tends to lean to the negative side, believing that they probably are not valid.

2. Poisons driven

We can see how these various afflictions arise from the fundamental error of holding to a substantial self. Dharmakīrti's *Commentary on the "Compendium of Valid Cognition"* says:

> Holding there is a self, you conceive of an other.
> Discriminating self and other, attachment and hostility arise.
> In connection with these,
> All the faults arise.

Among the six rudimentary obscuring afflictions, **ignorance, attachment, and hostility are called the "three poisons". It is from these three that all the other afflictions are created.** Each affliction can become the motivating thought for actions of the body, speech, or mind. **Any action** (virtuous or non-virtuous) **impelled by one of these afflictions is *contaminated action***. Accumulation of that contaminated action (karma) becomes the potential that ripens into future experience. That karma determines the nature of your life in the future; it determines the kind of rebirth you will have and the quality of your experience within that realm of rebirth. Therefore, we can say that **all samsaric results arise from those three poisons**, and **the ignorance of grasping at an inherently existent self is the root of all cyclic existence.** That is what Dharmakīrti is saying here.

3. Ignorance is the Root - Wisdom is the Antidote

Cyclic existence is not some externally created condition, but an internal process; it **arises from the root of ignorance**. By looking inward in meditation, you can observe this process, and by seeing the arising of the afflictions and the way they motivate each action becomes clearer and clearer. You see how each moment emerges out of this nexus of cause and effect. You see how each action (even when performing some virtuous deed) has behind it some degree of attachment to self, or pride, or jealousy; some level of seeking gratification for the self

you are clinging to. **You act with the expectation that your action will return some benefit for that self. Until you achieve a direct realisation of the true nature of the self, every action you perform will have some combination of these afflictions as its cause. In particular, ignorance pervades all the afflictions; it is always there in the background.**

Āryadeva says in his *Four Hundred Stanzas*:

> Just as the tactile faculty pervades the body,
> Ignorance pervades all the afflictions.
> Therefore, by vanquishing ignorance,
> All the afflictions will be vanquished.

Ignorance is the fundamental, root affliction, pervading all the others. From that mistaken grasping at a self all the others arise. By observing them in meditation you will come to recognise how they perform their destructive functions; you are **observing exactly what the enemy is doing. This is the operation of wisdom.** Practitioners do not look outside of themselves for the enemy; they are always attending to the **inner enemy**, examining who they are and what kind of harm they are doing. If you **watch these six inner enemies, you will develop the capacity to resist their influence and prevent them from leading you to harmful actions.** Even if you cannot immediately resist all negative behaviours, **developing an awareness of what the afflictions are and how they function will have great long-term benefit.**

The Kadampa Geshe Ben Kungyal said, "Standing at the door of the afflictions, holding the spear of the antidotes; other than that I have no other job". **All you need to do is guard the door against the afflictions. Your job is to use your wisdom to watch the door of the mind and ask, "What is it doing? What is it planning to do? What is coming in? How is it reacting"?** If you are diligent, you will be successful. As you gain control over these inner enemies, you will find that you are naturally controlling the outer enemies (the sufferings you experience in cyclic existence) because they are the results of the inner enemies, the obscuring afflictions.

To destroy the afflictions from the root will ultimately require the direct realisation of emptiness. Until you are able to achieve higher realisations, you can utilise the many methods that enable you to temporarily block, suppress, or resist the influence of the afflictions. You can recognise the conditions that give rise to certain afflictions and make an effort to avoid those situations. Realising that you are mistaking impure objects as pure, you can turn that perception around by meditating on the **contaminated nature of all objects of desire**. You can use such methods to mitigate the intensity of afflictions such as desire or anger when they arise. This lessens their influence and gives you the mental space to avoid creating strong negative karma. If you cultivate a high degree of meditative stabilisation, you can temporarily suppress the afflictions, and this will be very helpful as you progress on the path to the final realisation of emptiness, which will eliminate these afflictions from the root.

In order to engage in any of these methods for avoiding or suppressing the afflictions, you need to identify them and understand how they come to arise. In the next section we examine their causes.

3" The causes of the obscuring afflictions

All the afflictions arise from a combination of various causes. Six of the fundamental causes of the obscuring afflictions are explained here.

1 Basis

The *basis* of the afflictions is their lurking, subtle latent propensity. Ie, although a particular affliction (eg, desire) may not be active and present in the mind at a particular moment, it is continuously lurking at an unconscious level as a potentiality, a subtle predisposition or propensity. Until these propensities are eliminated from the root, every sentient being has this readiness for a particular affliction to arise when conducive objects and conditions are met. This potentiality is the support for the obscuring afflictions, and is the first of the six causes.

2 Object

The *object* causing an affliction to arise is the *suitable, supporting condition* that awakens that subtle propensity into a fully active affliction. When you plant a dry seed in

the ground, it needs supporting conditions such as moisture, warmth, and nutrients in order to sprout and grow into a flower. In the same way, all sentient beings have within them the seed or subtle propensity for the afflictions to blossom, and when a suitable object is encountered it acts as the supporting condition enabling the affliction to arise in full flower.

In general, we say that an affliction arises when (a) it has not been eliminated from the root, (b) the object is nearby, and (c) you perceive that object erroneously. This means that (a) the affliction is abiding in your continuum as a subtle propensity without being eliminated. (b) an object, acting as the suitable condition, comes into proximity. And (c) although that object is impure and has a nature of causing suffering, you view it as pure and a cause of pleasure. For example, take the situation where (a) the affliction of attachment lurks in your mental continuum as a subtle propensity. (b) a suitable object appears, such as another person's body having an appealing shape. (c) you perceive that body as attractive (even though its nature is impure and it is a source of suffering rather than pleasure). Based on that misperception of the proximate object, the lurking affliction of attachment is activated.

Since an object is necessary for an affliction to arise, you can avoid the afflictions by avoiding the objects that give rise to them. It may be a long time before you can eliminate the subtle propensities (the afflictions in their dormant state) from the root, but you can prevent them from awakening into their active forms by keeping your distance from the objects that activate them. You can intentionally avoid situations where you know you will meet those objects. This is a simple method that can be very helpful.

3. Social Distraction

***Social distraction* refers to those worldly activities that bring you under the influence of unwholesome acquaintances.** When you spend time with people whose minds are completely distracted by drinking, playing games, and wasting time, this naturally contributes to the development of afflictions such as attachment, hatred, jealousy, pride, and so forth. This kind of social distraction can be very powerful. One day, or even a few hours, of exposure to a stimulating distraction can agitate your mind for days or weeks afterward. It stirs up and excites the afflictions and makes it quite difficult to regain control of your mind.

This is the basic reason why Buddhist monks and nuns isolate themselves from towns and villages and retire to secluded places like monasteries and nunneries. They take vows not to engage in many common social diversions such as drinking, dancing, and watching shows. They change their entire external appearance by shaving their heads and wearing robes that mark them off from lay people who are pursuing worldly concerns. This deliberate change in their appearance not only reminds them of their vows, but actually prevents those who might have a bad influence from even approaching them.

If you are looking for pleasure in this life, the monastic life style will not benefit you. But for those who are seeking inner development, trying to combat and reduce the afflictions, it will be of great benefit. That is the purpose of the austerity of becoming a monk or nun. What does "monastery" mean? It is not supposed to be just another place for social distractions. It is supposed to be a place of solitude, where there is nothing to distract you from the opportunity to develop your inner wisdom.

At a later stage of spiritual development (once you have realised the truth of selflessness to some degree) your inner resolve will not be affected by the external influences of worldly distractions. Like a big, powerful man in the middle of a group of children, you will be unaffected by the influence of harmful companions. In fact, for such a realised being, meeting such "harmful" people (those who are overcome by their own delusions) only reinforces one's realisation, and strengthens resistance to the afflictions. At that stage, you can travel freely in the world without fear of losing your vows or giving way to temptations. You will be protected by your own inner wisdom.

But for now, at the beginning of the path, you possess all these inner propensities, like seeds in the spring, just waiting to meet the moisture and warmth that will enliven them and cause them to send out shoots. At that stage of your development, you need the protection of these external precautions.

4. Explanation

The fourth factor causing afflictions to arise is *explanation*. This refers to **listening to various kinds of wrong or harmful teachings, or reading books that lead your mind in the wrong direction.** If you listen to teachings that encourage you to commit harmful actions, or read things that stimulate desire or hatred, that will obviously lead you away from the goal of pacifying and eliminating the afflictions.

5. Becoming Accustomed

***Becoming accustomed* means that by repeating certain behaviours over a long time, without applying an antidote, those actions become habits and they become your natural, ordinary, and daily way of life.** For example, there are people who get angry all the time, without much provocation; as soon as some little thing does not go their way, they get furious. They have become so accustomed to having this emotion of anger arise, and it has become so natural to them, that they do not even think of trying to stop it.

6. Attention

Finally there is *attention*. This refers to incorrect thinking: attributing qualities to objects that they do not actually have. Prime examples of such incorrect ways of paying attention include imputing: attractiveness onto an object that has an unpleasant character; purity onto the impure; and permanence onto things that are impermanent. For example, if there is a person you do not like, who is unattractive to you, you then proceed to impute all kinds of exaggerated or false attributes onto that person, generating all kinds of false reasons why that person is ugly and horrible. This is the process by which you build up a powerful and very destructive hatred. In the same way, you can produce a powerful attachment by thinking how wonderful, how beautiful, and how good a particular person is. Imputing onto others these "good" and "bad" qualities and then concentrating on them causes attachment and aversion to arise in a very powerful form. The afflictions will increase and strengthen the more you indulge in this kind of deluded attention, or incorrect thinking.

These six points are called the "causes of the obscuring afflictions". **In order to eliminate these afflictions from the root, you must directly realise the emptiness of self**; the nonexistence of the "self" that is held by the view of the transitory collections. **Realisation the emptiness of self is the main antidote to the afflictions.** Until you achieve that level of realisation, it is very helpful to understand these causes and conditions that give rise to the afflictions. That way you can steer away from those causes and conditions and pacify the afflictions until you are able to eradicate them completely.

4" The faults of the obscuring afflictions

- **The afflictions always bring bad results; they never have any good effects.** As soon as an affliction arises it disturbs your mind and causes you to perceive the object of attention in a distorted manner. It reinforces, solidifies, and perpetuates the subtle propensities that are already present. **When an affliction arises, other afflictions of a similar nature** are not interrupted but **can actually be stimulated and increased**. For example, if a desire for some object arises, other, similar types of desire will also be stimulated.
- **As soon as an affliction arises it harms oneself first, and then it often harms others.** For example, when anger arises it immediately harms you by causing mental suffering. Then, when you act on that anger, you will do mental or physical injury to someone else. In the end, both you and the person you are angry with are harmed by the arising of your own inner affliction. Moreover, the negative karma of your aggressive action leaves the propensity for more suffering results to ripen in the future. **All the afflictions lead to misdeeds now and in future lives.** And **all the harmful actions you perform motivated by the afflictions will ripen into unpleasant experiences and outcomes in this and future lives.**
- **When the afflictions arise they push you far away from nirvana.** This is because these deluded thoughts and the harmful actions they give rise to cause you to cycle in samsara for

a longer time. **Because of the afflictions and negative karma you spend vast periods of time trapped in miserable lives and emancipation is pushed far away.**

- **Even if you have virtuous thoughts within your mind, these afflictions will destroy them and your wholesome actions will degenerate.** They will lead to the loss of your wealth and resources and, instead of worldly enjoyments, you will meet loss and misfortune.
- **When you are dominated by these afflictions you don't function well in front of other people; you feel nervous, hesitant, joyless, and discouraged when you are in public.** You lack the fearlessness that comes with a controlled mind, and instead you are overwhelmed by guilt and a loss of self-confidence in public.
- **When the afflictions are strong your bad reputation spreads far and wide.** Even holy beings such as teachers, deities, and protectors see how you are tarnished by these delusions and they denigrate you and will not protect you.
- **When your time to die arrives you go with great regret and sorrow.** You have only your negative actions to recall. After death you are born into the worst realms of existence. You failed to accomplish any meaningful purpose in this life and have only undesirable fruits to experience in the future. All beings share the desired goals of happiness, peace, and freedom, but you obtain none of them. In fact, because of the afflictions you actually achieve the opposite of all your desired goals. These points are expressed by Maitreya in the *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras*:

> Because of obscuring afflictions you destroy yourself, destroy other beings, and destroy ethical conduct;
> Your virtues degenerate, your wealth declines, your protectors and teachers revile you;
> Your bad name spreads, in future lives you are born in places devoid of freedom.
> Finally you come to great mental anguish over the decline of virtues you attained or were yet to attain.

Śāntideva also describes the faults of the afflictions in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*:

> Though enemies such as hatred and craving
> Have neither arms nor legs,
> And are neither courageous nor wise,
> How have they come to enslave me?
>
> While they dwell within my mind,
> At their pleasure they cause me harm,
> Yet I patiently endure them without anger—
> But patience here is inappropriate and shameful.
>
> Should even all the gods and demigods
> Rise up against me as my enemies,
> They could not lead nor place me
> In the fires of the deepest hell.
>
> But this mighty foe, these obscuring afflictions,
> In one moment can cast me into those flames,
> So hot that if they met Mount Meru,
> Not even its ashes would remain.
>
> The enemy of my obscuring afflictions
> Is long-lasting, with neither beginning nor end.
> Among all other enemies,
> None can remain for so long.
>
> If I agreeably honour and serve anyone,
> They respond with beneficial and pleasing actions.
> But if I serve these obscuring afflictions,
> They respond with actions that bring harm and pain.

Ordinarily we think of other sentient beings as our enemies, but that is not really where our problem lies. The real enemy is inside; it is these obscuring afflictions. Because of their power, the insidious manner of doing us harm, and the long period of time over

which they operate, these inner enemies are incomparable. In these verses Śāntideva is describing with an amazed tone how powerful, how controlling, this inner enemy is. Although the afflictions have no arms or legs, he says, they have made me their slave; whatever they tell me to do I am compelled to obey.

This enemy is happily harming me all the time. Ordinarily, we speak of patience as an excellent quality. But **this is not the place for patience! In fact, you should be trying to damage and destroy this enemy with every weapon at your disposal.** If you practice patience with this enemy, it will be more than happy to continue bringing you more and more suffering. This is definitely an inappropriate object for the practice of patience.

Śāntideva makes the point many times in his chapters on "Patience" and "Meditation" that **we should never be patient with ignorance, attachment, hostility, and the other afflictions.** In fact, **we should be applying a kind of "hatred" toward them, with a clear intention to destroy them.** Hatred is obviously a negative emotion when it is directed toward other living beings, so we can't really call this attitude "hatred" in the usual sense. But it is analogous to hatred, and it carries the same intense desire to destroy its object; only in this case the destruction of that harmful object is itself a virtuous and liberating act. This is the type of hatred that practitioners need to practice.

That is the point of the meditations we are doing here. **We are trying to develop the power to destroy the enemy residing deep inside us. That is the meaning of this practice. First acknowledge that other beings are not the source of your problems; the real enemy is inside. These afflictions are the real source of danger and all the suffering you experience. Therefore, they must be destroyed. How can you destroy them? What is the method? This attitude of focusing your energy on destroying the afflictions takes on the form of hatred, but it is not hatred in the usual sense; it is the practice of liberating yourself from your own delusion.**

Why are these afflictions the proper objects of your hatred? If all the beings of the world rose up against you what is the worst they could do? They could kill you; in other words, they could separate you from this life. But that is not too serious a thing; after all, this separation is going to happen anyway. And the beings of this world cannot do anything to you after you are dead. They cannot put you into the hot fires of hell; they don't have that kind of power.

But the inner enemy, these powerful obscuring afflictions, can cast you right into a fire so intense that it could incinerate the greatest mountain in the world. And this can happen in one brief moment, in the brief instant that lies between this life and the next. If you have created the karma to be born into such a hell, that moment of death is all that separates you from those fires. The distance between you and that suffering experience is not at all great; it is only the distance of a single breath. When the last breath stops you will be born right there. The journey doesn't take many months. **One moment will be enjoying your life as a human; in the next moment you will find yourself in hell.** That can happen. That is what the powerful inner enemy can do. It is not merely birth in hell, but all the other miseries of this samsaric world (poverty, illness, grief, and the rest) that are brought about by this inner enemy.

From the point of view of time as well, the afflictions surpass all other types of enemy. **No external enemy could harm you for longer than the length of this one lifetime. But this inner enemy has been operating since beginningless time, and will continue to bring you endless misery until you are able to uproot it.**

In general, with ordinary enemies, if you turn your attitude around (if you treat them with respect and try to benefit them instead of doing them harm) they will often stop being your enemies and will become your friends. **It is the nature of things that when you act beneficially toward an external enemy, his or her animosity generally disappears. However, in the case of the inner enemy, the more you cooperate with it (the more you honour it and serve it) the more harm it does to you. As long as you obey it (as long as you give it the opportunity) it will continue to do you harm. These are the faults and disadvantages of the inner enemy, the obscuring afflictions. Until you have successfully applied the anti-**

dotes, this is the way they will operate. The more you cooperate with attachment, hostility, jealousy, or pride, the more suffering they will bring you.

But the afflictions do have one favourable characteristic. **If you combat the afflictions and succeed in casting them out of your mind, they will never be able to return.** If you kick ordinary enemies out of one country, they may find a refuge somewhere else and build themselves up until they are ready to come back for another battle. The situation with the inner enemy is different. **Once you eliminate afflictions from the root, there is no way for them to return. When they are eliminated from the mind, there is no other place for them to go. By your application of the inner antidote (the realisation of the true nature of self) the obscuring afflictions are permanently terminated.**

That is the kind of cessation you need to obtain. That is why practitioners constantly strive to kick these inner enemies out of their mind. **Once they are terminated by means of the antidote, their cessation will be permanent. T**here will be no need to worry about that enemy returning again to cause you trouble.

Once you understand these faults of the afflictions, you must determine to combat them using the methods that are made available here. The famous Kadampa Geshe Gonpawa said:

> In order to eliminate these afflictions you must know their faults, their nature, their antidotes, and what causes their arising. Once you understand their disadvantages, view them as completely faulty, and regard them as enemies. If you do not know their disadvantages, you will not understand how they are enemies. Therefore, you should contemplate this matter as it is explained in the *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* and *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*.

Geshe Gonpawa then goes on to say:

> In order to understand the characteristics of the obscuring afflictions, study the Abhidharma. At least study Vasubandhu's *Explanation of the Five Aggregates*. Once you are familiar with the root afflictions and the subsidiary afflictions, as soon as attachment, hostility, or any of the others appear in your mind, you will be able to identify it with the thought, "This is one of those; now it has arisen", and you will be able to combat it.

Geshe Gonpawa is recommending that you study the Abhidharma texts by Vasubandhu or Asaṅga, where the details of the afflictions are extensively explained. If you cannot go into the subject at such length, at least look at Vasubandhu's shorter text, the *Explanation of the Five Aggregates*. Once you understand the nature of the afflictions and you can identify them, there are many methods to temporarily suppress them, or to try to eliminate them from the root. But first you must know what they are, and be able to recognise them when they arise.

This means more than just knowing these things in your head. There is not much benefit in that. The whole point of identifying the afflictions and learning how they operate is to enable yourself to oppose them more effectively, and eventually to root them out. Just as in a war you need to know the size, disposition, tactics, and strategy of the enemy, you need to know everything about these internal enemies in order to destroy them. This is why we explain this subject in such detail. You first need to educate yourself, equip yourself, and then you can engage in the struggle to oppose and eliminate the forces that do you so much harm.

b" How that causes karma to be accumulated

We have been investigating the process of cyclic existence in terms of its origin. We began by looking at the way the obscuring afflictions arise.

Now we turn to **way those afflictions cause karma to be accumulated**. This has 2 parts:

1" Identifying the karma that is accumulated

This topic also has two parts:

(a) Karma that is intention

(b) Karma that is intended action

What is the meaning of karma? Karma is explained in two aspects. First comes *karma that is intention*, or *intention karma* for short. This is the mental intention that motivates a physical or verbal action. On the basis of that motivation, an actual physical or verbal action is performed.

The second type of karma is *karma that is intended action*, or *karma-having-intended*. There are two systems of thought regarding the meaning of this type of karma. The lower Abhidharma system, which was held by the Vaibhāṣika school and is elaborated in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Knowledge*, holds that *karma-having-intended* is the physical action of body or speech that is motivated by the intention. For these schools this type of karma is a physical action.

In the Mahayana Abhidharma system, presented in Asaṅga's *Compendium of Knowledge*, karma is always mental. Here, *karma-having-intended* is the thought (the mental action) that accompanies the physical or verbal action motivated by the intention. Although there is a physical or verbal act, that does not constitute the karma; instead, karma is the purely mental action that accompanies the physical one. These are the two different interpretations of *karma-having-intended*, or *karma that is the intended action*, and they will be discussed shortly.

(a) Karma that is intention

The *Compendium of Knowledge* by Asaṅga says:

> What is intention? It is a function of consciousness that is a mental action initiating the engagement of the mind in virtuous, non-virtuous, and neutral activities.

Whatever physical or verbal action you perform, there is always a virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral motivation that lies behind it, intending it and initiating it. That is *karma that is intention*, or, more simply, *intention karma*.

Here we need to fill in some details about our model of the mind. The general term "mind" is made up of (1) *primary consciousness*, or simply *mind*, and (2) *secondary consciousnesses*, or *mental factors*. In each act of cognition there is a *primary mind* (*the* primary mental consciousness) and, concomitant with that, various surrounding *mental factors*. Five mental factors accompany *every* primary mind and constitute the aspects of cognition that carry out its fundamental functions. These *five omnipresent mental factors* are *feeling*, *discrimination*, *intention*, *contact*, and *attention*. The karma that we are discussing now is the mental factor of intention.

With this understanding we can paraphrase Asaṅga's definition and say that ***intention* is a mental factor whose function is to move and induce the primary mind with which it is concomitant toward an object.** In each cognitive act, when consciousness is attending to an object, there is first of all the primary mind. A primary mind apprehends the basic presence or mere entity of the object; it is the mere awareness of the data presented to it. But a primary mind never cognises an object without concomitant mental factors; it is these mental factors that distinguish the specific features of the object. The primary mind is said to be similar to the hand and the mental factors are like the individual fingers. The wholesome or unwholesome nature of the primary mind is determined by the presence or absence of wholesome or unwholesome mental factors. If an unwholesome mental factor is present, the entire mind becomes unwholesome, in the same way that adding a pinch of salt to a glass of water causes a salty flavour to pervade every drop of that water.

In each cognitive act the *primary mind* apprehends the basic presence of the object. The mental factor of *feeling* experiences the object as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The mental factor of *discrimination* identifies the object by discerning its distinguishing characteristic. The mental factor of *intention* (i.e., karma) directs and propels the mind toward the object and moves the mind to become involved with that object. Just as a magnet moves a piece of nearby iron, **intention moves the mind toward engagement with beneficial or harmful objects. The mental factor of *contact* acts to connect the three elements of a cognition: the object, the faculty, and the primary mind. This coming together of the three, activates the sensory or mental faculty such that it becomes the basis for the feeling of pleasure, pain, or indifference. Lastly, the mental factor of *attention* focuses and stabilises the mind on its object, not allowing it to move elsewhere.** (There are, in addition to these five, many other mental factors that may arise with a particular mental event; some of them are wholesome, some are unwholesome, and some are neutral. These are described in detail in the Abhidharma literature.)

The mental factors are said to be "concomitant" with the primary mind because they always share five characteristics with it. They have a similar *basis* in that they are based on the same

faculty, whether it is the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mental faculty. They have a similar *duration* in that they arise, abide, and cease simultaneously. They both attend to the same *object*. They have a similar *aspect* in that they both reflect a similar image of the object; for example, when the primary mind observes an object as blue, the mental factors also observe it as blue. Finally, they have a similar *substance* in that there can only be one primary mind at one time, and accompanying that there can only be one of any given type of mental factor at that time. These are the implications when we say that the mental factors are concomitant with the primary mind.

(b) Karma that is intended action

Intention Karma and Intended Karma

According to the system elaborated in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Knowledge*, *karma that is intended action* (or, more simply, *intended karma*) is any action of body and speech motivated by an intention. As stated above, in this system intended karma is the actual physical or verbal action initiated by intention karma. The *Treasury of Knowledge* says:

> Karma is intention and what it produces.
> Intention is mental karma.
> What it gives rise to is karma of the body and of speech.

According to the Vaibhāṣika school, intention karma is a mental act that motivates a physical action of body or a verbal action of speech, which is the actual karma, the actual action. Karma that is the intended action is not mental but is purely physical; bodily karma is form and verbal karma is speech.

The Vaibhāṣikas also divided this physical and verbal karma into two types: *revealing* and *non-revealing* karma. A karma is revealing if it enables others to understand one's own motivation. When you act physically, with either your body or speech, you provide information to others concerning the state of mind, the intention, that lies behind and drives that physical act. In this sense physical karma *reveals* or informs others of your inner motivating state.

In this system, physical karma is form in that a particular configuration of colour, shape, or gesture of the body (i.e., the form of the body) reveals the motivation that lies behind that gesture. In general, it is difficult to know a person's mental attitude because it is not visible. But certain activities or gestures act as signs that reveal what is inside one's heart. The motivation is revealed by the physical movement. For example, when monks or nuns take a vow, they kneel down with their palms pressed together and follow the ritual in front of their preceptor. These physical gestures reveal the virtuous motivation operating inside the mind of that person. That is revealing karma.

Non-revealing karma is the ongoing karmic potentiality instigated or set in motion by that physical, revealing action of body or speech. It is this form of karma which persists in the psycho-physical continuum. Once it is set in motion by a physical, revealing action of body or speech, it remains entirely inaccessible to our senses. It reveals nothing.

Although it is form (a material substance based on the *four great elements*[32]) *it* is supremely subtle, invisible, and even non-obstructive.

Once a monk or nun has physically and verbally taken a vow, that vow (that karma) persists in his or her continuum. It is not visible, nor is the intention that motivated the vow visible, but it is always there; whether sleeping, eating, or walking, the vow is always there. That karma is said to be non-revealing; it is there but it is invisible, and very subtle. I have used the virtuous

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[32] The four great elements (*mahābhūta*; 'byung ba chen po)—earth, water, fire, and wind—are the indivisible building blocks of material existence. Everything material, everything in the aggregate of form, is based upon these fundamental material units. These are not to be taken literally as atoms of those particular substances, but as material atoms that perform their respective functions: earth supports without letting fall down; water makes cohesion; fire ripens; wind increases and expands. These are their functions; their natures are, respectively: solidity, moisture, heat, and movement. Alfonso Verdu (1985; p. 21) says:

> The four *mahābhūtas (great elements)* should be considered as simple primordial dharmas of materiality, each one carrying its own specific kind of activity or energy and thus establishing the basis for each one of the fundamental states which can characterise or affect any of the appearing things in the material world.

In practice, these four elements always arise together, and the particular quality of the resultant complex matter (bhautika; 'byung gyur) that is manifested is dependent on the predominance of one or the other. These molecules of complex matter then combine into collections of *subtle atoms* (saṃghāta-paramāṇu; rdul phra rab bsags pa). It is massive conglomerations of these collections of subtle atoms that we actually experience as matter in the world.

activity of taking a vow as the example, but both revealing and non-revealing karma can be either virtuous or non-virtuous.

This is the Vaibhāṣika view of the way karma persists in the continuum of an individual. Proponents of this view say that both revealing and the non-revealing karma are form; they are physical. Non-revealing karma is a very subtle type of form, based on the physical elements of the body that commits the revealing karma. It is so subtle that it is not obstructive to other matter, but it is still considered a type of form.

In his *Treasury of Knowledge* Vasubandhu presents the Vaibhāṣika view of the phenomenal world, but he also interjects objections to that view from his own position, which was in accord with the Sautrāntika school. (In later texts he adopted the Yogācāra viewpoint.) This conception of revealing and non-revealing karma was one of the key concepts in the Vaibhāṣika karmic system that Vasubandhu criticises and tries to refute. He rejected the notion that karma was in any way physical. **The Sautrāntika, Yogācāra, and Madhyamaka schools maintain that intended karma (i.e., karma that is intended action) is the *thought* that accompanies the action at the time of performing the action. They insist that *the mind is the thing*; physical action is not in and of itself karma.**

If we take the act of killing as an example, these upper schools assert **that first you have the intention to kill (this is the intention karma) and this sets in motion the act of killing. The physical action or bodily movement of killing is not itself the intended karma. Rather, the intention to kill sets in motion a second thought, a second intention, that actually moves the body during the action of killing. It is *that thought*, which moves the body at the time of the action, that constitutes the intended karma. In the case of an action of speech, it is the thought that moves the voice at the time of the act that constitutes the karma of speech; it is not the sound, or the physical movement that makes the sound.**

For the upper schools karma is always of a mental nature. The physical configuration of the body is actually a neutral phenomenon; in and of itself it is neither virtuous nor non-virtuous. For example, you can put your palms together like this and it can be a gesture of paying respect to your spiritual teacher. But you can put your palms together in exactly the same way as a preparation for striking someone with the intention of killing him. It is the same physical gesture, but one is virtuous and the other is non-virtuous. **It all depends on the intention that lies behind the physical action, not on the physical action itself. For this reason the upper schools insist that karma is mental. First there is the intention karma (which sets the action in motion) and then there is the intended karma (which moves the body or voice at the time of the action).**

Virtuous and non-virtuous Karma

Now we move on to understand the nature of virtuous and non-virtuous karma. **Karma can be classified as either virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral.** Here we will be concerned mainly with the first two. **Virtuous karma can be subdivided into two kinds: *contaminated virtuous karma* and *uncontaminated virtuous karma*. Contaminated phenomena nourish or increase afflictive states of mind; states of mind that lead to suffering and do not lead to liberation.** They may increase affliction when they are taken as objects of cognition, or in the case of mental phenomena, by being concomitant with other states of mind.[33] ***Contaminated karma* is action that is motivated by obscuring afflictions; action rooted in affliction and, once performed, nourishes future affliction.**

Contaminated virtuous karma is also of two types: that which exists in the mind of an ārya being, and that which is present in the mind of an ordinary individual. Since this chapter is discussing the process that brings cyclic existence into being, we will not concern

[33] For an ordinary individual, one who has not reached the level of an ārya by attaining the path of seeing and thereby transforming contaminated states into uncontaminated states, a mental factor (such as memory) is contaminated because it nourishes contamination by means of concomitants. For example, when a man remembers a beautiful woman, contamination increases as concomitant mental factors (such as attachment) arise together with the memory. Even the eye faculty of an arhat is contaminated, because it is capable of nourishing the afflictions of someone else who takes it as an object; for example, someone who sees the arhat's eye and feels jealousy and attachment toward it.

ourselves here with uncontaminated karma, or the contaminated virtuous karma in the mind of an ārya (which we will look at later.) Basically, **cyclic existence is produced by contaminated action performed by ordinary individuals,** and that is what we will focus on here.

There is also another way of dividing karma: as meritorious, demeritorious, and immoveable. **Virtuous karma of the desire realm is called *meritorious*. Non-virtuous karma in the desire realm is called *demeritorious* karma.** (Non-virtuous karma only occurs in the desire realm; it does not exist in the form and formless realms, so in fact all non-virtuous karma is demeritorious karma.) Ie, meritorious and demeritorious karma are only created by beings of the desire realm. **Contaminated virtuous karma of the form and formless realms is called *immoveable* karma.** As the *Treasury of Knowledge* states:

> Meritorious karma is virtuous karma of the desire realm.
> Immoveable karma is karma in the upper realms.

Why is virtuous karma of the form and formless realms called "immoveable"? **In the desire realm, where we live, both virtuous and non-virtuous karma are *movable* or *variable*.** For example, if you create a virtuous karma that should bear fruit as birth in a deva realm, under certain conditions the result of that karma could vary or change to birth in another realm, perhaps as a human, an animal, or even as a hungry ghost. However, in the upper realms, when you create karma that should ripen in some particular level, it will never ripen in another level; it never varies. For example, if you are on the level of the first concentration in the form realm, and you create karma that is the cause to be born in the second concentration, that is where you will be born; it will not vary or be moved. As the *Treasury of Knowledge* states:

> Why? Because karma that should ripen on one level
> Does not move to another level.

2" How karma is accumulated

First we are going to discuss what types of karma ārya beings can accumulate. Here we have to make a distinction between āryas, or *superior beings*, and *ordinary individuals*. Āryas are those who have attained the direct realisation of the truth, which means they have reached the *path of seeing*; they have gained the direct realisation of emptiness. Ordinary individuals are all other beings, like ourselves, who have not yet directly realised our true nature. Sometimes āryas are called "those who see the other side". Ie, they can directly see the cause and effect of cyclic existence and the cause and effect of emancipation; they have directly realised this cause and effect relationship. Ordinary individuals like us are those who only see this side. We cannot see beyond our own circumstances, beyond what we directly experience.

Āryas *can* accumulate *uncontaminated* karma. For example, ārya bodhisattvas have a *subtle mental body* which is not created by afflictions or contaminated karma, but is produced by the subtle propensities of the obstacles to knowledge that have not yet been purified, together with uncontaminated karma. But what we are talking about here is the cause of cyclic existence, and only contaminated karma acts as such a cause. In terms of contaminated karma, āryas only accumulate contaminated *virtuous* karma, which is virtuous karma motivated or dominated by afflictions. It is virtuous, but it is not pure in that it tends to increase affliction rather than lead to emancipation.

This gets even more complicated. There are four levels of ārya beings: stream-enterers, once-returners, non-returners, and arhats. These are the four fruits of the Śrāvaka path. The first two have obtained the ārya state, but they are still capable of accumulating non-virtuous karma. Both of these can be born back in the desire realm. Once-returners can be reborn back in the desire realm one more time; that is where the name "once-returner" comes from. Though they have eliminated many afflictions, they still retain some subtle afflictions that can act as the cause to be born in the desire realm one more time.

The stream-enterer can be born back in the desire realm more than once. Those stream-enterers with the least capacity can be born a maximum of seven more times in the desire realm. Stream-enterers with sharper faculties will return to the desire realm fewer than seven times; they may return only once. It is even possible for a stream-enterer to attain arhatship in the same lifetime. But in no event will they take rebirth more than seven times in the desire realm.

But the *Treasury of Knowledge* explains that "seven times" has a special meaning here. It refers to the maximum times you, as a stream-enterer, can be born *in the same type of rebirth*. You can be born seven times as a human, seven times as a deva, seven times in the intermediate state as a human, and seven times in the intermediate state as a deva. In total, the stream-enterer with the least capacity can be born up to twenty-eight times in the desire realm before attaining arhatship.

To understand how this works, we need to understand a little bit about how the afflictions for each realm of existence are removed. Arhatship is achieved when you have permanently eliminated all eighty-nine of the obscuring afflictions. These include eight factors to be eliminated on the path of seeing, and eighty-one factors to be eliminated on the path of meditation (that is nine afflictions for each of the nine levels of cyclic existence).[34]

The stream-enterer has removed all of the eight factors to be eliminated on the path of seeing, and by this they have attained the ārya level, so they can no longer be born in the lower realms. But they have not eliminated any of the desire realm factors to be eliminated on the path of meditation. The once-returner, in addition to eliminating the factors on the path of seeing, has temporarily suppressed six of the nine desire realm factors to be eliminated on the path of meditation. The non-returner has temporarily suppressed all nine of the desire realm factors to be eliminated on the path of meditation.

Because they have not eliminated or suppressed any of the nine afflictions of the desire realm, the stream-enterer cannot be born in the upper realms, i.e., the form and formless realms. **The practice of suppressing the afflictions of a human rebirth involves meditating on the faults of that type of rebirth and cultivating its antidotes; suppressing the afflictions of a rebirth as a desire realm deva involves meditating on those faults and cultivating antidotes to that type of rebirth.** Eg, if the person attains stream-enterer as a human, he or she will meditate on the faults of a human rebirth and will produce powerful antidotes to being reborn as a human in the next life. Therefore, in the next life this person will be born as a desire realm deva. Then this deva will meditate on the faults of that rebirth and (if arhatship is not attained in that life) will again be born as a human, having cultivated antidotes to rebirth as a deva. Going back and forth, this being will alternate births as a human and as a deva. If he or she is not sharp enough to attain arhatship in one of those lives, it is possible to be born in each life up to seven times. With an intermediate state rebirth preceding each rebirth as a human or a deva, such a being can be reborn a total of twenty-eight times in the desire realm.

Why then does it say in the sutra that the stream-enterer is one who can take rebirth "seven times at the most"? This is analogous to a tree that produces leaves in clusters of seven. That tree might be called the "seven-leaf tree", even though it would have thousands of leaves in total. Similarly, each type of rebirth comes in a bunch of seven. This is the explanation we find in the *Treasury of Knowledge*.

This discussion began with the point that in general, āryas only accumulate contaminated virtuous karma, but that stream-enterers and once-returners can accumulate non-virtuous karma as well. However, **the kind of karma that āryas accumulate is never *projecting* karma; karma that can propel them into a future happy or unhappy rebirth. This is the distinctive difference between the type of karma that āryas can accumulate and the type that ordinary beings accumulate.**

Projecting (Throwing) and Completing (Actualising) Karma

Let's review two main types of karma. ***Projecting karma*** **is the strong karma that projects or throws one into a particular type of rebirth. This is like planting a seed. It is the primary cause of the future rebirth; the cause of being born in a particular realm of existence.** The second type is called ***completing karma*****, or *actualising karma*.[35] This is what actualises a projecting karma. When you throw seeds on the ground in the spring, you still require other supporting conditions to produce crops, such as moisture, warmth, and fertiliser.**

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[34] These nine levels are: the desire realm, four levels of the form realm, and four levels of the formless realm.

[35] For a full discussion of completing or actualising karma, see chapter 14 page 32: "The distinction between projecting and completing karma."

Those supporting conditions are referred to as actualising karma. Like moisture and fertiliser, actualising karma must come together with the seed at the right time if the seed is to germinate and bear fruit; when it does, the actualising karma becomes the direct cause that brings the throwing karma to fruition.

When a person attains the ārya level by means of a direct realisation of the truth on the path of seeing, he or she no longer creates any new *projecting* karma. Although some āryas may be born again in the desire realm or the upper realms, the projecting karma for those rebirths was accumulated *before* they attained the ārya state. During all the innumerable lifetimes prior to their realisation, they accumulated innumerable causes for all kinds of future rebirths. But once they achieve the ārya level, they do not create any new instances of projecting karma. But they *can* create new actualising karma, which matures and brings to fruition previously accumulated seeds to be reborn in cyclic existence.

Nāgārjuna says in his *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* (Mūlamadhya- maka-kārikā):

> The root of cyclic existence is formative action,
> Therefore, the wise do not act to accumulate karma,
> Therefore, the unwise are those who do.
> The wise do not, because they see reality.

He is saying that **the root of cyclic existence is the action that produces the seeds for birth; projecting karma.** The "wise" are the āryas, those who do not create projecting karma because they have directly realised the emptiness of the self, the ultimate truth. Because they have achieved that realisation, ignorance has no power to lead them to take the kinds of actions that accumulate this kind of karma. It is only the "unwise", ordinary individuals, who produce projecting karma. Vasubandhu makes the same point in his *Explanation of the Divisions of Dependent-Arising (Pratītya- samutpādādi-vibhaṅga-nirdeśa)* when he says: **"For those who have seen the truth, there is no projecting karma."**

Therefore, Tsongkhapa says, as long as you remain under the influence of ignorance, which grasps at a mistaken conception of self, and as long as this misconception dominates your mind and all your actions, you will continue to create this kind of karma. Once you have directly realised the "suchness of selflessness" directly, although you may still be born in cyclic existence as the result of *previously accumulated karma* and afflictions, you will not create any *new* projecting karma.

As Asaṅga says in his *Levels of Yogic Deeds*, once you have the mental power of the realisation of selflessness, it overpowers ignorance and the karma that is created by the inferior force of ignorance, just as a strong man beats a weak one. Thus, stream-enterers and once-returners, who do not assent to grasping at a self but, in fact, have eliminated it, no longer newly accumulate the karma to be born in cyclic existence.

Therefore, those who create the karma to project cyclic existence are those ordinary individuals who remain at a level below the highest level of the *supreme worldly stage* of the Mahayana path of preparation. As mentioned earlier, **there are five paths leading to enlightenment: the path of accumulation, the path of preparation, the path of seeing, the path of meditation, and the path of no-more-learning**. One becomes an ārya when one attains the path of seeing. Before that, one is on the path of preparation, and the *supreme worldly stage* is the last of the four stages on the path of preparation. This stage can also be divided into three progressive levels, so here reference is made to the highest level of the supreme worldly stage. This is the last moment before the path of seeing. That is why it is called the supreme *worldly* stage, because it is the last step before one directly realises selflessness, enters the path of seeing, and becomes an ārya.

All the sentient beings at this level or below are ordinary individuals who accumulate projecting karma, the karma that projects samsaric life. They are operating under the power of afflicted ignorance and the view of the transitory collections, holding the "I" as real, substantial, and permanent. When they perform non-virtuous actions, such as killing, it creates demeritorious karma, which will cause them to be born in the lower realms. When they perform virtuous actions of the desire realm (such as the practice of giving or keeping ethical

conduct) they create meritorious karma. And when they cultivate meditative states such as single-pointed concentration (which are included on the levels of the form or formless realms) they create immoveable karma. **All of these are *contaminated* karma. They are actions rooted in ignorance and the impulse to gratify and satisfy the immediate needs of a self that does not exist the way it is conceived to exist.**

It appears that **until you achieve the ārya stage, every action you take will be a cause of continuing in cyclic existence. Even virtuous actions such as prayer, making offerings, observing vows; even high levels of meditation such as trying to achieve single-pointed concentration or highest insight; even actually attaining the very high subtle states of meditative stabilisation such as the four concentrations of the form realm or the formless absorptions of the formless realm; all of these virtuous efforts are being described here as further causes of life in cyclic existence.**

Contradiction and Paradox

All actions (whether virtuous, non-virtuous, or immoveable karma) are included within the second of the four noble truths; they all belong to the truth of the *cause* of suffering. It appears, then, that until you attain the stage of an ārya, everything you do is wrong, doesn't it? You can't move! Now we have to deal with that question.

The following objection is raised: what about the practitioner who has clearly seen the disadvantages of all worldly wonders, whose only interest is to obtain complete freedom from cyclic existence, and who has accomplished many virtuous actions with that pure motivation? And what about those practitioners who have not yet achieved the ārya stage, but who nevertheless possess a conceptually clear and accurate understanding of the meaning of selflessness. Is the virtuous karma they create (which is similar and close to the wisdom that analyses selflessness) also included as a cause of cyclic existence?

The answer is as follows. In general, practitioners who are on the first two paths (the path of accumulation and the path of preparation) do accumulate ordinary projecting karma. However, virtuous motivations such as those just mentioned, or the virtuous mental karma that is similar to the wisdom that analyses selflessness, actually constitute a part of the *antidote* to the craving for future samsaric existence. It is clear that seeing the faults of all worldly wonders, or seeking complete emancipation from cyclic existence, or meditating on selflessness, are all antidotes to attachment to samsara, because they are directly opposed to the ignorance of grasping at a self that is the very root of cyclic existence. Since they operate in a manner contradictory to the perpetuation of cyclic existence, these cannot be considered ordinary projecting karma, which is part of the truth of the cause; they are not the actual projecting karma that perpetuates cyclic existence. However, because they are *supportive* of the actual projecting karma producing future rebirth, they *are* included within the truth of the cause.

Right now you do not have the direct realisation of emptiness. Until you attain that realisation, all of your virtuous actions (even when motivated by the thought of renunciation, or when they involve some level of understanding selflessness) are still contaminated by the subtle influence of the ignorance that grasps at a self. When you are reborn into a samsaric existence, these virtuous actions become the cause of obtaining pleasant conditions, but they are still contaminated by ignorance, and therefore they are included within the truth of the cause of suffering.

Among the four noble truths, the first two (the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering) are to be abandoned. The third and fourth (the truth of cessation and the truth of the path) are to be implemented. The paradox here is that these contaminated virtuous actions (such as renouncing samsara and meditating on selflessness) are being categorised as part of the truth of the cause, and therefore as practices to be abandoned. Once you attain the direct realisation of selflessness, your virtuous actions become part of the truth of the path. At that point the ignorance of self-grasping has been replaced with the wisdom that realises the true nature of the self, and so your actions become purely, totally contrary to the cause of cyclic existence. But until that point, even your virtuous actions are included within samsaric causality.

This does not mean that you should not be practicing all of these virtuous actions. These are the actions that actually lead directly to the accomplishment of the higher paths. Nāgārjuna said that **even those who think about the teaching of emptiness *with doubt* are fortunate; simply having the curiosity to investigate emptiness from a position of skepticism (not yet convinced whether emptiness is true or not) is enough to cause samsara to begin to decompose.**

The source of this interpretation is Asaṅga's *Compendium of Determinations*, which says:

> If someone asks: why are those worldly practices that destroy the craving for rebirth and generate the super-mundane path leading in the opposite direction included within the truth of the cause?
>
> We reply: although essentially they are not on the side of rebirth in cyclic existence, they still are supportive of the positive activity of the body, speech, and mind, which is the cause of future happy rebirths. Therefore, you should understand that they are included within the truth of the cause.

The point being made here is that these contaminated virtuous actions are essentially very favourable attributes; their nature is to be an antidote to cyclic existence. Nonetheless, they do function as supporting causes that, in association with previously accumulated projecting karma, lead to future rebirths in the higher realms of cyclic existence. Because they have this samsara-producing aspect, they belong to the truth of the cause.

Tsongkhapa says that having carefully considered the faults of cyclic existence, you produce a mind that feels repugnance for samsaric life and is interested only in gaining freedom from it. Motivated by that thought of renunciation, you engage in the kinds of virtuous actions that will eventually produce the super-mundane path. These virtuous practices are the true fulfilment of renunciation and the real cause of escaping samsaric life. Nevertheless, they are similar to and supportive of certain causes of rebirth in cyclic existence. Therefore, although they are not the actual cause of future rebirths, they are included within the truth of the cause.

This is the way the solution to this paradox has been taught. **The most important thing is to understand that even though you have not yet obtained the ārya stage, you must apply your energy and effort to developing this thought of renunciation and the wisdom that realises selflessness. These practices will lead you to the ārya stage, even though they are considered part of the truth of the cause of suffering.**

Therefore, whatever meritorious Buddhist practice you engage in, you should keep certain principles in your mind.

1. **First, you should examine and come to recognise the faults of cyclic existence, and by this practice generate a sincere thought of renunciation. The true thought of renunciation involves generating a powerful aversion to the entirety of cyclic existence, from the most terrifying hell realms up to the most blissful abodes of the gods.** When you clearly understand how all life within this samsaric cycle is produced by karma and afflictions and is subject to dissatisfaction and suffering, you will be inspired to focus all of your energy on the practices that lead to emancipation from this condition. All virtuous activities that are motivated by that thought of renunciation become part of the antidote that counteracts attachment to the wonders of samsara, and will ultimately lead to emancipation from cyclic existence.
2. **The second principle that should guide your practice is the view of selflessness; you should direct your actions toward cutting the root of cyclic existence by attaining the wisdom that realises the lack of an inherently existent self. The root of samsara is the so-called "egoistic view". This is the ignorance that grasps at a mistaken conception of self, that perceives an ultimately existent nature of the self and of all phenomena. This ignorance underlies all other obscuring afflictions and is the fundamental root of all the karma that creates cyclic existence.**

   The antidote to this process of karmic causality is to turn the mind in the opposite direction, and this is done by analysing the meaning of selflessness. The direct reali-

sation of selflessness on the path of seeing will initiate the true antidote that cuts out ignorance from the root. But well before you achieve that level, just by hearing and thinking about the right view (by examining, analysing, and meditating on selflessness) you can undermine the attachment that causes so much contaminated karma, and you can turn your actions into antidotes to cyclic existence.

3. **The third principle that should guide your virtuous activities is bodhicitta, the altruistic intention to attain emancipation for the sake of others. You come to see that all other living beings are the same as you in being trapped in this deep ocean of misery. You should find it unbearable to see the inexhaustible nature of their suffering, and you should make the solemn determination that you will free them from this situation and lead them to the perfect life of buddhahood.** This bodhicitta motivation is based on cultivating great compassion and loving-kindness. Even before you have become an ārya (even at the early stages of your practice) you can generate this kind of compassionate, loving-kindness attitude from the heart. As long as the thought of compassion lies behind your virtuous activities, they will become part of the antidote to samsaric existence, and they will ultimately lead to the perfection of bodhicitta.

Tsongkhapa places great emphasis on these *three principal paths: renunciation, bodhicitta, and the view of emptiness*. When **all of your virtuous practices are aspects of these three paths, they become antidotes to cyclic existence and they lead toward emancipation.** When virtuous actions lack these three principles as their motivation and purpose, they become ordinary causes for rebirth in cyclic existence; ordinary aspects of the truth of the cause of suffering.

There are some situations in which, even though your virtuous actions are not motivated by one of these higher principles, they still would not become ordinary causes of rebirth. This is mainly due to the power of the object of your virtuous practice. For example, when you make offerings or prostrations to the spiritual teacher, the buddhas, and bodhisattvas, these powerful objects of practice enable your actions to achieve a special level of merit, and cause them to become part of the antidotes to samsara.

Such cases, however, are exceptions to the rule. In general, virtuous actions taken without one of these three higher motivations become merely causes for higher rebirths and happy circumstances in future samsaric lives. As such, they are ordinary parts of the truth of the cause. You should reflect on this and **make an effort to bring all of your practices under the power of the thought of renunciation, or under the power of bodhicitta, or under the power of the wisdom that realises emptiness. These are the principal paths leading to the highest goals of sentient beings.**

We are talking about the way karma is accumulated. In regard to whatever karma we sentient beings create, whether virtuous or non-virtuous, we can say that all our actions are for the purpose of finding some kind of happiness. In some cases, as in the higher deva realms and the formless realms, we are trying to achieve a peaceful, neutral feeling. But in general we can say that all beings are acting in order to obtain some kind of mental happiness or physical pleasure. **Nobody is trying to obtain suffering.** Although we constantly create karma that becomes the cause of suffering, **nobody is creating karma with the intention of producing suffering for themselves.** Therefore, we can understand the process of accumulating karma in terms of two categories:

(a) Accumulating karma for pleasant feelings
(b) Accumulating karma for neutral feelings

(a) Accumulating karma for pleasant feelings

(i) Accumulating karma for the pleasure that comes from enjoying desirable objects: sights, sounds, and the like

Here we are mainly talking about sensual pleasure: the pleasurable experience of form, sound, taste, smell, or touch. Most of the pleasures of the desire realm (which includes the

three lower realms, humans, and the desire realm devas) are sensual pleasures. In the desire realm, most karma is accumulated in the effort to achieve some type of sensual enjoyment.

There are two types of action intended to achieve sensual pleasure. If your object is to achieve pleasure only in this life, then you are mainly accumulating demeritorious karma. In contrast, if you are mainly seeking pleasure for a future life, you are accumulating meritorious karma. The actions you will have to take to achieve desire realm pleasures in your next life (such as a happy rebirth, long life, wealth, and beauty) will be meritorious, such as observing ethical conduct, giving charity, and practicing patience. When your only concern is this life, then even when you try to practice virtue (by meditating, making offerings, observing ethical conduct, and the like) there is actually no virtuous intent because you are only acting for the sake of immediate pleasure. Therefore, your actions are demeritorious karma. There is a Kadampa saying that goes, "If you circumambulate merely for the sake of this life, it will become the cause of birth in hell, the hungry ghosts, or the animals."

(ii) Accumulating karma for gaining bliss in meditative concentration, after you have rejected attachments to external sensual pleasures

Thus far we have been talking about pleasures we gain from external objects. This is actually a crude form of pleasure compared to the more subtle experience of the devas of the form and formless realms. Such beings are not attracted to sensual pleasure because, to them, sensual pleasure is such a rough type of experience that it seems like suffering. The pleasurable feeling they enjoy arises from meditative concentration; this is much deeper and more subtle than externally based pleasures.

Those who engage in such activities as focusing on a meditative object, mainly in order to experience the bliss that arises from meditative stabilisation, accumulate immovable karma. The bliss being referred to here is the special kind of mental happiness that arises from meditative stabilisation, and is experienced in the first three concentrations of the form realm. Achieving a particular level of meditative stabilisation leads to rebirth in a corresponding level of the form realm. So when meditators reach one of these higher meditative states, they are accumulating immoveable karma, and that karma becomes the cause to be born into one of the first three levels of the form realm.

At each succeeding level of the form and formless realms, the body-mind continuum becomes more subtle and experience becomes more refined. At the level of the first concentration of the form realm, beings still experience physical pleasure. On the second and third concentrations, however, there is no more pleasure, but there is still mental happiness. On the fourth concentration there is neither pleasure nor mental happiness, and from there on through the formless absorptions there is only neutral feeling; the experience of deep, peaceful meditative absorption.

(b) Accumulating karma for neutral feelings

When you have turned away from attachment to sensual pleasure, and on top of that you have lost interest in the mental happiness of meditative bliss, you may engage in activities for the purpose of experiencing neutral feeling. Then you will be accumulating immoveable karma that will become the cause for rebirth in the fourth concentration up through the four formless absorptions and their highest level: the peak of existence.

At these levels the mind is extremely subtle and calm, deeply engaged in meditative absorption. From our current position here in the desire realm, we can hardly imagine the subtlety of these states and the nature of the neutral feeling they experience.

When we speak of "activities" or "karma" you engage in to be born in these states, we are not talking about any physical action. This karma is deep meditation. The more subtle the level of meditative stabilisation you achieve, the higher the level among the four formless absorptions you will be born into. The highest level in the samsaric world is the "peak of existence."

This explanation follows the thought of Vasubandhu according to his *Treasury of Knowledge* and its auto-commentary. The key to this system is understanding the following: those beings who accumulate karma for the sake of sensual pleasure are born in the desire realm; those beings who accumulate karma for the sake of the mental happiness from meditative bliss are born in the first three levels of the form realm; and those beings who accumulate karma for the

sake of the neutral feeling of the deepest meditative absorptions are born from the fourth concentration up to the peak of existence.

Tsongkhapa then takes this approach to its logical conclusion. All these beings are creating a particular type of karma in their quest to experience some form of happiness and freedom from suffering. Because of their attachment to those gross and subtle forms of pleasure, their karma becomes the cause of further rebirth within cyclic existence. However, by the same logic, if you end that attachment and you feel nothing but revulsion for the whole of samsara (from the hell realms up to the peak of existence) and you engage in virtuous activities purely for the sake of achieving complete freedom from samsaric existence altogether, you will leave cyclic existence further and further behind and emancipation will grow nearer and nearer.

With this topic we have concluded the discussion of karma in the *Lamrim Chenmo*. **We have learned about its divisions, how it operates, and how it is accumulated. It is very important to study the cause and effect of karma so that you can make it the basis of your own actions in the future. By studying, thinking about, and meditating on the details of karma, you can integrate your understanding with the way you live your life, and this will create a solid foundation for progress on the path.**

c" The process of death and rebirth

We have been discussing the process that gives rise to cyclic existence. We have looked at how the obscuring afflictions arise and how they cause karma to be accumulated. Now **we examine how these two causes, karma and affliction, give rise to the process of death and rebirth**. This explanation has five parts:

1" Conditions of death
2" The mind at the time of death
3" Where heat gathers
4" How you reach the intermediate state after death
5" How you then take rebirth

1" Conditions of death

There are three conditions that cause death.

1. The **first is death due to the exhaustion of the life span**. Obviously, when you die you have exhausted the span of your life, but that is not the meaning here. This means that **whatever life span was originally projected by the projecting karma that produced that rebirth has been spent**. It is like the expression in English: "His time had come". When there is no interruption to your natural longevity and you live out the length of life that was originally projected, that is death due to the exhaustion of life span.

   This type of death can occur after a long life or after a short one; it depends on the karma that initially projected that life. Some karmic seeds will produce a very short life. If you have the karma to be a human for only a very short time, you might die immediately after birth; some infants even die in their mother's womb. On the other hand, some humans live more than ninety years. Any of these could be death due to the exhaustion of the life span.
2. **The second condition is death due to the exhaustion of merits. This takes the form of dying from a lack of the necessities that support life. The merits you have accumulated are the cause for the food, clothing, shelter and all the basic requirements that make life possible.** When these merits are exhausted, those supporting conditions disappear, resulting in death from poverty, hunger, cold, or other conditions of deprivation.
3. **The third condition is death due to the failure to avoid unfortunate circumstances. This refers to dying an untimely death due to carelessness, putting yourself in danger, and doing things you could have avoided.** In the sutras we find nine examples of this cause of death:
   1. Overeating.
   2. Eating unsuitable, unhealthy, or poisonous things.
   3. Eating before you have digested the previous meal.
   4. Not fully eliminating undigested food that has accumulated in the stomach.

5. Obstructions that block the passage of digested food.
6. Not using medicines appropriately. This means that certain substances when taken individually may be beneficial, but when mixed together they can cause illness.
7. Not knowing what requires practice and what does not. This refers to trying to imitate people who have special skills and do dangerous things. An example of this would be trying to climb a difficult mountain or walk across a tightrope when you have not trained to do so.
8. Going somewhere at the wrong time. At certain times, certain places are dangerous, so if you go there at that time you may have a serious accident.
9. Certain types of sexual conduct can also cause untimely death.

Some of these causes, like overeating, are familiar to all of us, so we should be careful not to cause our own untimely death.

Of these three general causes of death, **dying due to the exhaustion of life span is the one that you cannot do anything about. Once your life span is projected by previous karma, you cannot change it by your own efforts. For the others, you can accumulate more merits during your lifetime, and you certainly can avoid putting your life in danger in the ways we have just described.**

2" The mind at the time of death

(a) Dying with a virtuous mind

As you approach death, the grosser levels of consciousness dissolve and the more subtle levels come to the fore. **The final *subtle dying mind* is always neutral, never virtuous or non-virtuous.** This level of consciousness rises in the last moments of the death process. Organs and sense faculties have already stopped functioning, breathing has stopped, and the mind is becoming more and more subtle with less and less control by the dying person. In the final moments at the end of this life, the subtle dying mind arises and it is always neutral.

Prior to that very subtle level of mind, as long as the grosser levels of consciousness are still active, the mind can be virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral. **It makes a great difference to your future rebirth whether you die with a virtuous mind or a non-virtuous mind. When death comes with a virtuous mind you are born in a higher rebirth; when it comes with a non-virtuous mind you will be going to a lower rebirth.**

The mental state when you are close to death is very important. The question is: "**What determines whether the mind goes in a virtuous or non-virtuous direction during that final period of life"? If you spent your life cultivating virtuous qualities (eg, faith in the Three Jewels) as death approaches your mind will naturally return to those virtuous objects, because it is accustomed to those kinds of thoughts.** However, **if you spent your life absorbed in anger or hatred, your mind will go *that* way at the time of death. If you were obsessed with desire and attachment during life, *those* afflictions will possess your mind during death. It is the power of one's own habitual action that takes control of the mind.**

Secondary, supportive conditions that nourish the main karmic seeds and enable them to sprout become extremely important at this stage of the death process Just as a seed planted in the ground requires supportive conditions to sprout and yield fruit, the powerful karmic seeds in your mental continuum able to project a future rebirth require supportive conditions to nourish and activate them. **At the time of death the most powerful karmic seed will act as the projecting karma, with power to cast you into a particular kind of rebirth. Other seeds become secondary supportive conditions that nourish & activate that projecting karma.**

There are *three* particular supportive conditions that come together at the time of death to nourish and activate the previously planted projecting karma: two forms of attachment, which act as the moisture that nourishes the seed. When these two appear in the context of the twelve links of dependent origination (next chapter), we call them **"craving" and "grasping".** The first, *craving*, is a general attachment to cyclic existence, the desire for pleasure to continue and for discomfort to cease. When craving intensifies into the urge to reach out and grasp the object of desire, that is the second form of attachment: *grasping*.

The third nourishing factor is like the warmth that is necessary for a seed to germinate. This third factor's secondary action is a *similar type of karma to the main projecting karma*. If the projecting karma is non-virtuous, non-virtuous thoughts (mental karmas) arise at the time of death and act as that third supportive condition. If the projecting karma is virtuous, then virtuous thoughts arise and nourish that main seed. Once these three conditions activate that seed, you take rebirth in your next life.

The mental karma (thoughts) of the dying person as he or she approaches death act as an essential condition, along with craving and grasping, which nurture and activate the main projecting karmic seed. That is why it is so important to guide the mind to the side of virtue as one approaches death.

Generally, whatever type of action (virtuous or non-virtuous) you were accustomed to performing during your lifetime will be the most powerful type of seed in your continuum; it is this that will naturally come to mind at the time of death. Gradually other thoughts become weaker and weaker until they are forgotten. At that point the mind is completely absorbed in those most powerful, habitual actions and, with those actions propelling the mind, you take rebirth.

Of course, at the time of death the person does not have much control over his or her own mind, even at the gross level. Sensory awareness has disappeared and even conscious thinking has faded away, so the mind is essentially passive. Under those circumstances the influence of previous experience stored in the mind as karmic propensities becomes the dominant force determining what will come into the mind. If you were accustomed to doing non-virtuous actions during your life (for example, if you were a slaughterer of animals or a fisherman) thoughts of killing will naturally push to the surface when your mind is in this passive state. If your life was spent practicing powerful virtues, those are the thoughts that will come to the mind most vividly.

There is a verse from Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Knowledge* that describes which types of karmic seeds ripen first at the time of death:

> In the round of karma that produces rebirth, karma will ripen in the following order:
> 1st whichever karma is heaviest, 2nd whichever is nearest, 3rd whichever was most habitual, 4th what was previously performed.

This means that the dying mind will be influenced by whatever is the heaviest karma accumulated during that lifetime; that karma is what will project the next rebirth. If you have powerful negative *and* positive seeds in your continuum, and they are of equal weight, then whichever was performed closest to the time of death will ripen first. If the powerful karmas are also similar in terms of closeness, then whichever was more habitual during that lifetime will ripen first. When all of these criteria are equal, then some other karma that was performed earlier in this lifetime, or a strong karma from a previous lifetime, will ripen at the time of death.

According to this principle, the heaviest, or nearest, or most habitual action will naturally come to mind during the death process. If you have cultivated a strong Dharma practice, you can direct your mind to virtuous objects as your time to die approaches by intensifying your practice and eliminating all other concerns from your thoughts. It is also possible for someone else (someone who is sitting with you as you die) to influence the direction your mind will take. This kind of assistance, which leads the dying person's mind toward faith and other virtuous qualities, can be tremendously beneficial and can make a great difference in determining the next life.

For example, when a man who has engaged in a Dharma practice during his lifetime is dying, his friends and relatives may know what his daily practice consisted of. Then, as long as the dying one can still hear, someone can sit beside his bed and remind him of those practices, perhaps reading the prayers or mantras that he recited every day. The person providing this assistance may be a spiritual teacher, a relative, or a close friend. This person can gently guide the dying man's mind back to the virtuous practices he cultivated when he was still alive and healthy. This also keeps the mind focused on virtuous thoughts and pulls it away from wandering to unwholesome objects. This type of outside help leading the mind in a positive direction can be quite helpful.

Also, it is important to avoid disturbing the peaceful mind of the dying person. Sometimes people gather near the deathbed and indulge in all sorts of distracting conversation, with a lot of crying, or arguing, or expressions of fear. When the dying person hears this disturbing chatter, negative thoughts and emotions of anger, fear, or attachment can be churned up. That kind of distracting talk can cause real damage to a person who is about to die.

Knowing how to assist people through the dying process can be especially useful for those (such as doctors, nurses, and social workers) who work in the medical and helping professions. You need to do a little research to determine what kind of spiritual practice the dying patient was involved in, or what his or her belief system and values were. With that knowledge, you can discuss these things with the dying person in a way that guides his or her mind to the positive side. Usually, we are helpless to change other people's karma, and when they are close to death there is little we can do for them. But **seeing to it that the external conditions are peaceful, and trying to guide their mind in the virtuous direction, can influence the way their death process proceeds and can be a very good and helpful thing to do.**

The process of falling asleep offers an experience that is similar to the death process. The thoughts you are having as you fall asleep influence the entire sleep session. Even those who are intensively engaged in virtuous practices may get angry just before going to bed. If they dwell on their anger as they fall asleep, that powerful negative mind will determine the nature of their sleep, their dreams, and even how they feel when they wake up in the morning. Conversely, those who normally are enmeshed in unwholesome actions may have a virtuous thought enter their mind just as they are falling asleep. In that case, the mind enters sleep in a peaceful, virtuous way. This is analogous to the process that takes place at the time of dying.

Here we are with this precious human rebirth that can achieve so much. If you cannot achieve enlightenment in this lifetime, you should at least have confidence that your next life will be a high rebirth and you will not fall into a lower realm. **In order to have this kind of confidence when the time of your death arrives, you must begin right now eliminating negative thoughts and actions and cultivating a mind that is naturally directed toward virtues. If you spend your healthy years accustoming your mind to Dharma practice and accumulating a storehouse of merits, this preparation will serve you very well when you arrive, as you inevitably will, at the process of death.**

Finally we come to a description of the inner experience of those who are dying. **The experience at the time of death is like being in a dream. Those who have practiced mostly virtuous actions during their life feel as though they are passing out of thick darkness into light, like walking toward a field of bright shining sunlight. They do not encounter terrifying or repulsive forms. As in a pleasant dream, they find themselves in an attractive place where they meet a variety of friendly, beneficial beings. They die peacefully, and at the point of death do not suffer from severe pain or physical discomfort. Those who have practiced with an awareness of the cause and effect of karma pass smoothly and without great misery into their next life when the vital essence of this life is finally extinguished.**

(b) Dying with a non-virtuous mind

How does the process go for those who have engaged primarily in non-virtuous actions? As long as the gross level of discrimination persists, **their mind is filled with negative thoughts, which arise naturally as the result of their previous habits. In some cases they are reminded of previous harmful actions by external conditions or by other people. And at the time of death they experience severe pain in their bodies.**

These beings have unpleasant experiences that foreshadow the results of the negative karma they have created. For example, **they may have nightmares in which they meet terrifying creatures or undergo horrible torments. Such visions, which foretell the future awaiting them after they die, cause deep anguish and even physical pain, and often cause the dying person to scream, groan, cry, and shake. They have the experience of passing from a place of light into thick, impenetrable darkness.**

When those who have committed great negative actions see these signs of their un-

welcome future, they experience such physical pain and fear that their hair stands on end, their limbs flail, and they lose control of their bladder and bowels. They seem to be falling, and reach out to the sky as if they were trying to hold on to something. Their eyes roll back and bubbles gurgle from their mouth. Those who have committed the heaviest types of negative karma will meet this kind of experience at the time of death.

For those who have committed an intermediate amount of negative karma, the experience will be less severe; some of the things just described will occur and some will not. **In general, when the vital essence of their life is finally extinguished, those who have practiced non-virtuous karma pass with great difficulty and misery into their next life.**

This kind of suffering at the time of death is experienced by the beings in all the types of rebirth except for devas and hell denizens. The devas of the form and formless realms experience no physical pain or mental anguish. For hell beings, their existence has been such pure pain that the death process cannot be any worse than what they have already experienced.

All beings (whether dominated by virtue or non-virtue, for as long as the gross level of consciousness is proceeding and until the last moment when discrimination becomes completely unclear) **feel a strong attachment to the self. This is something they have been accustomed to for a very long time. Under the power of that attachment to the self, they feel as if they are headed toward nonexistence, that their self is being annihilated.** From that fear a strong attachment to the body arises as they grasp at their physical embodiment. That attachment to the body becomes one of the main causes of birth into the intermediate state.

Of course, every samsaric birth (that is, each time you take a new body) requires both karma and affliction. First a strong projecting karma plants the seed of the next rebirth; then, at the time of dying, the supportive secondary conditions arise that nourish that seed so that it sprouts into a new birth. At the moment of death, attachment to the body acts as the affliction that brings about birth into the intermediate state.

When we discuss the twelve links of dependent origination in the next chapter, we will see that the eighth and ninth links are the two levels of attachment we mentioned earlier: craving and grasping. These two act as supportive secondary conditions that nourish and activate the main karmic seed, just as moisture nourishes a dry seed in the earth. **At the moment of birth into the intermediate state, it is grasping at a body that acts as the affliction that activates the projecting karma and sends the dying person into that rebirth.**

What happens to ārya beings at their time of death? When they reach their time to die, **stream-enterers and once-returners still retain attachment to self. However, because of the power of their direct realisation of selflessness, they do not willingly fall under the influence of this attachment. Viewing the self with the wisdom of analysis, rather than assenting to and grasping at a self, they reject it.** As we mentioned earlier, their wisdom realising selflessness overpowers self-grasping just as a strong man beats a weak one.

As for non-returners, they no longer possess attachment to self because they have abandoned all attachment to the desire realm.

(c) Dying with a neutral mind

Those whose actions have not been predominantly virtuous or non-virtuous, but mostly of an ethically neutral nature, generally have neutral thoughts coming to mind as they proceed through the death process. They do not have a strong experience of either pleasure or pain.

For all beings, the last moment of mind is always neutral. If you are dying with a virtuous mind, that virtuous mind sustains only as long as the gross levels of consciousness are active. It is the same for a being who is dying with a non-virtuous mind. Gradually the five sense consciousnesses and the mental consciousness dissolve into more and more subtle levels. Once the gross levels of consciousness have ceased and the subtle levels have come to the fore, the virtuous or non-virtuous states of mind stop and the mind becomes ethically neutral. At that point you can no longer access your previous virtue, even though you were accustomed to it for a long time. Others cannot turn your mind in that direction because you can no longer hear or cognise speech. **A certain amount of cognitive clarity is necessary for a thought to be virtuous or non-virtuous.** The gross levels of mind that function while you are

alive have thoughts that are clear and have virtuous or non-virtuous intent. But **the subtle mind at the time of dying does not have that kind of clarity simply because it is so subtle.**

Once the consciousness has dissolved to that most subtle level of mind, all minds of death are neutral. An outsider looking at your body at that time would say that you are already dead, because your breathing has ceased, and your sense faculties and all internal organs have stopped functioning. Only the subtle mind is active at this stage, and it is on the verge of passing on to the intermediate state.

3" Where heat gathers

We have now finished the conditions that cause death, and the various states of mind that arise as one experiences death. Now we turn to another aspect of this process in which **an external sign appears that helps indicate what type of rebirth a dying person can expect.**

Those who have created predominantly non-virtuous karma, and who will therefore be born in a lower rebirth, lose their heat from the upper part of their body first. The head of such a person will be the first part of the body to become cold, and gradually this cold feeling will make its way downward to the heart area. For those who have created predominantly virtuous karma, it is their feet that first lose heat, and the body cools progressively from the bottom up to heart. In both cases, the consciousness finally exits the body from the heart area. At the moment of conception consciousness enters the fertilised ovum (what is traditionally called the joined "semen and menstrual blood") and the place where it enters the ovum eventually becomes the heart of that body. Then, at the end of that life, consciousness exits the body from the same place.

Although it is not explicitly stated in the commentaries that explain this process, it is understood that after the heat gathers in the heart from the upper or lower end of the body, the heat from the opposite end also gathers at the heart, so that all the heat is collected there when the consciousness departs.

4" How you reach the intermediate state after death

At the very final moment of death the consciousness transfers from the heart of the old body into the intermediate state. This movement from the old body to the new one is described as virtually simultaneous, like the movement of a balance scale: when one end goes down, the other end goes up.

Just as with all samsaric rebirth, the two causes of karma and affliction come together, like a father and mother, to produce birth in the intermediate state. The first cause (the particular affliction that causes rebirth into the intermediate state for most beings) is attachment to the body. (For some beings who have higher realisations, it is a joy over their previous virtuous activities.) The second cause is a virtuous or non-virtuous karma.

In the intermediate state you take a body that resembles the form you will have in your next life. If you will be born as a human, you take a human-like body; if you will be an elephant, your intermediate-state form resembles that of an elephant. However, the intermediate-state body is much, much more subtle than the material body of the approaching life.

The sense faculties of an intermediate-state body are always complete and fully functional, but again, they are far more subtle than ordinary organs. For example, the eyes are like the so-called "divine eye", which can see a great distance without obstruction, right through solid objects such as walls. The whole body is so subtle that it too can pass through solid obstructions as if it possessed supernatural powers. The mind only needs to think that it wants to go to a certain place and it immediately arrives at that spot. This subtle body can travel into space, under water, or through fire without suffering any ill effects. The *Treasury of Knowledge* says:

> Because it is projected by the same karma,
> It has the form that it will have in the "previous-time existence",
> That is, after the first moment of conception
> And prior to death in the next life.
> It is seen by beings of the same type and by beings with the divine eye.
> It has supernatural powers due to karma.

Its faculties are complete and unobstructed.
It cannot be reversed. It eats odours.

The term "previous-time existence" refers to the life of beings between the moment they are conceived up until the time of their death. The word "previous" here refers to the time *prior to death*. The *Treasury of Knowledge* says that there are **four states of existence**, and "existence" must be understood here as the **coming together of the five aggregates**. The **"birth existence" is the very moment of conception, when the consciousness enters the mother's womb**. From that moment onward until the moment of death (i.e., **the entire lifetime) is called the "previous-time existence".** The **final moment of death is called the "death existence". After that comes the "intermediate-state existence."**

Tsongkhapa takes pains to clear up certain misconceptions about the form that a being takes in the intermediate state. Some have mistakenly interpreted this term "previous-time existence" to mean that in the intermediate state one takes a body in the form of their *previous* life, but this is incorrect. It is equally wrong to interpret the canonical texts, as some do, to say that for three and one half days one takes a body like the one of the *previous* life, and that for the next three and one half days this body changes to one resembling the body of the *next* life. He says that these interpretations have no textual basis and should be considered pure fabrications. **The form in the intermediate state looks like the body you will have when you are born in the next life.**

The first line of this verse from the *Treasury of Knowledge* makes the point that **the intermediate-state existence is projected by the same karmic seed as the lifetime that follows.** Since one karma projects both the intermediate state and the rebirth that follows, it makes sense that one will have the same form in both those rebirths.

Furthermore, as the *Levels of Yogic Deeds* points out, consciousness does not remain in the previous body; it no longer has any relationship with that form nor any desire for that form. Therefore, it is a complete fabrication to claim, as some do, that the being of the intermediate state becomes distressed upon seeing its previous body.

Who can see an intermediate-state being? Intermediate-state humans can see others of the same type, but cannot see, for example, intermediate-state hungry ghosts. Also, meditators who have obtained the supernatural vision of the divine eye by means of attaining a high level of meditative equipoise will also be able to see intermediate-state beings. This of course includes buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats and other āryas. Unlike those meditators, however, the supernatural powers that the intermediate-state being possesses are not achieved by means of meditative accomplishment, but are purely due to the power of karma.

As we have just discussed, prior to death it is possible to affect one's rebirth by using special practices and guiding the mind in a virtuous direction. According to the *Treasury of Knowledge*, once you are born into the intermediate state you can no longer "reverse" or affect the type of rebirth you are about to take in the next life. However, the *Compendium of Knowledge* by Asaṅga **maintains that the coming rebirth can be changed even *after* taking birth in the intermediate state.**

Based on this latter theory, **people in some Buddhist countries like Tibet recite many prayers and perform special tantric rituals for seven weeks after a person dies.** Forty-nine days is the longest a being will remain in the intermediate state before moving on to the next rebirth. These special practices are performed because it is believed that there is a chance for certain external conditions to affect the rebirth of the dead person. These external conditions include the invoked power of the buddhas and bodhisattvas as well as the power of the meditative equipoise and realisations of those performing the rituals.

The Qualities of the Intermediate State

Now we turn to a description of the intermediate states themselves. **For those who have created powerful non-virtuous karma, the intermediate state appears gloomy, as when rain clouds darken the sky; sometimes it is a darkness as deep as the night. For those who have accumulated virtuous karma, it appears light, like a white cotton cloth or the night sky when it is lit with moonlight.**

The *Descent into the Womb Sutra* describes the colours of the intermediate state this way:

> **For one who will be born in the hell realms the intermediate state appears like the scorched stump of a tree. For one to be born as an animal it looks like smoke. The intermediate state of the hungry ghosts is like seeing water. For beings to be born as desire realm devas and humans the intermediate state is like gold. The intermediate state of beings to be born in the form realm appears white.**

When you die in the formless realm and are to be born in the desire realm or form realm, you do pass through an intermediate state existence. However, if you are going the other way, and are about to be born in the formless realm from the two lower realms, you do not pass through an intermediate state but proceed directly from the present life to your existence as a formless being. This is the only exception that can be found in authoritative texts where a being is not born in an intermediate state after death.

Therefore, it is incorrect to claim that those who commit one of the automatic transgressions (such as killing one's father or mother or an arhat) go directly to a rebirth in the hells without passing through an intermediate-state existence. Because the Sanskrit and Tibetan terms for these five most powerful negative karmas literally mean "without any interval", some have mistakenly taken this to mean that there is no intervening birth in the intermediate state. But the term "without any interval" actually refers to the fact that those who commit these extremely non-virtuous deeds will definitely be born in a hell realm after they die, and that no intervening birth in another realm is possible. These beings do take birth in the intermediate state before they are born in hell, but their stay in the intermediate state is extremely brief.

It says in the *Descent into the Womb Sutra* that in the intermediate state of the devas it seems as if the beings are moving uphill. In the human intermediate state, beings seem to moving straight ahead. Those who are going to be born in lower rebirths move with their heads lowered and eyes cast downward as if walking downhill. The *Treasury of Knowledge Auto-commentary* has a different description. It says, "Humans, hungry ghosts, and animals each move in their own manner". In other words, in the intermediate state these beings move in the same way they move in their own realms.

The life span of beings in the intermediate state depends on when they find suitable conditions for rebirth. Sometimes the necessary conditions for their next rebirth come together very quickly, in which case a being spends a brief time in the intermediate state. In such cases the intermediate state may last just a moment, a day, or a few days; there is no set length of time. In cases where the right conditions cannot be found, it is possible to remain in one body in the intermediate state for a maximum of seven full days. If you do not find a suitable rebirth in those seven days, you die and are born again in another body in the intermediate state, at which point another period of seven days begins. As soon as the right conditions are met you take rebirth into your next life. But if the conditions are not met, you can be reborn into the intermediate state up to seven times. That means the maximum stay in the intermediate state is seven rounds of seven days, or forty-nine days. The duration of a day in the intermediate state varies. For beings who are going to be born human, a day is the same length as our human day, but for most of the other types of beings it is much longer.

As we mentioned, according to the higher Abhidharma system found in Asaṅga's *Compendium of Knowledge*, the karma of a being can change even after taking birth in the intermediate state. In accordance with this view it is possible, for example, that a being who is born as a deva in the intermediate state dies after seven days and is then born back into the intermediate state as a human, or in some other form. This type of change is caused when a change in a being's karma changes the seeds that are projecting the rebirth.

5" How you then take rebirth

Following your stay in the intermediate state comes your next rebirth. The moment of conception in that next life is called the "birth existence". There are four types of birth, or birth-sources: birth from an egg, birth from a womb, birth from moist heat, & miraculous birth.

We begin with a description of birth from a womb. While residing in the intermediate state, by the power of karma you observe other beings of the same type in the place where you are going to be reborn. For example, if you are going to be born as a human, you see other humans in the place you are about to be born. You are not actually seeing real people, but by the power of karma you have a kind of dreamlike vision of them.

You then want to have contact with them (to play with them and talk to them) and this desire inspires an urge to go to that place. There you see the joined semen and blood (that is, the fertilised ovum) of the father and mother and, as a result of distorted vision, you misperceive this as the father and mother lying together engaged in sexual intercourse. Asaṅga's *Levels of Yogic Deeds* says that such sexual contact is not actually happening at that time, but this is how you misperceive the fertilised ovum in an illusory vision. This perception causes attachment to arise. If you are going to be born as a female, you feel desire for the man and want to lie with him, and you want to stay away from the woman. If you are going to be born as a male, you desire the woman and want to join with her. Driven by that desire you approach closer and closer to the man and woman, but as you get closer the rest of their bodies disappear, leaving only a vision of their genitals. This makes you angry. **At that moment you die from the intermediate state and you take rebirth in your next life.**

What is the material locus where the consciousness enters? The father and mother are inspired by desire to engage in sexual activity. The desire becomes intense and at its culmination a gelatinous semen is emitted by the father. Then, within the mother's reproductive organ, drops of the father's semen mix with the ovum of the mother, traditionally referred to as the "drop of blood". When these two "drops" are joined together, they congeal into a substance that has the consistency of the skin that forms on boiled milk when it cools. This is the material cause of the body in the new life. Simultaneously **the intermediate state existence ceases and the consciousness enters this fertilised ovum:** the united drops of semen and blood.

According to the Yogācāra system, **this main consciousness that enters the new body is called the "foundation consciousness"** (often translated as "store-house consciousness"). Those who do not accept the existence of the foundation consciousness (the other three tenet systems of Buddhism: the Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, and Madhyamaka) hold that it is the mental consciousness that carries the karmic seeds and takes rebirth in this new body.

Until the consciousness enters, the combination of blood and semen is an inert, unaware material liquid. By the power of that entering consciousness, the blood-and-semen combination is brought into contact with the four great elements[36] in their subtle aspect, giving rise to the subtle level of the five sense faculties. In this way a transformation is brought about in the previously inert, purely material blood-and-semen combination; **it comes to life**. **Awakened with consciousness and the sense faculties,** it is now something other than the material substance that was there before the consciousness entered; it is **now a sentient being**.

If you boil milk, then you let it cool off a bit, and then you add a yoghurt culture, this combination of warm milk and culture brings about a transformation that we call "yoghurt". In a somewhat similar manner, consciousness (which is the mental faculty) brings with it the subtle aspect of the great elements, which are the material cause of the subtle sense faculties, and together they bring about a transformation of the inert liquid of the blood and semen into an aware, sentient being, enlivened by the mental faculty and the five sense faculties. Remember that in the intermediate state, although your body is so subtle it can pass through walls, you always have all five faculties fully functioning. This is a very subtle level of the physical faculties, brought into the new body with the consciousness. If you are born as a blind human, it is because something goes wrong with the gross faculty as it develops, but in the intermediate state the subtle level of that faculty was complete and fully functioning.

The moment at which the consciousness enters the fertilised ovum is what we call "birth". "Birth" or "rebirth" does not refer to the moment you come out of your mother's womb; it points specifically to that moment of conception, when the consciousness enters the mother's womb and joins with the combined blood and semen: the beginning of the new body.

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[36] The four great elements; earth, water, fire, and wind. See footnote 32 page 83

As you proceed through this process you have various experiences, depending on the nature of your rebirth. **If you have accumulated very little merit, then even though you are being born as a human you will be born into a low class, or a generally humble condition.** As you die in the intermediate state and then enter the womb, you are disturbed by a howling, clamorous noise, and it appears as though you are entering a muddy swamp, or a dense, prickly thicket. Such experiences arise in a dreamlike fashion. Conversely, **if you have been practicing virtue, you will begin life with a high birth.** The experience of dying and entering the womb will be a peaceful one, as you hear sweet sounds, and feel as though you are entering a beautiful mansion or even a celestial palace.

After conception you remain in the mother's womb for thirty-eight weeks, during which the trunk of the body, the limbs, and all the organs grow to completion. Four days after that you are born. This is a general description of the process; some individuals are born sooner and some later. The *Descent into the Womb Sutra* deals with this birth process in detail, and you can study that text if you are interested in knowing more about the birth process. This sutra says:

> If the foetus remains there for nine months or longer, it will be fully developed. After eight months it is fairly complete but not fully developed. After six or seven months it will not be complete and the limbs will not be fully developed.

As I said earlier, **samsaric rebirth requires karma and affliction joined together,** like the father and mother. **The main affliction, which acts like the glue that joins things together, is desire. If the intermediate-state being does not have the desire to go to a particular place of rebirth, it will not be born there.** Then how is it that beings are born into the hell realms, which certainly is not a place they desire to go?

Take as an example someone who has **created the karma to be born into hell by butchering sheep, poultry, or pigs throughout his or her entire life.** The term for this kind of habitual, dedicated, **negative action is "anti-vow" or "non-vow".** It is similar to a vow in that it involves an intentional lifelong commitment to engage in a certain kind of action. The butcher who slaughters animals in order to support his family does this because his father and grandfather were butchers before him. It is a lineage that may go back many generations. They **make a deep, lifetime commitment to this activity** as their livelihood and way of life. It is as if they take a vow to slaughter animals for as long as they live. **This anti-vow creates a powerful non-revealing negative karma that is always with the butcher,** so that even when he is not actively killing an animal, that **commitment and intention to keep killing constantly produces negative karmic potential.**

If we take that butcher of hogs as an example, he has created the cause to be born in hell. When he is in the **intermediate state he sees the place he is going to be reborn, but what he sees,** as if in a dream, **is a lot of hogs.** He has worked with hogs during his whole life, so he is very pleased to see them, and he is eager and excited to go there. However, when he arrives he does not find what he saw in his dreamlike vision. The hogs are not there, and instead he finds the kind of hell he is about to be born into. With that, desire is lost and anger arises. When the anger arises he dies from the intermediate state and is immediately born into that hell realm. Some hungry ghosts live in circumstances that are almost as bad as hell, and they take rebirth in a similar manner.

One feature of this explanation of rebirth into the hells is that the object of attraction is not necessarily similar in type to what you will become in your rebirth. For example, what attracted the butcher was the hogs that he used to kill. Still, it is an object that is pleasing and the being wants to get to it and have contact with it. Other beings who are destined for hell, but who do not possess such powerful negative karma as those with the anti-vow, go through a similar process of death and rebirth into the hell realms. This explanation is according to the *Levels of Yogic Deeds* by Asaṅga.

In general, intermediate state beings who are going to be born as animals, hungry ghosts, humans, desire realm devas, and devas of the form realm, go through a similar experience. They observe the place where they will be reborn, and there they see living beings who are

similar to themselves. If they will be born as a dog they see dogs, and being delighted to see these similar beings they are attracted and have a strong desire to get to that spot.

You may have had an experience something like this in a dream. You see some attractive object and try to reach it, but when you go there you find nothing, or perhaps the attractive object has turned into something else. Even in a dream **this can make you angry. For the beings of the intermediate state, when that anger arises they die, and they are directly born in the place they were attracted to.** Remaining in the intermediate state is a delicate mental balance. You stay only as long as you have strong attachment to the experiences there. When your reaction reverses and becomes anger and strong aversion, you immediately die from that place and you are cast into whatever is your suitable next rebirth. All of this happens as the ripening of your karma.

In his explanation of this process in the *Treasury of Knowledge*, Vasubandhu says, "Others go out of a desire for odour or an abode". This means that beings who are about to be born from heat and moisture are attracted by some distinctive smell, and going toward that they die from the intermediate state and are reborn. Those to be born from egg take birth in a process that is similar to those born from a womb.

Beings who will take miraculous birth (such as devas and most hell denizens) feel a strong attraction to a particular kind of place and are spontaneously born there. For example, a likely cause of taking birth in a hot hell is having killed others by burning them to death. Let's say you have committed such heavy negative karma and you have died and taken birth in the intermediate state. When it is time to die in the intermediate state and go to your next rebirth, you will have a dreamlike experience of feeling very cold. You will be shivering and thinking to yourself, "How nice it would be if I could be someplace really hot". That kind of craving for intense heat will bring you directly to a rebirth in a hot hell. If you are going to born in the cold hells, you will feel too hot and dream about being plunged into icy water. This is the process as it is explained in the *Treasury of Knowledge*. In general, Tsongkhapa says, he has explained the process of death and of taking rebirth in accordance with the presentation in the *Levels of Yogic Deeds* by Asaṅga.

This brings us to the conclusion of the section on contemplating suffering and the cause of suffering, which was the first of the two methods for producing the mind that strives for emancipation. **In this section we have focused on the first two noble truths: the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering, which is karma and afflictions.**

Now we turn to another approach the Buddha used to explain the cause and effect of cyclic existence: the analysis of the twelve links of dependent origination. This presents another method for discovering the true nature of the self and, thereby, for breaking out of the cycle of samsaric suffering.