Chapter 21 The Twelve Factors of Dependent Origination

b' Contemplating the twelve links of dependent origination

All the teachings of the Buddha are methods for obtaining liberation from cyclic existence. When we practice according to the presentation in the *Lamrim Chenmo* we are engaging in Mahayana practice, so we are not striving merely for our own salvation. **Our ultimate goal is to benefit all sentient beings by leading them to liberation as well. In order to achieve that goal for others we must first develop the wish to achieve liberation for ourselves.** This is why we are studying these practices, which are common to the beings of intermediate scope and which lead to individual liberation from cyclic existence.

In order to generate the powerful motivation required to follow this path to its ultimate conclusion, **we need to begin with a clear realisation of what is wrong with cyclic existence and why we should want to get out of it.** After all, we ordinarily enjoy this existence. Since beginningless time we have been enjoying it, wanting to continue living within it, endlessly involving ourselves with it. The negative mind says, "What is wrong here? Why do you want to spend so much energy trying to get free of this pleasant place"? **This attitude is rooted in not knowing the faults of cyclic existence and not understanding its true suffering nature. We crave birth in samsara because we do not realise what a thoroughly miserable situation it really is.** That is one of the main causes of not being able to gain freedom from it.

For this reason we have been looking at various ways of understanding the faults of cyclic existence. We examined this in terms of **the Buddha's teaching of the four noble truths, analysing the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering.** Now we look at the nature of cyclic existence from another angle, **in terms of the Buddha's teaching of the twelve links of dependent origination.** This is not an easy topic to understand, but by studying it, analysing it, and then meditating on it, we can come to understand quite clearly how cyclic existence evolves. This can lead us to a direct and clear understanding of selflessness.

When you understand how each link in this chain of causality gives rise to the next link, you also grasp the means by which you can interrupt this process of samsaric evolution by cutting the causal links at certain points. As the Buddha said, **"When this is, that is. When this arises, that arises. When this is not, that is not. When this ceases, that ceases".** By meditating on the links in this chain of causality, in both the serial and reverse orders, you come to realise the process that gives rise to cyclic existence as well as the means by which that process can be interrupted. This is the great benefit of familiarising yourself with this teaching on the twelve links of dependent origination.

We are not talking about gaining just a theoretical understanding of this teaching, but **a realisation that leads to direct transformation of your daily life and the behaviour of your body, speech, and mind. When you replace ignorance (the first link in this chain) with wisdom, you naturally bring about a revolution in your actions, your karma; the second link.** Up until now all of your actions have been directed toward the samsaric side. But **once you begin acting out of wisdom, everything turns around completely and whatever you do becomes the practice of purification, leading ultimately to emancipation.**

Studying, thinking about, and meditating on this teaching of the Buddha has really only one purpose; **to bring about an inner transformation**. It is not about intellectual understanding or some external show of knowledge. **We have to deal with the root of the problem, beginning from ignorance and proceeding from there.** We have to integrate our realisation with our experience. Emancipation depends on this inner realisation. That is the main goal of studying these twelve links of dependent origination.

It is not, as I said, an easy topic to understand, but you begin by hearing about and studying it, then thinking about and analysing it. Then, by meditating on this topic, your mind becomes totally familiar with the causal nexus that gives rise to samsaric existence. By understanding this causal process you will come to a firm understanding of selflessness. If you apply your understanding to your daily life, putting it into practice with your body, speech, and mind, and you use your understanding to strive for emancipation from cyclic existence, then as you cultivate

this realisation you will be able to practice properly, and in time you will achieve your goal of liberation for yourself and others.

This topic (contemplating the twelve links of dependent origination) has four parts:

1' The division into twelve links
2' The condensed presentation of the links
3' How many lifetimes are required to complete the cycle
4' How to summarise their significance

1' The division into twelve links

The theory of the twelve links of dependent origination, or dependent arising, was taught by the Buddha to show the process of cause and effect by which the circumstances of cyclic existence arise. The multifarious effects that we experience as life in samsara arise from a conjunction of many, many different causes and conditions. There is nothing that arises without depending on causes and conditions. When something arises, it always depends on something else.

What we will be discussing here, in particular, is the *dependent arising of affliction*. This is a presentation of the way impure, samsaric phenomena arise based on causes and conditions having at their root the obscuring affliction of ignorance. In contrast, it is also possible to talk about the *dependent arising of purification*, in which you look at the causes and conditions that bring about liberation from cyclic existence. For now, we will be dealing with the afflicted, samsaric side of the twelve links of dependent origination. And the first of the twelve factors (the most fundamental root of samsara) is ignorance.

1. Ignorance

Ignorance is the root cause of everything in samsaric life, from rebirth to all the experiences you have in all your lifetimes. All these experiences are the ripening results of karma; karma depends on afflictions; and all the afflictions depend on ignorance.

What is ignorance? There are different systems of explanation regarding this term. The *Treasury of Knowledge* says, "**Ignorance is like an enemy or a falsehood".** To understand why Vasubandhu defines "ignorance" this way, let us first look at its etymology. The Sanskrit word for "ignorance" is *avidya*, with a meaning "not" and *vidya* meaning "knowing". Similarly, the Tibetan term is *ma rig pa*, with ma meaning "not" and *rig pa* meaning "knowing". The English word "ignorance" is composed of the very same elements; it comes from the Latin *ignārus*, in which the prefix *i* means "not" and *gnārus* means "knowing". However, the point that the *Treasury of Knowledge* is making is that ignorance is not a *mere absence* of knowing. It is more **like an "enemy",** someone who is not merely not a friend (such as a stranger), or *other than* a friend (such as a tree), but rather **someone who is the very *opposite* of a friend; someone who is actively *un-friendly*.** In the same way, a "falsehood", or "un-truth", is defined as the *opposite* of true words; it is **a statement that *contradicts* the truth**.

So the ignorance we are talking about does not imply the mere absence of knowing; after all, a piece of stone has an absence of knowing but we do not call it ignorant. **Ignorance is something that is *contrary to* and *directly opposed* to knowing.** Here, **in the Buddhist context, "knowing" or "wisdom" refers specifically to the wisdom that knows the true nature of the self and the true nature of phenomena. The cause of cyclic existence is *not knowing* the true nature of the self, and as a result of that, grasping at a *false* conception of self. That is ignorance: not only does it not know the self, but it grasps at a conception of self that is contradictory and opposed to its true nature.** Ignorance is not the mere absence of knowing wisdom, nor something other than that wisdom; **it involves holding affirmatively to a conception that is contradictory and incompatible with knowing wisdom.**

On this issue Tsongkhapa presents two points of view. First he quotes the great master Dharmakīrti who said in his *Commentary on the "Compendium of Valid Cognition"*:

> Here, **the antidote, knowledge, is understanding the truth, the meaning of the selflessness of persons. Its opposite is the view of the transitory collections, which grasps at a self of persons.**

The antidote of ignorance is *knowledge*, which is seeing the truth, **understanding the meaning of selflessness.** The opposite of that is the *view of the transitory collections*, which regards the five aggregates and based upon that collection imputes a substantial self, which is then conceived of as real, independent, and substantially existent.

The great master Asaṅga and his brother Vasubandhu do not agree that ignorance is actually *grasping* at an incorrect conception of reality. They say that ignorance is merely *not knowing* the true nature of reality. This definition is more in tune with the common usage of the term "ignorance", as not knowing something clearly.

These are the two definitions of ignorance. The first sees it as a *wrong understanding* of reality. The second sees it as a mere *not knowing* the truth. Tsongkhapa says that **regardless of this disagreement, all agree that the principal antidote of ignorance is the wisdom that realises selflessness.**

According to Asaṅga's *Compendium of Knowledge* there are two types of ignorance.

a. The first type is **not knowing about the cause and effect of karma and its results**. This ignorance of the consequences of virtuous and non-virtuous actions underlies non-virtuous action, and it is this type of ignorance that gives rise to lower rebirths.
b. The second type of ignorance is **not knowing the true nature of ultimate reality.** It is this type of ignorance that leads to the actions that cause you to be born in higher rebirths within cyclic existence. To be born in higher rebirths you must accumulate virtuous karma, but those **virtuous actions are still motivated by an interest in gratifying a self that does not exist**. **The root motivation of samsaric virtuous karma is ignorance of the true nature of the self.** Even beings in the upper realms, who abide in the subtle bliss of meditative equipoise, act out of the ignorance that grasps at a mistaken conception of self. Although each individual act has its own immediate, proximate motivation, the fundamental motivation that underlies them *all* is this grasping at a false conception of self.

For both of these types of ignorance the antidote is knowledge, understanding, and realisation; and the ultimate antidote to the fundamental misconception of self is the wisdom realising selflessness.

2. Formative activity - Karma

Formative activity refers to the actions that arise because of ignorance, which become the causes and conditions that eventually bring all future results. In short, this refers to karma. **Karma is action of body, speech, and mind. There are two types: non-virtuous or demeritorious karma, which produces unhappy rebirths, and virtuous karma, which produces happy rebirths.** As we explained earlier, there are two types of virtuous karma: meritorious karma, which projects rebirth in the desire realm, and immovable karma, which projects rebirth in the form or formless realms. **For all samsaric karma the underlying cause is ignorance.**

3. Consciousness

The third link is consciousness. In general, the sutras speak of six consciousnesses: the five sense consciousnesses plus mental consciousness. For those who adhere to the Yogācāra[37] system, where eight types of consciousness are described, the consciousness of this third link is what that system refers to as *foundation consciousness*. For those who do not accept the existence of a foundation consciousness, this link refers to the *mental consciousness*.

Motivated by the ignorance of self-grasping, you take actions of body, speech, and mind. Each action deposits a seed or impression on the consciousness, which carries that seed forward as a potential, which will eventually ripen and yield a result in the form of some type of future life experience.

In order to discuss this more clearly we can divide consciousness into two stages. First there is the consciousness that receives the impression deposited by a seeding action; this is referred to as the *causal consciousness*. For example, because of the ignorance of not knowing the cause and effect of karma, you perform negative actions. All negative actions, such as harming others by killing or by stealing, are done to benefit oneself; after all, beings act under

[37] Includes Tibetan and Zen

the misapprehension that what they are doing will bring them happiness. This fundamental ignorance of cause and effect causes beings to perform harmful actions. As soon as a particular non-virtuous action is completed, it deposits a seed on the consciousness, which is carried forward as a potential that will ripen in the form of suffering experience in the future. The consciousness that receives this seed, and carries it forward without interruption until the conditions are met for that seed to ripen, is called the *causal consciousness*. In general, it is this causal consciousness that we refer to as the third link of dependent origination.

When a non-virtuous seed that was *previously* deposited on that causal consciousness ripens and gives rise to a new unpleasant birth, the first moment when that consciousness becomes conjoined with the new life is referred to as *resultant consciousness*. Thus, when we speak of the **two stages of consciousness, we are referring, first to consciousness during the time it is functioning as a cause, and second, to that consciousness at the first moment of its ripening as a result.**

The process works in the same way when you perform virtuous karma, which has as its underlying motivation ignorance about the true nature of self. Because of the ignorance that grasps at an inherently existent self, you act in ways that you believe will make that self happy; you may make offerings, give charity, observe pure ethical conduct, and perform other virtuous actions. These actions deposit seeds on the consciousness, which are carried forward until they ripen into happy rebirths at some time in the future. This virtuous karma (which is "contaminated" because it is motivated by ignorance) becomes the cause of birth in the desire realm as a human or deva; in the case of immovable karma, it ripens as birth in the form or formless realms. The consciousness that receives and carries forward those karmic seeds is called the *causal consciousness*. The consciousness at the first moment when such a seed ripens as birth in one of these happy migrations is called the *resultant consciousness*.

4. Name and form

The fourth link is called "name and form" (nāma-rūpa). **"Name" refers to the combination of the four nonphysical aggregates: feelings, discrimination, formative activity, and consciousness. For the Buddhist schools, these non-physical parts of the mind-body continuum, which combine to create the mental life of an individual, are what we are really talking about when we talk about a "person", a "being", a "personality", or a "life."**

"Form" refers to the physical aggregate, what we commonly call the "body". For all beings (except those in the formless realm) consciousness joins with the body, the form aggregate, at the moment of conception, and as the five aggregates come together and develop, life begins. That developmental period is called "name and form". If you are born in the formless realm you have only four aggregates; you have *name* but no *form*. All other beings have all five aggregates; they have both *name* (the four mental aggregates) and whatever *form* is appropriate to the realm in which they are born.

There are two different views on whether the beings of the formless realm have form or not. According to the Yogācāra system they have no form at all. Other schools, including the Madhyamaka, say that although there is no gross body, beings still have the "mere seed" of form, which means they have an extremely subtle body of form; and this is the view of tantra as well.

When the Buddha first taught the twelve links of dependent origination, he was speaking to human beings, so he laid out this evolutionary process in a manner that applies to *human* development. To better understand what name and form is actually talking about we can take a human life as an example. From the time that the consciousness first joins with the fertilised ovum (the mixed parental blood and semen) all five psychophysical aggregates are already present. These five aggregates, during the period between conception and the stage when the six sense organs have developed, is given the designation "name and form". The body, consisting of the combined blood and semen before the six sense organs have developed, is called "form". The four mental aggregates as they exist in this developmental period are designated "name" because they form a basis or referent for naming.

Traditionally, we have a description of five stages of development in the womb. The first stage is when the consciousness joins the mixture of parental semen and blood, called *mer mer po* in Tibetan. Then this coagulates into a small soft mass called *nur nur po*. Then it grows

longer, into an oval shape called *nar nar po*. This oval mass grows longer, and as it does it becomes harder and more substantial, called *trang gyur*. In the final stage the embryo begins to develop limbs and is described as "having five bumps"; this stage is called *kang lag gyu*.[38]

In brief, **the period during which the foetus is developing through these five stages, up until the six sense organs are complete, is designated "name and form."**

5.The six sense bases

Here we have the continuation of the development of the mind-body complex described in the name and form link. Again, we can take a human life as our example. At this stage of the gradual growth of the sense faculties, the body faculty has already been established, but the eye, ear, nose, and tongue faculties are still developing. "The six sense bases" refers to this developmental phase, during which the person develops the *capability* to experience an object through the coming together of sense faculty, object, and consciousness, although that contact has not yet taken place. In other words, with the completion of *name and form* you have an actual body; then, with the completion of the *six sense bases*, the specific physical properties of that embodiment are fully developed, and the sensory faculties thereby become utilisable instruments.

This process of gradual development takes place for beings born from a womb, from an egg, or from warmth and moisture. For those with miraculous birth (such as devas and beings in the intermediate state) the sense bases do not gradually evolve but are fully manifested at the moment of birth. This is explained in Asaṅga's *Levels of Yogic Deeds*.

6. Contact

Once the sense faculties are complete, they begin to operate. *Contact* is the moment when a faculty, an object of cognition, and a moment of consciousness meet. In dependence on this moment of contact, the object is distinguished as either attractive, unattractive, or neutral. There are six kinds of contact, corresponding to the six faculties and the six types of consciousness: tactile, visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and mental.

7. Feeling

Depending on whether you have contact with an attractive, unattractive, or neutral object, you experience a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling. When contact and feeling are complete, the experience is complete.

Let us look again at this whole process of the evolution of a human being, thinking of the being as an *experiencer*. All samsaric life is experience, and whatever you experience within a particular life is due to causes and conditions; your physical form and your mental life are both the results of karmic seeds planted at an earlier time.

The human as experiencer has these two parts: the physical and the mental. The physical aspect coalesces in the mother's womb with the union of the parental semen and blood, and the consciousness joins at the moment of conception. As we said earlier, with the completion of name and form you have an actual body. At that stage of the fertilised ovum enlivened with consciousness, you have obtained the entity of a body, although the details of its shape have not yet fully manifested. By the power of karma, the body with its faculties continues to develop and, at the stage of the six sense bases, the sense faculties come to their full manifestation. At that point the entire physical instrument that enables the being to be an experiencer is complete; all the particular physical requirements and capacities to experience life (to be a *subject* who experiences an object) are in place. The faculty, consciousness, and object are now linked together.

Then comes contact; the point at which a faculty, consciousness, and object meet. This meeting creates experience as a consciousness grasping an object as attractive, unattractive, or neutral. In other words, from contact feeling arises. In dependence on whether you come in contact with an object you determine to be attractive, unattractive, or neutral, you experience a feeling that is pleasant, suffering, or neutral. This is the way you experience life; feeling is the experience of the ripening of your karmic seeds. Some-

[38] These are the five stages of gestation. They are difficult to translate, but their Sanskrit terms are: arbuda (mer mer po), kalala (nur nur po), peśin (nar nar po), ghana (mkhrang 'gyur), and praśākhā (rkang lag 'gyus).

times you have pleasant feelings, sometimes you have unpleasant feelings, sometimes they are kind of neutral. One feeling after another; this is the way you experience your life. Most of the effort of your life is directed at striving for pleasant feelings.

Each experience of feeling is the ripened fruit of karmic seeds you planted in the past, the results of causes you created by your previous actions. Beings in the form and formless realms experience only pleasant, peaceful feelings during their whole life. Inhabitants of the lower realms (hell beings, hungry ghosts, and many animals) experience mostly suffering feelings. For humans and some other beings in the desire realm, experience is mixed. **But *all* beings in cyclic existence experience feelings that are the ripening of their previous karma.**

Contact is the point at which the subjective components of experience (the faculty and consciousness) meet and utilise the object; at that point the object's role in the experience is complete. **From that contact, *feeling* (the subjective reaction) arises; this is the experience of the object as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This feeling is the ripening of previous karmic seeds, and once that feeling has arisen, the entire experience is complete; the karmic seeds have yielded their fruit.**

8. Craving

Craving is attachment. When an enjoyable feeling arises you become attached to it. You do not want to separate from it; on the contrary, you want more and better. Even when pain and discomfort arise there is a craving, but in this case the craving is to be free from that unpleasant feeling.

Tsongkhapa points out that the statement, "Craving arises as the result of feeling" needs to be qualified. Feeling itself is not the ultimate cause of craving; **craving is caused when feeling is *accompanied by ignorance*. In the twelve links, ignorance is the root cause that sets the whole process in motion**. When a particular feeling arises, it is rooted in ignorance and dominated by ignorance. When a feeling of pleasure or aversion arises toward an object, that object is being perceived in a distorted way. Because of ignorance, the feeling arises based on this mistaken perception: when that feeling is pleasurable you desire the object and want to possess it; when the feeling is unpleasant you desire separation from the object. In either case the feeling gives rise to the craving only because it is dominated by ignorance.

Craving is another word for desire. We need to keep in mind that not all desire is non-virtuous. There are certain kinds of virtuous, pure desires, such as the desire of a bodhisattva to liberate all sentient beings and free them from suffering. When a desire like that is free of ignorance or other afflictions, it does not operate to perpetuate entrapment in cyclic existence. **Once ignorance is cut out from the root, feelings still arise but craving does not.** For example, arhats experience pleasant feelings, and buddhas also have blissful feelings. Because these feelings are not dominated by ignorance, they will not give rise to craving or attachment.

This nexus between the seventh and eighth links provides a good illustration of how these twelve links operate as a chain of causation. A feeling is the culminating result of a previous set of causes (ignorance, karma, consciousness, etc.) and when that feeling arises that particular sequence of cause and result is complete. But at the same time, that feeling is giving rise to a new craving, which may take the form of attachment, aversion, or some other affliction. That new craving will motivate new karma, and a whole new cause-result sequence will be set in motion by the completion of the last one. In this way the chain of experience within one lifetime, and the chain of lifetimes within cyclic existence, perpetuate themselves. That self-perpetuating process is what the twelve links of dependent origination are really talking about.

There are three types of craving (and in this context we might prefer to use the term "attachment" to refer to them): there is attachment that belongs to the desire realm, attachment that belongs to the form realm, and attachment that belongs to the formless realm. Consider the following question: "How are phenomena distinguished that belong to the desire realm, to the form realm, or to the formless realm"? The distinction is based on the type of attachment that any particular phenomena give rise to; they become part of that realm of existence based on their capacity to generate attachment to that particular realm. Phenomena of the *desire* realm nourish attachment to *that* realm, and phenomena of the form realm nourish attachment

to *that* realm. These points make it clear that this **eighth link of craving, or attachment, plays a central role in perpetuating and structuring samsaric existence.**

9. Grasping

In the eighth link we took a form of desire or attachment and we called it "craving". This craving then gives rise to a more intense, more powerful form of attachment, which we call "grasping". **Craving is a general attachment to objects. Grasping augments craving in a way that strengthens and actualises the ripening of karmic seeds into samsaric rebirth or other experiences.** Grasping is divided into four categories based on four types of objects:

1. **"Grasping out of desire" refers to attachment to sensory objects we enjoy in the desire realm: form, sound, smell, taste, and tangible objects; referred to as the "attributes of the desire realm". Here in the desire realm the mind is dominated by sense consciousness.** Between mental objects and sensual objects, we ordinarily have a stronger attachment to sensual objects. In this realm, beings spend their whole lives chasing after the attributes of the desire realm, such as attractive forms, delicious tastes, and fragrant smells. They feel happy when they find such pleasures and they suffer when they do not.

   Higher up, in the form and formless realms, beings do not even use the tongue or the nose because they have no need to eat or smell. The beings of these upper realms survive by the very subtle food of samādhi, the nourishment of meditative stabilisation.
2. **"Grasping for views" refers to grasping at any of the various types of wrong view,** with the exception of the view of the transitory collections. These four wrong views, discussed at greater length in several sections below, relate to **certain misguided behaviours and religious practices based on mistaken dogmas, philosophies, and beliefs.** Grasping for views arises when you have a strong attachment to these kinds of wrong views.
3. **"Grasping for mistaken morality and asceticism" is a type of wrong view where you hold that some distorted system of ethics or mode of religious behaviour will lead to emancipation**, ie sacrificing other beings, or burning your body with fire, or imitating dogs or pigs. You become attached to these beliefs and practices based on arguments you find convincing even though they are flawed, and based on these faulty convictions you grasp at mistaken morality and asceticism. Although convinced that you are on the right path, **such perverted ethics and practices lead only to negative karma and future suffering**.
4. **"Grasping for a self" is a strong attachment to self that comes from holding the mental and physical aggregates to be a real "I". This grasping at a false imputation of an absolute, substantially existent self (where there is, in fact, only a transitory aggregation of elements) leads you to hold onto this self with pride, egoism, and attachment.**

   This fourth type of grasping is equivalent to the view of the transitory collections. All of the other afflictions, such as attachment, pride, and jealousy, develop out of this fundamental misunderstanding: the wrong view that imputes an essential self upon the perishable aggregates. If you do not make this mistake (**if you view the nature of the aggregates correctly and do not impute a real self where none exists) then all these other faults and wrong attitudes will not develop.**

These are the four types of grasping taught in the sutras. **The powerful form of attachment of "grasping" acts as the moisture that awakens, stimulates, and nourishes dormant karmic seeds you have deposited on your mental continuum by previous actions.** The latent seeds of past actions are always present, but they require the moisture of attachment in order to ripen and bear fruit. Once the two levels of attachment, craving and grasping, actualise the potentiality of a karmic seed, it ripens quickly into a resultant experience.

For example, in the continuum of an arhat there are many latent karmic seeds deposited by actions taken in the innumerable lifetimes before attaining arhatship. But these remain as dry seeds because they will never be moistened and actualised by attachment. Why? Because without attachment these seeds will never yield their fruit. We can see how these two levels of attachment (called **"craving" and "grasping" here in the context of the twelve links of de-**

pendent origination) are the critical factors in actualising and ripening karmic seeds, and thereby bringing about rebirth and all the experiences of cyclic existence.

10. Existence

The tenth link, **"existence", is the subsequent rebirth brought about by the ripening of the seed planted by the action of the second link.** Specifically, **"existence" refers to the moment just before that next life happens, at the point when the karmic seed is fully actualised and ready to yield its fruit.** So the name of this tenth link, "existence", is a case of giving the name of the result to the cause. The result is a new existence, and that name is given to the **moment when the causes of that new existence have all come together and are about to produce that result.**

Let's look again at how a samsaric rebirth is brought about. There are actually **two distinct periods of causation: a period of seeding and a period of actualisation, or germination**. **Both periods require an action, or karma, coupled with the supportive cause of an obscuring affliction.** At the stage of planting the seed, the first link (ignorance) is the affliction, and the action of the second link (formative activity, karma) is what actually plants the projecting karmic seed that will eventually ripen into the next rebirth.

That seed remains dormant until it is nourished and activated by the moisture of the afflictions of craving and grasping, the eighth and ninth links. The projecting karmic seed is thereby reactivated and ready to yield its fruit as a new rebirth. However, there is one more causal element necessary to complete the causes of this period of actualisation, and that is a secondary karma, an action taken just at the time of death.

There are three supportive causes that actualise the main karmic seed. Craving and grasping are the afflictions that act as the moisture awakening and activating the seed, and then a final karma (which is usually a mental action, a thought at the time of death) acts as the third supportive cause. This final karma will be similar in its ethical tone (virtuous or non-virtuous) to the main karmic seed. If the first two factors are like moisture, then we can say that this third nourishing factor is like the warmth necessary for a seed to germinate. If the projecting karma is non-virtuous, at the time of death non-virtuous thoughts (which are mental karma) arise and act as this third supportive condition; if the projecting karma is virtuous, then virtuous thoughts arise and nourish that main seed. In this way the thoughts of a person who is approaching death act as an essential condition that nurtures and activates the main projecting karmic seed. This is why it is important to guide the mind of a dying person to the side of virtue as he or she approaches death.

This tenth link, existence, is actually the potency that was established by the karma of the second link to bring forth the next rebirth, when it has been fully nourished and activated by craving, grasping, and a final, secondary karma. At that point it is fully empowered to produce the next life, and it is that fully empowered karmic potential that is called "existence". This is the last link in the previous life, the moment just before rebirth. The next existence has not yet come into being, but at the stage of the tenth link it is about to do so; that is why the name of that result, existence, is given to its fully potentiated cause.

11. Birth

The result of that fully potentiated cause is rebirth. **The first moment of that new life, when the consciousness enters its new body, is the eleventh link, called "birth".** Birth can take place by any of the four modes: birth from a womb, from an egg, from heat and moisture, or miraculous birth. Hell beings, devas, and intermediate state beings always have miraculous birth. Hungry ghosts usually experience this type of birth as well, but some are said to be womb-born. Humans and animals share all four types of birth.

12. Aging and death

The twelfth link, which combines **aging and death, begins in the second moment after birth. The first moment when your mental and physical aggregates conjoin there is called birth. By the second moment you have already begun to age. From that moment, aging never stops; you are moving irrevocably toward death.**

Aging is the maturation of the aggregates and the unceasing, unstoppable change they undergo in each moment. Although in every moment you are getting older, and the aggregates are never identical from moment to moment, there is a continuity and an identifiable similarity that distinguishes one being's aggregates from another's. **Death is the cessation of the continuum of that seemingly identical set of aggregates. The continuity of the present aggregates comes to an end at the moment of death.**

Aging and death are combined into one link because death can occur without the common signs of aging such as white hair, a bent body, and the loss of memory. In fact, death can occur immediately after birth, in which case there is hardly any aging at all.

It is traditional to mention, in connection with this link of aging and death, the sorrow, lamentation, and anguish of losing those you love, and the suffering of dying yourself; this is done in order to bring to mind the unsatisfactory nature of cyclic existence. **The previous eleven causes and conditions function in their interdependent fashion to produce an experiencer, a being living a life. Regardless of the nature of that life, in the end it will undoubtedly culminate in the suffering of death.** Although some practitioners who have maintained excellent ethical conduct die with their bodies and minds at ease, the death process in general is one of severe pain and sorrow. The chain of dependent origination by which beings continue to cycle in samsara inevitably ends with the pain and sorrow of its final link: death.

2' The condensed presentation of the links

Having identified each of the twelve links of dependent origination, we now analyse the meaning of this sequence from various points of view. Asaṅga's *Compendium of Knowledge* says that these twelve links can be subsumed under four categories:

> What do you get if you summarise the links? There are four types: projecting factors, projected factors, actualising factors, and actualised factors. Which are the projecting factors? They are ignorance, formative activity, and consciousness. Which are the projected factors? They are name and form, the six sense bases, contact, and feeling. Which are the actualising factors? They are craving, grasping, and existence. Which are the actualised factors? They are birth and aging and death.

From this we see that there are **two stages of this causal sequence. There are the projecting causes, which "plant" the projected effects; and then there are the actualising causes, which bring about the actualised effects.** The question is, "Does this sequence represent one round of rebirth for a given individual, or is it a description of two cycles?"

If these twelve factors represent the cause and effect for only one life, then it seems incorrect to have the set of actualising factors occurring *after* the projected factors. To put it another way, if this sequence represents one cycle of life, why would the projected effects, which are *effects*, come before the actualising causes, which are *causes*? Such an order only makes sense if the sequence describes two rounds of rebirth.

However, if the twelve links represent two rounds of causality for two different lives, then the actualising causes of the latter causal sequence appear inadequate to produce a rebirth, because this group lacks ignorance, formative activity, and causal consciousness. By the same token, the initial causal sequence of projecting causes lacks the actualising causes of craving, grasping, and existence, so it is inadequate to produce rebirth in the first cycle.

To state the problem in the most concise form: if the sequence represents one life, all the projecting and actualising causes should come before all the projected and actualised effects, and all those effects should occur together as one life. If the sequence represents two lives, then the first life will be lacking the actualising causes and the second life will be lacking the projecting causes.

How do we resolve this apparent contradiction? In general, **every life requires all six causes and includes all six results. Whatever is projected by a projecting cause has to be completed by an actualising cause.** Take my life as an example. **At some time in the distant past the ① three projecting causes were initiated: ignorance, karma, & causal consciousness. In order to yield any result, those projecting causes must be activated by the**

The Twelve Links

① **Projecting causes:** ignorance, formative activity, and causal consciousness.
② **Projected factors:** resultant consciousness, name & form, the six sense bases, contact, and feeling
③ **Actualising causes:** craving, grasping, and existence
④ **Actualised effects:** birth and aging & death.

three ③ actualising causes: craving, grasping, and existence. *Nothing will be brought into existence without all six of these causes operating together.* ② Name and form, the six sense bases, contact, and feeling were projected by the ① projecting causes of ignorance, karma, and causal consciousness. They were then brought to fruition by the ③ actualising causes: craving, grasping, and existence. Thus actualised, those very same projected factors are designated as the two ④ actualised effects and are called birth, and aging and death.

Therefore, **for one person's single life, all the causes have carried out their function before birth.** First the projecting cause projected name and form, the six sense bases, contact, and feeling; then later, when these are brought to fruition by the actualising causes, those very same projected factors become the actualised factors of birth, aging, and death. In short, **for one life, all the causes must operate before the fruition of the actualised effects.**

If that is the case the question becomes: "**What is the reason for explaining this in terms of two cycles of causality?**"

The reason two sets of causality are shown is in order **to point out the differences between the effects of projection and the effects of actualisation in terms of their suffering natures. The projected effects actually remain in a state of dormancy, of potentiality, until such time as they meet the conditions to manifest in their actualised state.** In other words, at the time they are projected they do not come into existence in their fully actualised nature of suffering. They have that potential (they are suitable to become factors of suffering) but that will only happen when they meet the actualising conditions. **When they are projected, the projected factors are made suitable to manifest at some time in the future, when they meet the necessary actualising conditions; at that time they will become factors of suffering. But at the time of projection, this has not yet occurred.**

For example, in some previous lifetime, perhaps a long time ago, I projected the virtuous karma to be born a human, as Geshe Sopa. We can say it was virtuous karma because I am now living a human life. At that past time those karmic seeds were planted in this mental continuum [links 1, 2, and the causal aspect of 3]①. What was planted by that action was the seed or potentiality of the projected effects: the factors of resultant consciousness, name and form, the six sense bases, contact, and feeling [the resultant aspect of 3, plus links 4–7]②. Then, at the time of death in my previous life, just before I was born in this life, the actualising causes [links 8–10]③ ripened this potentiality and brought about birth in this life [links 11– 12]④.

When we say that the seeds were planted (that the projected effects were projected) it means that they were rendered suitable to manifest when they meet the necessary actualising factors. **Until they meet those necessary conditions, the projected effects remain dormant, in a state of potentiality. This is the meaning of projected effects. Calling them "effects" does not mean that these factors are already manifest and fully functioning; it does not mean that contact and feeling have already occurred.**

This is the same as planting a seed in the garden. You can plant a seed in the fall and it will lie dormant right through the winter. Then in the spring, when the ground warms up and the rains fall, that seed sprouts. It is brought to germination by the actualising causes of warmth and moisture. It was rendered suitable to be actualised by planting (projecting) it in the ground. If you hadn't put the seed there, then no matter how much moisture and warmth appeared in the spring, you would not have a sprout.

The actualised effects (birth, aging, and death) are factors that have already been actualised; they are fully manifest, fully functioning, and are therefore conditions of suffering in a current lifetime. Every causal relationship has these two stages, requiring both a primary cause and secondary actualising conditions.

According to this method of explaining the twelve links, these two different sets of causes and effects were presented in order to illustrate this difference. **The projected effects will only become suffering factors of life at some time in the future (possibly many lives after they are planted) because they remain in a dormant state of potential until they are awakened by actualising causes. Once those seeds have been awakened by the actualising causes, the actualised effects ripen immediately as the suffering factors of birth in the next life, without any other life intervening.**

Another reason why two separate cycles of cause and effect were taught was to **emphasise the point that two types of causes are necessary to produce the result of taking birth in cyclic existence. Presenting the twelve links in this manner enables us to distinguish projecting causes from actualising causes, and to understand how both are necessary to produce that result.** Asaṅga explains this in the *Levels of Yogic Deeds* this way:

> Since it is the case that the factors from consciousness up to feeling ② have the character of being intermingled with the factors of birth, aging, and death, why were they taught as two different types? They were taught that way in order to show **the different characteristics of things that produce suffering**, and in order **to differentiate between projecting and actualising**.

The same text also says:

> Among these twelve factors, how many are included in the truth of suffering and will become sufferings in the current life? Two: birth and aging and death. How many are included within the truth of suffering but will only become suffering at a later time? Those that remain in a state of potential, from resultant consciousness up to feeling.②

The first quotation states that the projected and actualised factors are "intermingled". This means that the factors come together; they are functioning at the same time, in the same lifetime. For example, the actualised factor of birth and the projected factor of name and form start at the same time. During the time that the six sense bases, contact, and feeling are operating, the actualised factor of aging is also operating. In this sense they are intermingled. Then why are they shown separately? It is **in order to show the different kinds of causes that bring about the suffering factors of cyclic existence, and in order to help us differentiate these two distinct types of causes.**

The Twelve Links As a Presentation of Two Lifetimes

So far we have been discussing the purpose of showing two cause and effect cycles within the twelve links under the assumption that these twelve links all occurred within one lifetime. However, what becomes evident from the preceding discussion is that these twelve links are presented in a way that seems to fit two separate rounds of dependent origination. The *Rice Seedling Sutra (Śāli-stamba-sūtra)*, one of the primary sources of the Buddha's presentation of the twelve links, teaches, on the face of it, a sequence that takes place over two lifetimes. **Factors from ignorance up through feeling describe one round of dependent origination;① & ② the factors from craving through aging and death describe a second round ③ & ④.**

Let's once again take my life as an example. **The twelve links begin with the 2½ projecting causes; ignorance, karma, and the causal stage of consciousness.① These projecting causes give rise to a series of projected effects, which constitute the experience of my life; from resultant consciousness up to feeling.② Then, from the activity of feeling, craving arises, which increases into grasping, and finally, just before I die, I perform the actualising karma of existence.③ These are the three actualising causes, and they occur just before I die. But these 3 are not the actualising causes that produced this present lifetime. They are not part of the round of dependent origination that I am experiencing**

now. What they are actualising is the next lifetime; another birth, aging, and death.④

The craving, grasping, and existence that occur just before I die cannot be part of the causality of my current life because the causes for this life cannot be happening at the *end* of my life. These actualising causes are the causes of a *subsequent* life, and as such they are part of a separate round of dependent origination.

The way the Buddha has presented these twelve links of dependent origination is to first introduce the three projecting causes that produced this life; ignorance, karma, and causal consciousness. Then he shows some of the results of those causes, which constitute the experience of this life, from causal consciousness up to feeling. Then, near the end of this life, craving arises in dependence upon feeling, and this craving leads to grasping and then to existence. This second causal nexus gives rise to birth and aging and death, but that actualising causal nexus and its actualised results are a separate sequence of dependent origination. They are the cause and effect of a separate lifetime.

What this means is that **for each of the two lifetimes it is necessary to infer one of the causal sets.** As a description of **my current life, the twelve links include the projecting causes,① but it is necessary to infer that in the previous life there were actualising causes③ that brought my birth to fruition. Within that same set of twelve links we have the actualising causes③ for my next rebirth, but it is necessary to infer that projecting causes① were created at some previous time, which are actualised at the time of death and will bring into being my next life.**

Why did the Buddha teach the twelve links in a manner that spreads them over two lifetimes? It was in order to demonstrate how this process is a perpetual chain. In this life you are experiencing the results of previous ignorance and karma. At the same time, during this very life, you are creating the causes of another rebirth in the future. The twelve links operate as an endless chain.

The Projecting Causes① and Projected Effects②

To clarify how these factors operate, Tsongkhapa says that projecting causes and projected effects should be understood by way of four points:

1. **What has been projected? 4½ factors: resultant consciousness, name and form, the six sense bases, contact, and feeling.**
2. **By what are they projected? They are projected by karma** (called **formative activity** in the twelve links) **which depends on ignorance. Ignorance is the root motivating factor leading to karma, the main projecting activity.**
3. **How are they projected? By means of instilling in the causal consciousness the subtle propensities or karmic seeds. Ignorance creates the formative activity of good and bad karma. That karma instills in the consciousness a subtle seed or propensity to ripen into a certain kind of result at a time in the future when it meets the necessary conditions. Before the karma was created, that potential was not there. Karma has left this new potential on the consciousness; that is how the factors are projected.**
4. **The meaning of "projected"** is that **those factors that are projected are rendered suitable to be actualised and to manifest when the actualising causes are met.**

The Actualising Causes③ and the Actualised Effects④

Now we turn to the actualising causes which can be understood by means of three points:

1. **What does the actualising? The main actualising cause is grasping, which has craving as its own cause. Both of these are types of desire, but grasping is desire that is intensified to the point where it has the power to bring its result immediately. The craving form of desire arises over and over again, getting stronger and stronger, until it turns into grasping, with the power to bring forth the result.**

The **actualising causes are described as three: craving, grasping, and existence.** Earlier we discussed existence as a final, actualising karma. Here, in the context of this ex-

planation, existence is not treated as some new karma. **The emphasis here is on the potential of the projected karmic seed. When it meets the moisture and warmth of craving and grasping, that potential is actualised and it becomes ready to bring forth its fruit. That very actualised seed (that empowered potential ready to ripen into its result) is itself called existence, the tenth factor.**

There are these two modes of explaining this tenth factor. It is still true that **at the time of death a virtuous or non-virtuous action arises that combines with the grasping to actualise the seed**. In our earlier explanation that karma was referred to as existence. But this explanation only mentions craving and grasping as the actualising causes, and according to this mode of explanation existence is defined as that fully potentiated seed itself.

2. **What is actualised?** It is **the two actualised effects: birth, and aging and death**.
3. **How are they actualised? By means of empowering the subtle karmic propensities that were instilled in the consciousness by the formative activity of karma.** The second factor, karma, deposited the subtle propensities of the projected factors on the consciousness some time in the past. Now these propensities are empowered to ripen and bring forth their results by these actualising causes. **This is what "actualise" means; to render the potentiality of the seed powerful enough to bring its result immediately.**

Another way of looking at this comes from Vasubandhu who wrote in his *Explanation of the Divisions of Dependent Arising* that **the only actualised factor is birth itself, while aging and death demonstrate the faults of birth.**

With all this information we can now put together examples of how the twelve links operate. The **first example** describes the process of dependent origination for someone who is headed toward a lower rebirth. Ignorance of the cause and effect of karma is the first cause. Motivated by that ignorance, non-virtuous karma deposits on the consciousness the subtle propensity or seed of an unpleasant rebirth. This potentiates the 4½ projected factors② (from resultant consciousness to feeling) and makes them suitable to ripen in one of the three lower realms when the necessary conditions are met. These dormant karmic propensities are revitalised and repeatedly nourished by craving. And with the complete nourishment of grasping, these seeds become empowered to manifest and ripen into birth in a lower realm, where aging and the various sufferings of bad rebirths will ensue.

The **next example** describes the sequence for someone who is going to a higher rebirth. Motivated by ignorance about the meaning of selflessness, karma deposits on the consciousness the subtle propensity of a pleasant rebirth. **The good karma to be born in higher rebirths in the desire realm is called "meritorious karma" and consists of virtuous behaviours such as maintaining ethical conduct. The good karma to be born in the form and formless realms is called "immoveable karma" and includes such practices as cultivating single-pointed concentration.** Depositing these karmic propensities on the consciousness renders the projected factors (from resultant consciousness up to feeling) ② suitable to be actualised and to ripen into the experience of either the higher rebirths of the desire realm or rebirth among the devas in the upper realms. Subsequently, craving and grasping revitalise those dormant seeds and repeatedly nourish them, and this empowers them to ripen into birth in those higher realms and the experiences that ensue.

You may have some confusion about **how ignorance can be the motivation of virtuous karma.** For ordinary individuals (until they reach the ārya stage where they directly realise the emptiness of self) **all actions, whether virtuous or non-virtuous, have as their most fundamental motivation the ignorance that does not know the true nature of the self and holds onto a conception of self that is utterly mistaken. For all rounds of dependent origination, first there is the "I", this deep misunderstanding and misperception of the nature of the self.**

That **grasping at a misconceived "I" creates other afflictions, such as desire, hostility, pride,** and so forth. **Attachment to the "I" can lead you to want some genuinely worthwhile**

things for the sake of the "I", such as a higher rebirth and pleasant experience in future lives. For this purpose you will naturally engage in virtuous, meritorious karma. Although you perform meritorious deeds, **deep down there is always that subtle attitude, the egotistic view, which has at its root the ignorance of not knowing the true nature of the self. That ignorance always remains the underlying, basic motivation. It gives rise to attachment to the self, holding the self at the centre of all other concerns, perceiving the self as the most important thing in the world.** Of course that attitude can lead you to perform non-virtuous actions; but **even when you perform virtues those virtuous actions will be contaminated by that underlying thought. You can maintain pure ethical conduct, never breaking even the slightest moral precept, and that will become the cause of rebirth as a human or as a desire-realm deva. These are certainly happy rebirths, but they are still within cyclic existence; they are still within the cycle of suffering.**

Until you attain the ārya stage, you will almost never perform any action (virtuous or non-virtuous) without that egotistic motivation: a "contaminated action". Virtuous karma still brings merits, the accumulation of positive potential, which will ripen into happy results in the future. But that happiness will be *samsaric* happiness, happiness mixed with the sorrows of cyclic existence. Rooted in afflictions and therefore still impure.

You may even recognise how inferior life is in the desire realm and accumulate the merits to obtain a higher, more peaceful, more subtle, and longer life in the form or formless realms. **To obtain rebirth in those peaceful realms you must first attain single-pointed concentration.** Depending on the level of meditative stabilisation you achieve, you can be born into one of the four concentrations of the form realm, or one of the four formless absorptions. If you achieve the level of meditative stabilisation equal to one of these levels while you are a human, you deposit the karmic propensity to be born on that level at some time in the future; you render that seed suitable to be actualised and to ripen into the experience of that higher rebirth when the necessary conditions come together. This is called "**immoveable karma**", **the good karma to be born in the form or formless realms. The necessary conditions arise when craving and grasping revitalise that seed and nourish it over and over again until it is fully empowered to bring forth its fruit as birth into one of those higher realms.**

For example, in this human body, if you practice single-pointed concentration and you attain the level of meditative stabilisation that belongs to the "actual stage" of the first concentration,[39] and you do not degenerate from that level, nor do you attain the direct realisation of emptiness that comes on the path of seeing, then you have projected the karmic seed to be born in the first concentration, the first level of the form realm. Now you have the potential, the possibility, to be born there. But that potential must be actualised in order to ripen into that rebirth. Before the time of death in this life, the craving and grasping that belong to the first concentration must revitalise and nourish that projected seed. In other words, even while you are living in a human body, you have obtained the afflictions that belong to the first concentration by attaining that level of meditative stabilisation. You have attained a level of consciousness that is beyond the desire realm, and abiding in that state brings with it the functioning of the afflictions of that level. It is the craving and grasping of that level that nourish the karmic seed to be born there and bring that birth to fruition.

You have to attain the "actual stage" of the first concentration because the afflictions of the first concentration are part of the actual stage, but not part of the "preparatory stage". Although this topic can get very technical and complicated, the main point is that the afflictions of craving and grasping are necessary to ripen any projected karmic seed into an actual rebirth. And the craving, grasping, and existence must be of the same level on which you are going to be born.

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[39] Each of the four concentrations of the form realm has a preparatory stage and an actual stage. Here, to create the cause to be born in one of the concentrations, you must attain the level of concentration equal to the actual stage, the reasons for which follow in the text.

Other Ways to Categorise the Twelve Links

Nāgārjuna explains in the *Heart of Dependent Arising* that these twelve links can be subsumed under three categories: afflictions, karma, and sufferings:

> The first, eighth, and ninth are afflictions. (Ignorance, Craving, Grasping)
> The second and tenth are karma. (Formative activity, existence)
> The remaining seven are sufferings. (Consciousness, name & form, the six sense base, contact, feeling, birth, aging & death)

Nāgārjuna calls these categories "paths", so he is saying that the factors of ignorance, craving, and grasping are the path of afflictions, karma and existence are the path of karma, and the other seven factors are all the path of suffering.

In the *Rice Seedling Sutra* the Buddha, holding up a green rice sprout as an example, taught the twelve links of dependent origination and presented them in terms of four causes leading to rebirth. The analogy he uses in this sutra is a little bit different from the usual one we encounter; that karma is the seed and consciousness is the field in which it is planted. Instead, in the *Rice Seedling Sutra* **the Buddha likened ignorance to the planter, the agent who plants the seed; karma itself is like a field in which the seed is planted; and the seed that is planted is actually the seed of consciousness, specifically causal consciousness. When that seed is moistened by the water of grasping it becomes the sprout of name and form in the mother's womb. In this analysis it is the planter, the field, the seed, and the supporting condition of moisture [i.e., ignorance, karma, causal consciousness, and grasping] that together produce the birth of the being in the womb.**

3' How many lifetimes are required to complete the cycle

How many lives does it take in order to complete all twelve of these factors?

Many eons can intervene between the projecting factors of ignorance and karma, and the projected factors from name and form down to feeling. On the other hand, it is also possible that the projected factors will be actualised and ripen into the very next life after they are projected, with no intervening lives at all. For example, we are born here as humans with so many wonderful conditions that our lives are almost incomparable in terms of the precious opportunity we have achieved. In a previous life we must have projected the virtuous karmic seeds that ripened into this life. The lifetime in which we performed that meritorious karma may have been the immediately preceding life, or it could have been some distant lifetime many eons ago.

When it comes to the actualising factors② of craving, grasping, and existence, there is never an intervening life before they yield the actualised factors of birth, aging, and death; these actualised factors always arise in the very next lifetime. (Remember that **the intermediate state is not counted as a separate life although it does occur between this life and the next. The intermediate state is considered part of the life it precedes, because both of them are projected by the same karma.**)

Given that the projecting factors *can* ripen in the very next life, and the actualising factors *always* ripen in the very next life, the minimum number of lifetimes in which you can complete one round of the twelve links is two.

For example, let's say that during this life you create the karma to be born as a deva in your next life. This is done by the three projecting causes① of ignorance, karma, and causal consciousness. Later in this life, before you die, you create the actualising causes③ of craving, grasping, and existence, which revitalise and nourish those seeds and bring them to fruition. All six causes are then functioning in this present life, and at the time of death they give rise to the projected factors② of resultant consciousness, name and form, the six sense bases, contact, and feeling, as well as the two actualised factors④ of birth and aging and death. Remember that the projected and actualised effects are "intermingled"; they come together in the same lifetime, functioning at the same time. As we explained earlier, they were taught separately in order to clarify and help to identify the two different types of causes that bring about suffering in cyclic existence. In this way, **all twelve links of dependent origination are completed in a minimum of two lifetimes.**

Now then, **what is the maximum number of lives it takes to complete the twelve links? A thousand lives? More? Sorry, that is wrong. The maximum is only three.**

Let's take my current life as an example. Let's say that I did not project the causes to be born in this form in my immediately preceding life (it could have been two lifetimes ago, or many eons before) but the first of the three lives will be the life in which I planted the projecting karma. **Remember that the actualising causes must occur in the life immediately preceding the projected and actualised effects.** That would have been in my last life. **Therefore, we have a maximum of three lifetimes to complete all twelve factors: the life in which the projecting causes① are planted, the life in which the actualising causes③ occur, and the very next life in which the effects of all these causes ripen.** Even though there may be many, many lifetimes intervening between the lives in which the projecting and actualising causes occur, these intervening lifetimes are not part of this particular sequence of dependent origination. **The twelve factors that created and constitute this current life of mine took place over a maximum of three lives.**

How Dependent Origination Illuminates the Emptiness of Self

When you look at this process of cause and effect and how it gives rise to all experience in cyclic existence, you can see how there is no absolute self who is the creator of the karma, and no absolute self who is experiencing the result of karma. When we look for the "person" who creates the karma and the "person" who experiences the results, instead of discovering such an absolute self, we only find the numerous ever-changing factors of mind and body, the five impermanent aggregates. Upon those five shifting aggregates we impute a self, an "I," an independent "person." That imputed self, what we think of as "I," is what we hold to be the creator of karma and the experiencer of the results of karma. But in reality there is no such independent or absolute self. There is merely an imputation of such a self upon a collection of impermanent phenomena.

The causal factors (the projecting and actualising causes) are themselves merely impermanent phenomena. The resultant factors (all the projected and actualised effects) are also nothing more than impermanent phenomena that arise from the causal factors. There is no independent, absolute creator of karma or experiencer of its results. There is merely the imputation of such a self upon transitory phenomena having nothing more than a relative, nominal existence.

It is due to your ignorance of the true nature of things that you grasp at a false conception of self. You hold the "I" to be ultimately, substantially, independently real and you grasp at that "real thing" as being your true self. Once you start holding tightly to that false, misperceived self, you naturally want to make that self happy. In order to accomplish that you engage in all sorts of actions of body, speech, and mind; sometimes virtuous and sometimes not. All such action ripens into future experience and perpetuates the cycle of existence.

Once again we see how **the two karmic factors, karma and existence [the second and tenth links], arise from the three afflictions [ignorance, craving, and grasping], and in turn give rise to the seven factors of suffering [consciousness, name and form, the six sense bases, contact, feeling, and aging and death].**[40] **As you experience the pleasure and discomfort of those resultant factors, other afflictions, such as attachment and hostility, emerge in response. They in turn set in motion another round of actions; one set of results instigates yet another set of causes.** Here **again we see how the cause of all cyclic existence is karma and affliction. Again we see how the cycle (affliction causing karma, causing experience, causing affliction) perpetuates itself; cause and effect drives the**

[40] As per these lines from above
The first, eighth, and ninth are afflictions. (Ignorance, Craving, Grasping)
The second and tenth are karma. (Formative activity, existence)
The remaining seven are sufferings. (Consciousness, name & form, the six sense base, contact, feeling, birth, aging & death)

wheel of life, turning it round and round in perpetual motion. As Nāgārjuna said in his *Heart of Dependent Arising*:

> From the three arise the two, [Karma, existence -> ignorance, craving, grasping]
> From the two the seven arise, [Karma, existence -> consciousness, name & form, the six sense bases, contact, feeling, aging & death]
> And from the seven three arise— [7 -> karma, experience, affliction]
> That is the wheel of life, going around, and around, and around.

Breaking free of samsara

If you carefully contemplate how all sentient beings, including yourself, are helplessly wandering up and down through the miseries and disappointments of cyclic existence as a result of this very process of cause and effect, that will be the best means for you to recognise the faults of samsara and to generate disenchantment with it. This is extremely important because to the extent that you realise just how unsatisfactory cyclic existence is, to that extent your mental life will turn in the direction of renunciation. If you fail to see the faults of cyclic existence thoroughly and deeply, you will never become disenchanted with its attractions. You will continue to seek out samsaric pleasures, and this will only cause you to continue your helpless wandering through the sufferings of cyclic existence.

You have been born in samsara in various forms over and over again for countless eons. During every single one of those lives you performed uncountable thousands of actions, thereby planting new karmic seeds. **Even during one day in one life, from early morning until you go to bed, you create so many actions, so many different karmas. Sometimes your actions are virtuous, sometimes they are non-virtuous. When you think about your situation like this, you realise that you have created countless karmas since beginningless time. You have accumulated vast amounts of virtuous and non-virtuous projecting karma that has not yet yielded its results.** If those **unripened seeds** had physical form, they would make a huge mountain reaching far into the sky. **If these seeds are not destroyed by antidotes, they will remain dormant in your mental continuum, ready to be reawakened and nourished by the actualising factors of craving and grasping. Then they will yield their results, and you will continue to wander through higher and lower rebirths in cyclic existence.**

However, **although you have mountains of karmic seeds ready to ripen, if they are never revitalised and nourished by afflictions they will never be able to yield their results.** Arhats also accumulated masses of projecting karma in their previous lives. But because they have destroyed their afflictions, they will never again be born into cyclic existence as the result of karma. **For their accumulated projecting karma to produce another rebirth it must be nourished by the afflictions, and since arhats are free of afflictions, they are liberated from cyclic existence.**

Once you have a firm understanding of all this, you will regard the obscuring afflictions[41] as your enemy. You will see that the true enemy, the source of all your problems, is not outside somewhere. It is the inner enemy, the afflictions, that produce all your disappointment, unhappiness, and suffering. As Śāntideva said, if you are able to destroy this one enemy, you will destroy all enemies. **If you destroy the inner enemy of ignorance and the other afflictions from the root, then you will no longer be forced to wander in cyclic existence, because although you may still possess many seeds of projecting karma, without the afflictions to nourish them they will never be able to ripen.**

The great Kadampa Geshe Puchungwa spent his whole life practicing the meditation of the three types of spiritual individuals (the beings of small, intermediate, and great scope) by rolling that system of teaching (which is presented here in the *Lamrim Chenmo*) into his method of meditating on the twelve links of dependent origination. He did this by making the stages of the path, the *lamrim*, **a meditation on the way sentient beings involve themselves in these**

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[41] **Obscuring afflictions**: attachment, hostility, pride, ignorance, doubt and wrong view. The **three poisons**: ignorance, attachment, and hostility

twelve factors creating cyclic existence, and on the way they can extricate themselves from cyclic existence by disengaging from these twelve factors.

His system of correspondence worked this way. **Meditation on the twelve links of dependent origination as they apply to birth in the three lower realms constitutes the training for beings of small scope.** At this stage **the focus of practice is to recognise how the ten non-virtuous actions lead to the terrible sufferings of the lower rebirths. You meditate on what the experience will be in those realms, and this engenders a powerful determination to avoid that fate. You realise that the best protection is to take refuge in the Three Jewels, and then to adhere to ethical conduct. By meditating on how engagement in the twelve links of dependent origination leads to lower rebirths, and how disengagement from that cycle frees you from them, all the practices of the being of small scope are integrated into the contemplation of the twelve links.**

Meditation on the twelve links as they apply to birth in the upper realms constitutes the training for beings of intermediate scope. By contemplating the experience of humans and devas you come to realise that, no matter where you are born within cyclic existence, you are subject to the various forms of suffering; that even the highest rebirths are still conditioned by karma and afflictions, still in the nature of suffering. Recognising that stable happiness can only come with freedom from all of cyclic existence, you determine to attain emancipation for yourself. These meditations are integrated into the contemplation of how engagement in and disengagement from the twelve links of dependent origination lead, respectively, to high rebirth within or emancipation from the whole of samsara.

Cyclic existence is brought into being by the twelve links of dependent origination, and the root of that chain of causality is ignorance. Ignorance is the root of samsara. Therefore, the being of intermediate scope must ask, "How do I get rid of ignorance?" The answer is to meditate on the four noble truths, culminating in the direct realisation of the emptiness of self. This, too, is included in the practice of the being of intermediate scope as it is integrated with the twelve links of dependent origination.

Then, **for the being of great scope who is engaged in the Mahayana practice, you apply the very same understanding to all other sentient beings. You see how all these other beings (who have been your close relations over many previous lifetimes) have been wandering in cyclic existence because of the six causal factors①③ and have experienced all the miseries of the six results②④. Seeing this, you develop powerful love and compassion for all other living beings. You determine that you will quickly obtain buddhahood so that you will be able to benefit all these suffering beings. With this intention you train in the practice of bodhicitta, and you strive with great energy to vanquish the inner enemies: ignorance, craving, and grasping.**

If you know how to practice this method of Geshe Puchungwa, you will be able to **incorporate the practices of all three spiritual beings into your meditation on dependent origination. This brings the entire path into your meditation,** including the trainings of both the Hinayana and Mahayana.

Some people believe that the Buddha taught the twelve links of dependent origination mainly for Hinayana practitioners, who are seeking emancipation only for themselves, and that this training is therefore mainly for them. It is true that it is important for them, but it is just as central for anyone who is pursuing the Mahayana way. **In order to produce great love and compassion for other beings, it is essential to see clearly how they are suffering, how they are trapped in the endless cycle of samsaric misery. That realisation comes by way of this meditation on dependent origination. Therefore, this is a practice that is extremely beneficial to all three types of spiritual practitioners, and when it is done by the Mahayana individual of great scope, it will be of great benefit to all sentient beings.**

4' How to summarise their significance

Tsongkhapa now brings his discussion of the twelve links of dependent origination to a conclusion. **By means of the preceding discussion you should come to a clear understanding of how cyclic existence, which is made up of the suffering aggregates, is brought into existence by karma and affliction. Among the four noble truths, this is the truth of the cause of suffering: how karma and the afflictions together produce samsaric life.** In particular, **you should clearly see how the wheel of samsara turns by means of these twelve links of dependent origination, and how this chain of causality compels you to wander perpetually around that wheel of unhappy existence.**

Once you gain this comprehension, **you must accustom your mind to the reality it reveals by meditating on it until it is completely integrated with your view of the world.** Doing that will **destroy the dark ignorance lying at the root of all misfortune: the ignorance that fails to recognise the cause and effect that creates cyclic existence, and also the ignorance that grasps at a mistaken conception of self. It will clear away all the wrong views about the way experience arises,** including the view that our inner and outer world arises without a cause, and the view that it can arise from a 'completely incompatible' cause.

What do we mean by an **"incompatible" cause? In reality, all the causes that give rise to cyclic existence are *within* the individual; this is the very point that the twelve links of dependent origination bring to mind.** Although this is the Buddhist view, **many other tenet systems hold that the root cause of existence is an eternal, divine creator,** such as Īśvara or Viṣṇu in the Vedic tradition. The Sāṃkhya school of Indian philosophy holds that some kind of permanent, pervasive, universal principle is the cause of everything. We consider such causes to be "incompatible" because we wonder how a permanent, essential, unitary cause can possibly give rise to an impermanent, ever-changing, dependently arisen world? **When you hold that kind of wrong view you cannot possibly extricate yourself from cyclic existence because you are aiming at the wrong target. Although the cause of your suffering is over here, you are always busy looking over there.**

The insight you gain from contemplating dependent origination eliminates this type of misunderstanding. The realisation of the true nature of samsara, exactly as it is, leads to a powerful thought of renunciation, which will arouse and encourage you to pursue the path that leads to liberation. In this way, familiarising your mind with dependent origination increases the precious, essential treasure of the Buddha's teaching.

We all have the capacity to realise emptiness. Learning about *the twelve links of dependent origination*, understanding them clearly, then meditating the twelve links of dependent origination on them until your mind is completely familiar with them, is the best method to awaken your potential for direct realisation of the truth. Seeing things as they truly are, you are able to steer your behaviour and your practice onto the path that leads to emancipation.

As it says in the *Tantra Requested by Subāhu*, "**The path of dependent origination destroys ignorance.**" **Understanding dependent origination is the antidote to ignorance because ignorance lies at its root; when you fully comprehend the twelve links and how they operate, ignorance no longer has the power to delude your mind.**

The *Rice Seedling Sutra* says that **when you properly understand dependent origination, it clears away wrong views about the past, the future, and the present. What are those wrong views? "Wrong views about the past" refers to denying that existence has a cause, or imputing an incompatible cause; these are the kinds of view we were just discussing. "Wrong views about the future" refers to thinking that there is no future life after this life ends, that the causes you create in this life will have no results in the future. This is a kind of nihilism that leads to a "wrong view about the present." This is the belief that your present behaviour does not matter because virtue and non-virtue have no effect on future experience; you can do whatever you please because you will never suffer any**

consequences. All of these wrong views are dispelled by the correct view of dependent origination. Nāgārjuna said in his *Friendly Letter*:

> This teaching of dependent origination is the profound prize
> In the treasury of the Buddha's instructions.

We should also remember that Nāgārjuna opened his *Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way* with the following dedication:

> I prostrate to the perfect Buddha,
> The best of teachers, who taught that
> Whatever is dependently arisen
> Is unceasing, unborn,
> Not annihilated, not permanent,
> Not coming, not going,
> Not diverse, not unitary,
> And free from conceptual elaboration.

Tsongkhapa himself quoted this homage at the beginning of his poem *In Praise of Dependent Arising (rTen 'grel bstod pa)* and then added:

> I pay homage to the victorious Buddha,
> Who saw directly **and taught to others dependent origination,**
> Unsurpassed in insight and as teacher
> For this vision and this teaching.

The *Bases of Discipline* tells of the "supreme pair," the Buddha's superior disciples Śāriputra (who was called "supreme in wisdom") and Maudgalyāyana (who was called "supreme in psychic powers"). Often when we see the Buddha's image in a painting or a statue, these two monks are standing on either side of him. With their supernatural powers they used to visit the various samsaric realms in order to help different types of beings. When they returned from these miraculous travels they would recount what they had seen and explain the miseries of each realm to the Buddha's four types of disciples: the monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.

Living among these people were various friends and relatives of the true disciples who had no regard for the practice of virtuous conduct. These people were taken to see Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana and the great masters taught them the importance of ethical conduct, illustrating their talks with accounts of the horrible sufferings they had seen in other realms. Inspired by these teachings, many of them came to appreciate the practice of pure conduct and eventually obtained higher realisations.

In this manner Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana taught many disciples and other interested people. Seeing these two so often in the company of large gatherings, the Buddha asked Ānanda what they were doing. Ānanda explained how Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana were giving instruction to the public on the five realms, based on their own experience. He recounted how many people had gained great benefit from these teachings. To this the Buddha replied:

> Teachers like this supreme pair will not always be available. Therefore, make a painting in the vestibule that depicts the wheel of cyclic existence in five parts. At the outer rim draw the twelve links of dependent origination in both forward progression and in reverse.

These were instructions for the Wheel of Life, which many of you have probably seen on Tibetan scroll paintings, or *tangkas*. This wheel is a representation of all of cyclic existence, with pictures symbolising the five (or sometimes six) realms, and along the outer circumference are scenes symbolising the twelve links of dependent origination, beginning with ignorance; represented by a blind old man or woman. At the centre you find the three root afflictions (ignorance, desire, and hostility) depicted as a pig, a pigeon or a rooster, and a snake forming a circle with each one grasping the tail of the next. The entire wheel is held in the mouth of Yama, the Lord of Death, in the form of a savage demon.

The Buddha himself instructed his disciples to devise this kind of representation of dependent origination because he knew that in the future teachers like Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana would not be around to teach the nature of samsara. He told them to paint this picture in the

vestibule or entryway of the monastery and later, at the time of the great monastic centres such as Nālandā and Vikramaśīla, this was most likely the custom.

At most monasteries in Tibet you would find the Wheel of Life painted on a wall in the vestibule of the main temple. Instructions for composing these paintings can be found in the *Sutra on the Discipline (Vinaya-sūtra)* of Guṇaprabha, one of the most authoritative works on the Vinaya of the Sarvāstivādins, the school that provides the canon for Tibetan monasticism.

Also in Tibet, there was a certain type of *yogi* who wore ragged robes and, in between retreats, wandered from village to village carrying an iron rod, a tangka of the Wheel of Life, a begging bowl, and a conch shell. When he arrived in a village he would blow his conch shell, "Ooooooooh!" and anyone who was not busy working (especially the old people and children) would come out to sit and listen to the yogi's discourse. He would hang up his tangka, put out an offering bowl for donations, and teach about the Wheel of Life. Often his verses were composed in a simple and catchy way so they were easy for children to understand. The yogi would point at the different scenes on the tangka and tell the people about ignorance and karma, explaining, "If you do this you will end up here." Everyone enjoyed these entertaining teachings and in this way the general population learned the basics of karma and rebirth.

In the Vinaya commentary, the *Section on Nuns*, we find another story in which the Buddha recommends creating an illustration of the twelve links of dependent origination. This is an account of King Bimbisāra of Magadha, who was a close supporter of the Buddha. Bimbisāra became concerned about the power of a distant kingdom ruled by King Udrāyaṇa, so he sent letters and established a friendly relationship with that king. Although they had never met, they established a cordial relationship by sending letters and gifts back and forth with traveling merchants. Then Udrāyaṇa sent to Bimbisāra a magnificent jewel-studded suit of armour. Bimbisāra summoned his appraisers who informed him that every single gem in this suit was itself priceless, so the whole suit of armour was beyond value. This put King Bimbisāra in a quandary. He thought, "Udrāyaṇa has sent me such a fabulous gift. How can I repay this favour? If I do not send him something of equal value, he may become angry and this could cause trouble between our kingdoms. But what can I offer him that would compare with what he has given me?"

The king was discouraged until a minister reminded him that within his kingdom was the perfectly enlightened Buddha, something "more excellent than anything in the three worlds." Why not send King Udrāyaṇa a painting of the Buddha? The story tells how the Buddha consented to this saying, "Just as soon as King Udrāyaṇa sees it, he will come to experience faith and to perceive the truth." However, the royal painters found it impossible to capture an image of the Buddha with his extraordinary marks. After several failed efforts, the Buddha told them to bring some fabric. He cast his shadow on it and told them to fill in the shadow with their colours. He then instructed the king that underneath his likeness they should paint the wheel of life depicting the twelve links of dependent origination in forward and reverse order. Underneath he should write the two stanzas that generally appear beneath the Wheel of Life even to this day:

> Gather up and cast away.
> Engage in the Buddha's teaching.
> Like a great elephant in a house of mud,
> Conquer the Lord of Death's battalions.
>
> Whoever with great conscientiousness
> Practices this discipline of the Dharma,
> Abandoning the wheel of births,
> Will make an end to suffering.

When the Buddha suggested they create this combination of images and words, King Bimbisāra was extremely happy. He realised that this work of art, containing both an image of the Buddha and a presentation of his essential teaching, was truly something beyond value, even more precious than any suit of armour. King Bimbisāra sent a message to Udrāyaṇa saying, "I am bringing a very special present. You should come to meet me with a procession so that you may receive this gift with the appropriate welcoming ceremony."

Although Udrāyaṇa was not a Buddhist, the Buddha must have seen that he had strong propensities that were ready to ripen when he met the teachings. Perhaps Udrāyaṇa did not believe that Bimbisāra was bringing anything so precious, but he nevertheless agreed to meet him on the road. He was most pleased with the gift and he studied the verses until he memorised them. He then began to meditate on them through the whole night, sitting cross-legged with focused concentration, all extraneous thoughts pushed aside. He meditated on the cause and effect of dependent origination, seeing how samsaric life evolves as one link gives rise to another, and how emancipation from cyclic existence is achieved by interrupting this chain of causation. Meditating in this way on dependent origination, he realised the true nature of the self and attained the state of an ārya. This story points up how the teaching of dependent origination was already considered the heart of the Buddha's teaching, even at the time of the Buddha, because it has the power to lead those who practice it all the way to emancipation from cyclic existence.

You may think that this story took place a long time ago and is therefore not relevant to us. But we are the same kind of human being as King Udrāyaṇa, with the same kind of mind. We do not lack any attributes, physically or mentally, and we have the teachings right here before us. In fact, we have access to many more teachings, with commentaries and translations, than were ever available in the early history of Buddhism. **We too can use our life and the strength of our minds to shine the light of understanding upon the darkness of ignorance. To do this you have to begin by studying, learning, examining, and understanding, until finally the light of wisdom will shine within you, and this will naturally banish the darkness of ignorance and harmful behaviour. First you need to develop confidence in these teachings of dependent origination. You need to accept them, not out of blind faith, but with the conviction that arises from thorough understanding and experience.**

This conviction comes from understanding the teachings, and then accustoming your mind to them through the continuous practice of meditation. In the beginning you practice this meditation quietly, on a cushion, with a single-pointed mind. But as your conviction strengthens and your wisdom grows, you don't need to be sitting quietly in your meditation room to see how the process of cause and effect brings about the samsaric world we inhabit. You can find this process unfolding everywhere you go; on the street, in a crowd, at a party, or sitting drinking tea with your friend. Wherever you go you are in samsara; wherever you go you can find pain, disappointment, sorrow, and agitation. Some beings are being born, some are aging, some are dying, some are gaining, some are losing. There isn't any limit to the kinds of problems sentient beings encounter in cyclic existence. Once wisdom's fire is kindled within you, all of this (whatever you see) becomes pure fuel feeding the powerful fire of wisdom.

Without some level of understanding, everything goes to the side of ignorance. Just by reading and thinking about these teachings right here, we are gaining a certain level of understanding. But too often we just leave it there. We don't accustom our minds to this view through meditation, and we don't apply our insights assiduously to transform our behaviour. We plant some positive seeds, but we do not cultivate those seeds so that they are actualised and ripen into the wisdom of directly seeing the truth. We do gain some insight, but then we slide back to our earlier ways of thinking and acting. The seeds we have planted are still there, and may ripen at some time in the future (perhaps many eons in the future) but the opportunity we have right now to transform our view from ignorance to wisdom slips away for lack of effort.

We are talking here about building the most basic foundation of all future progress on the path; the thought of renunciation. This thought grows naturally out of seeing the faults of cyclic existence from many different points of view. We have approached this from two different angles: contemplating suffering and the causes of suffering, karma and afflictions; and contemplating the twelve links of dependent origination, the nexus of cause and effect that perpetually drives the cycle of suffering existence. Once you understand how thoroughly your life is enmeshed in suffering and dissatisfaction, the thought wishing to get free from this will spontaneously arise. This thought is the key to

all of the Buddha's teachings. The Hinayana, the Mahayana, the Tantrayana; all are based on this **thought of renunciation**.

Without this thought you will never seek emancipation for yourself, which is the practice of the Hinayana. Without this thought you can never generate the bodhisattva's sincere, compassionate determination to help other sentient beings become free of suffering, which is the practice of the Mahayana. Without this thought of renunciation whatever tantric practice you engage in will be only for your own selfish ends. You may hide in a cave for three years or even ten years reciting great mantras, visualising splendid mandalas, propitiating powerful deities, but whatever you do, you are still attached to this world. **Your mind and motivation are still oriented to worldly concerns; your practice remains on a selfish basis. You remain under the control of the ignorant self, which says, "If you do this you will become famous, or rich. You will be protected from your enemies. Demons will not harm you. You will become powerful and be able to control others." Without genuine renunciation these are the kinds of thoughts that will lurk in the back of the mind. The selfish, egotistic idea remains in control. Ignorance is telling you what to do.**

Such people may call themselves "Mahayana practitioners" or "tantric practitioners," but they are practicing the Mahayana and Vajrayana in name only. **Their mental attitude remains that of worldly beings, working only for their own temporary goals. Without the sincere thought of renunciation that kind of practice will not work; it will not pacify their own sufferings nor will it be of any benefit to others. The thought of renunciation is the foundation of all further progress on the path, and understanding dependent origination is the method to produce that thought.**

In his poem, *In Praise of Dependent Arising*, **Tsongkhapa praises the Buddha for his way of teaching dependent origination and emptiness as an integrated, unified view of the true nature of things.** Over many stanzas he **points out how exceptional this teaching is (how meaningful, how valuable, how profound) and how unique is the teacher who realised this true nature and presented it to the world**:

> Among teachers, the teacher of dependent origination,
> Among wisdoms, that which realises dependent origination—
> These are like the foremost conquerors of the world;
> There are no others who can match your glorious insight.
>
> Whatever you have taught
> Is penetrated by dependent origination,
> And since that leads to nirvana,
> There is nothing you do that does not bring peace.

On one level dependent origination is a description of how beings exist in the world and the causal chain that perpetuates the life process. At the same time, **it describes how beings can liberate themselves from the cycle of suffering by understanding this process, disengaging from these causes, and breaking the causal chain.**

But the **teaching of dependent origination goes even deeper than that. It demonstrates how everything that exists in the world is relative, depends on other parts, and arises from causes and conditions. It reveals how there is nothing that has independent existence. Most things appear to us to be independent; the inner self, external phenomena, all appear to have their own self-existence. They appear to be exactly the opposite of dependently arisen. On this level, in teaching dependent origination the Buddha is showing that everything is empty of this independent, absolute nature. In showing how everything arises in dependence on other causes and conditions, he is revealing the final nature of all things; the emptiness of all phenomena.**

Most of the problems of sentient beings are due to ignorance; not knowing the true nature of the self and of things in the world. That ignorance creates all the other obscuring afflictions, such as desire and hostility. These afflictions motivate action, and that

karma creates all of the many different kinds of life that sentient beings experience; all of which culminate in the sufferings of aging, sickness, and death. In this way, everything that happens during life is created by ignorance.

This ignorance is vanquished by the wisdom that realises dependent origination, the emptiness of any absolute, independent mode of existence. As Tsongkhapa says in these stanzas, **this wisdom is the highest wisdom, the best weapon to destroy all the problems that constitute the sufferings of cyclic existence. The Buddha (the teacher who has revealed to us this most powerful insight) is the highest teacher, the perfect teacher, whose function is to help others by introducing them to their true nature.** This teacher, equipped with this teaching, has power like that of the "foremost conquerors of the world." **As long as this kind of teaching (coming from this kind of teacher and revealing this kind of wisdom) survives in the world, sentient beings will have the ability to gradually eliminate all of their problems from the root.**