Chapter 17 The Eight Types of Suffering

We begin the Intermediate Scope.

The person who strives for complete emancipation from cyclic existence is the being of intermediate scope.

All of the trainings we have studied thus far have been directed toward turning the mind away from its pursuit of the pleasures of this life, and making a good rebirth in the next life the central concern of our mental and physical activity. We meditate on these practices common to the being of small scope in order to effect this reversal of our ordinary priorities. Based on trust in the cause and effect of karma, we redirect our actions to the virtuous side, purify previous non-virtue, and accumulate the causes for happy rebirths in the future. If we succeed in this practice, at the time of death we will have confidence that this precious opportunity of a human life has not been wasted.

If you can succeed at even that much, your life has been greatly successful and made meaningful. But that is not the final goal. Śāntideva says in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*:

> Even though they repeatedly come to a happy existence,
> And experience much pleasure there,
> Upon dying they fall for a long time
> Into the unbearable sufferings of lower realms.

Even if you succeed completely, and secure a comfortable rebirth in a happy realm, that life too will eventually come to an end, and once again you will face the possibility of falling into one of the many levels of misery. You have no security about what will happen in the future. Because you remain under the power of karma and afflictions, there is always the possibility of falling back into a suffering realm. In every such rebirth you will have to make energetic efforts to prevent the possibility of a lower rebirth.

You must look further. You need to start thinking about the next steps on the path. These are the trainings common to the person of intermediate scope; whose goal is complete emancipation from cyclic existence. This type of practitioner is striving for freedom from *all* future rebirth; high or low. He or she wants to cut off all rebirth conditioned by karma and afflictions,[12] because such rebirths offer no certainty about what will happen in the future.

Tsongkhapa says in his poem, *Foundations of All Good Qualities*:

> The splendours of cyclic existence cannot be trusted:
> They are the opening to all sufferings; when indulged in they never satisfy.
> Realising these faults, I request blessings
> To produce the highest aspiration for the bliss of liberation.

When you examine them closely, the attractive, desirable pleasures of the world never bring any final satisfaction. The very nature of any experience conditioned by karma and the afflic-

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[12] In Buddhism, **mental afflictions**, kleshas, are negative mental states or destructive emotions that contribute to suffering and hinder one's spiritual development. The concept of mental afflictions is central to understanding the causes of suffering and the path to liberation in Buddhist teachings.

1. **Ignorance**: This is considered the root of all other mental afflictions. It refers to a lack of understanding of the nature of reality, including the impermanence of phenomena and the interdependence of all things.
2. **Attachment or desire**: This involves an excessive craving for sensual pleasures, material possessions and attachment to things that are transient. Attachment leads to suffering when those objects or experiences are not attained or are impermanent.
3. **Aversion or hatred**: This is an aversion or hatred towards things that are perceived as unpleasant or undesirable. It can manifest as anger, resentment, or hostility.
4. **Ignorance of the law of karma**: This is different from the general ignorance mentioned earlier. It specifically refers to a lack of understanding of the law of cause and effect, the consequences of one's actions and the cycle of birth and death (samsara).
5. **Pride or ego**: This is an inflated sense of self-importance or superiority. It leads to a distorted view of oneself and others, hindering spiritual growth and understanding.
6. **Doubt**: Doubt refers to a lack of confidence or trust in the teachings of Buddhism, the path, or one's own abilities to follow the path. It can create obstacles on the journey towards enlightenment.

In Buddhist philosophy, the goal is to overcome these mental afflictions through ethical conduct, meditation and wisdom. The process of overcoming them is essential for attaining liberation (nirvana) and reaching a state of freedom from suffering. The practices within Buddhism, such as mindfulness and meditation, aim to cultivate awareness and insight to gradually eliminate these mental afflictions.

tions is it cannot deliver any kind of ultimate contentment or peace of mind. Trying to find satisfaction among the pleasures of a samsaric birth is like drinking saltwater to quench your thirst: no matter how much you drink your thirst will only grow greater and greater. When it comes to worldly pleasures, you can never get enough because you are never satisfied. Once you begin to pursue them you only crave more and more. This pattern of behaviour leads to innumerable troubles. All the dazzling attractions of cyclic existence can never bring stable happiness, and in this sense they are completely unreliable and not to be trusted.

You may enjoy the greatest fame and widespread admiration, but if circumstances change you will be despised by the world. You may have gathered vast wealth, but if circumstances change you will be reduced to abject poverty. You may bask in perfect health, but then suddenly find yourself in pain and close to death. You may delight in the bliss of birth among the gods, but at the end of that life you will fall into the agony of the lower realms.

All favourable circumstances arise in dependence upon causes and conditions. Conditioned by the power of ignorance and the other afflictions, you create karma. The results of that karma are the experiences you meet in your lifetime. Some of those experiences are pleasurable. You are attracted to and get attached to those pleasant feelings. You come to believe, or to hope, that certain of these pleasures can be stabilised; you expect them to bring permanent satisfaction and relief from your underlying anguish. But you are always deceived. There is no such permanent satisfaction. Why? Because these worldly pleasures are by their very nature dependent arisings,[13] impermanent and unstable. They are completely unreliable.

Once you understand that this is the true nature of all worldly pleasures, you recognise that what you really should be striving for is the truly stable, reliable happiness that comes only with emancipation. The only really worthwhile goal is freedom from conditioned, karmically determined experience; that is the only route to happiness that cannot be destroyed. In this prayer by Tsongkhapa you ask the buddhas and the Three Jewels to inspire in your heart the attitude that strives, with unfailing energy, for that freedom of emancipation.

That is the attitude of the being of intermediate scope. These are the trainings that we now begin to study in the middle section of the *Lamrim Chenmo*. The main goal of these meditations is to recognise the faults that are intrinsic to all cyclic existence, including the attractive pleasures of the higher realms. When you see that even the pleasures of cyclic existence are merely gateways to more suffering, it will naturally awaken a strong desire to be free from all samsara. When you see the unfailing benefits of liberation, you will naturally be inspired to strive toward that goal. You will be ready to exchange your ordinary concern for pleasure,

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[13] The Twelve Links of **Dependent Arising**, Pratītyasamutpāda in Sanskrit, illustrate the process of how ignorance and craving lead to the cycle of birth, death and suffering (samsara). The twelve links are interconnected, forming a chain of causation. Understanding and breaking this chain is crucial for achieving liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

1. **Ignorance**: This is the fundamental ignorance of the true nature of reality, including the Four Noble Truths and the nature of the self. Ignorance is the root cause that sets the cycle of dependent arising in motion.
2. **Formation**: Ignorance leads to the formation of volitional activities or mental formations. These are the karmic activities generated by thoughts, words and deeds.
3. **Consciousness**: Formation leads to the arising of consciousness. This refers to the subjective awareness or cognisance that arises as a result of karmic activities.
4. **Name and Form**: Consciousness conditions the development of name (mind or mental factors) and form (physical body) in a subsequent existence.
5. **Six Sense Bases**: Name and form lead to the arising of the six sense bases, which are the faculties of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and mental cognition.
6. **Contact**: The six sense bases give rise to contact, the interaction between the senses and the external world, leading to sensory experiences.
7. **Feeling**: Contact results in feelings or sensations, which can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.
8. **Craving**: Feeling leads to craving, the strong desire or attachment to pleasant experiences and the aversion to unpleasant ones.
9. **Grasping**: Craving, in turn, leads to grasping or clinging, where one holds onto desires and attachments.
10. **Becoming**: Grasping results in becoming, the process of forming karmic actions and the conditions for future existence.
11. **Birth**: Becoming leads to birth, the physical and mental manifestation in a new existence.
12. **Aging and Death**: Birth leads inevitably to aging and death, completing the cycle of dependent arising. The cycle continues as long as ignorance persists.

The understanding and breaking of this chain are fundamental to Buddhist teachings, as doing so leads to liberation from samsara. In Buddhist practice, cultivating wisdom, ethical conduct and mindfulness are essential components of overcoming ignorance and breaking the cycle of dependent arising.

fame, praise, wealth, and beauty (which are all temporary and deceitful) for a focused determination to be free of conditioned existence.

The first goal is to generate the desire for emancipation. Without that you will not find the proper method nor make the necessary effort to achieve this liberation. If you lack any of the three (the desire, the method, or the effort) you will continue to be trapped in the cycle of birth and death. When you see the faults of cyclic existence and the benefits of emancipation, a powerful, constant desire to achieve liberation will arise. Then your whole body, mind, and behaviour will change. All your activity will work against the causal cycle of samsara and will create the causes of emancipation. This is the main training of the being of intermediate scope.

Once you have firmly established this as your spiritual goal, and you have decisively turned away from any interest in the pleasures of cyclic existence, then you will have the ability to move on to the last step: training in the path of the bodhisattva, the being of great scope. Then you will be working not only for yourself but to help others.

But before you can effectively embark on that path, you must realise deeply and sincerely that there is nothing within cyclic existence that can offer any reliable happiness. Until you generate a mind intent on liberation, merely saying "I am practicing bodhicitta; I am practicing the Mahayana path; I am meditating on compassion and love," will be nothing but words.

2) Training the mind in the stages of the path shared with persons of intermediate capacity

To begin the path of the intermediate being, Tsongkhapa offers a dedication to the lineage teachers: "I bow down with respect to the revered holy teachers who possess great compassion."

By the time you reach this stage, your practice should be based on a recollection of death and an awareness of the misery you will experience if you have not prepared properly for that inevitable event. Contemplating this, you should produce an attitude that reverses ordinary concerns by decisively turning away from the affairs of this life and aspires to a happy rebirth in the future. The method of avoiding bad rebirths and obtaining good ones is taking refuge in the Three Jewels and gaining certainty about the cause and effect of karma. These are the practices of the being of small scope. If you engage in these trainings you will be able to secure a higher rebirth in your next lifetime.

Here, on the path of the intermediate being, you will not be satisfied with that goal. The intermediate spiritual being sees that all forms of samsaric birth are subject to disappointment and suffering; none offers hope of everlasting happiness. Hence, you turn away from any desire whatsoever for life within cyclic existence, no matter how blissful. This is the thought of total renunciation of samsara.

It is based on that level of renunciation, reached by means of these trainings of the intermediate being, that you are able to produce the supreme thought of enlightenment, bodhicitta. At that point you step onto the final path of these lamrim teachings, the trainings of the being of great scope, which lead to perfect buddhahood, the great spiritual goal of the Mahayana. It is in order to reach that path of the being of great scope that you must first train on this path of the being of intermediate scope.

The reason is that even if you are born in a splendid human life, or as a deva, you still have not passed beyond the pervasive suffering of having all your experience conditioned by karma and afflictions. You will still be subject to being born again and again, with no control over when you die, where you are reborn, or what unpleasant conditions you meet in future lives. As long as you continue to be conditioned by karma and afflictions you will not find any stable, reliable form of happiness. This pervasive suffering, the suffering of being conditioned, is a subject we will discuss later, when we examine the three types of suffering.

Even if you are born into a lifetime of blissful experience, holding on to that as some kind of ultimate happiness is a big mistake. It is merely a temporary respite within an endless cycle of uncontrolled rebirths. It is happiness that cannot last. It is happiness whose nature is to turn into disappointment and suffering. It is happiness that is certain to come to a bad end.

It is as if a man who was falling from a high precipice were to think, "Ah, this is quite comfortable. I don't feel any pain at all. I am enjoying this pleasurable sensation of flying." Of

course, within a short amount of time this person is going to crash. So he has made a mistake: that is not pleasure; it is only a moment of respite before a bad end. In the same way, a comfortable rebirth is nothing more than a brief intermission in the constant cycling through miserable, uncontrolled existence. As I quoted at the beginning this chapter, Śāntideva says in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*:

> Even though they repeatedly come to a happy existence
> And experience much pleasure there,
> Upon dying they fall for a long time
> Into the unbearable sufferings of lower realms.

Similarly, Candragomin's *Letter to a Student* says:

> Those born into the tumbling, incessant change of cyclic existence,
> Clutch on to a simple moment of repose as real happiness.
> They will surely wander helplessly through hundreds of rebirths—
> Some similar to this, some different—one after another.

Once you are caught in the wheel of samsara, your future is like a feather blown helplessly about by the wind. Unable to control your destiny, you grasp at the slightest joyful moment and imagine that this is real happiness. You create all kinds of actions out of attachment and aversion, trying desperately to cling on to a fleeting moment of peace. But those actions only produce more and more unhappiness in the future. You need to reconsider the true nature of "happy" migrations, recognise their fundamental faults, see that they are just as unsatisfactory as suffering rebirths, and become thoroughly disenchanted with their attractions.

Āryadeva says in his *Four Hundred Stanzas* (Catuḥ-śataka-śāstra-kārikā):

> The wise feel the same fear
> For a high rebirth as for the hells.
> It is rare indeed for a worldly state
> Not to produce fear in them.

The stanza says that it is rare to find a realm within cyclic existence that does not produce fear in the heart of a wise practitioner. But the term "rare" here really means "never." Why? Because there is, in reality, no state whatsoever that is not a fearful realm of suffering once you understand the true nature of things. From the lowest hells up to the highest heaven (the so-called "peak of existence") there is no state that a wise person finds attractive. Equally disenchanted with all of samsara, he or she produces a fervent desire to get out of this cycle of misery altogether. For, as the Verse Summary of the "*Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*" says, "Those whose minds are attached to cyclic existence will cycle there unceasingly."

In his *Letter to a Student*, Candragomin points out how our perception of experience as happy and pleasant is the source of delusion and attachment:

> To the extent you perceive all beings as happy,
> To that extent the darkness of your ignorance will thicken.
> To the extent you perceive all beings as suffering,
> To that extent the darkness of your ignorance will disperse.
> The more you fixate on attractive objects,
> The more the flames of attachment will spread.
> The more you meditate on unattractive objects,
> The more the flames of attachment will be extinguished.

Since beginningless time you have been grasping at the "glories" of cyclic existence as the sources of real happiness. You have perceived worldly goals such as material possessions, fame, and sensual pleasure to be some kind of ultimate satisfaction and bliss. You have become accustomed to imputing a nature of attractiveness upon those samsaric delights; you invest them with an ability to deliver bliss and contentment. Most human beings are so attached to these splendours that they sacrifice their whole life to attain them. **This hopeless pursuit of happiness in the wrong places (this habitual projection of unreal expectations on worldly objects) is the real problem.**

The antidote to that habitual, mistaken way of thinking is to **meditate on suffering**. **You must cultivate a correct perception of the nature of these worldly delights by meditating**

on the many ways in which they bring only disappointment and sorrow. You must concentrate on their faults. When you practice the antidote by meditating on the faulty nature of samsaric attractions, you are concentrating on their real nature; there is no imputation of false qualities. This is the reversal of the ordinary mode of perception. Ordinarily you see impure things as pure, impermanent things as permanent, and objects whose nature is to bring suffering as sources of happiness. For a very long time (beginninglessly, in fact) you have been accustomed to seeing only the falsely imputed "attractive" nature of these objects.

The antidote is to use discriminating wisdom to analyse their true nature, and by means of meditation to accustom your mind to perceiving that truth: their nature of being impure, impermanent, and causes of suffering. Once your perceptions are cleansed and your mind is accustomed to this truth, you will naturally turn away from these false attractions, and in doing so you will eliminate the causes of suffering.

If you do not meditate on the suffering nature of worldly splendours, you will continue to impute attractive qualities onto impure objects, your attachment will increase, ignorance will thicken, and you will go on perpetually turning the wheel of samsaric life. **It is vitally important to meditate on the faults of cyclic existence.** That is the practice of the being of intermediate scope. And that will be the emphasis of the practices we find in the following sections. They are methods to loosen your attachment to cyclic existence and to inspire you to seek complete freedom from it. These methods are explained under the following four headings:

a) The actual training to develop the attitude of the person of intermediate spiritual scope
b) The measure of having produced the attitude of a person of intermediate scope
c) Clarifying misconceptions
d) Establishing the nature of the path that leads to emancipation

a) The actual training to develop the attitude of the person of intermediate spiritual scope

i) Identifying the mind that strives for emancipation

If you want to understand the mind that strives for emancipation, you must first identify emancipation. "Emancipation" means freedom from bondage. But what is it that binds you, that ties you up? Karma and the afflictions bind you to cyclic existence. The power of these two keeps you in samsara. By their power you are born into one of the three realms: in the desire, form, or formless realm. By their power you are born among one of six types of sentient beings: hell denizens, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demigods, and devas. By their power you take birth by means of one of the four birth sources: from a womb, from an egg, from moist heat, and by miraculous birth.[14]

Being bound by karma and afflictions means that your five aggregates are compelled to be reborn, over and over again, into these experiences. Emancipation means total release from that cycle of birth and death, which is totally beyond your control. It means cutting the chain of karmic causality that binds you to that endless cycle. The desire to obtain that freedom is identified here as the mind that strives for emancipation. This is an attitude that **first understands the causes of bondage in cyclic existence, recognises the means of gaining freedom from that bondage, and then decisively sets out to achieve that goal.**

It is the very nature of phenomena dependent upon causes and conditions that they arise in one moment and then, in the second moment, they change and are destroyed. Every moment there is arisal, change, and destruction. **"All conditioned things are impermanent"** means that nothing that arises from causes and conditions is ever able to stay exactly the same, because every moment it changes. For example, in the first moment you are born, and then with each passing moment you become older and older. We are all constantly changing, although we do not recognise the change. Suddenly you are not a baby anymore; you are a big, strange person. It appears to happen slowly, gradually, but in every moment everything is constantly in a state of transformation.

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[14] There are four types of birth or "birth-sources": birth from an egg, birth from a womb, birth from moist heat, and miraculous birth. Hell beings, devas, and intermediate state beings always have miraculous birth. Hungry ghosts are usually miraculously born, but some are said be womb born. Humans and animals share all four types of birth. See chapter 8.

But this moment-to-moment destruction of the world produced by karma and afflictions is not what is meant here by "emancipation." That kind of destruction does not require an antidote. It is just like a tree that grows from a small seed: every moment it is changing and growing into something else. If the moment-by-moment destruction of produced phenomena were emancipation, then everybody would be automatically liberated without any effort.

The emancipation we are concerned with here is a type of cessation which is based on the application of an antidote, and which destroys its object permanently, from the root. It is like a tree that is intentionally dug up from the root: that tree is permanently destroyed.

If you do not give rise to the antidote, rebirth from one life to the next will just go on and on. Some of these rebirths will be high, some will be low, but they will just keep coming, one after the other. It is by the power of cultivating the antidote that the process of rebirth is finally, permanently, brought to an end. **The poison tree of samsaric birth and death can only be destroyed by pulling out its roots of karma and affliction, which can only be done by applying the antidote of meditation.**

When, by the power of the antidote, the continuity of rebirth is stopped; that is emancipation. This is what you must comprehend if you are going to "identify the mind that strives for emancipation." Once you know what emancipation is, you can strive for that with energy and determination.

ii) The method for producing the mind that strives for emancipation

If you do not see the faults of a particular type of experience, you will not recognise it as suffering and you will not feel any special desire to be rid of it. The basis of a strong wish to be free of thirst is to recognise the discomfort of that experience, to know its faults, and perceive it as undesirable.

It is the same with the desire to obtain emancipation. Emancipation is freedom from the suffering of the aggregates appropriated by karma and afflictions. The desire to obtain emancipation depends on seeing what is wrong with those aggregates; that they have the very nature of suffering. Samsaric life manifests in the body-mind continuum of your aggregates, and if you don't see samsaric life as faulty you will not feel any need to be emancipated from it.

You have to meditate on the faults of cyclic existence in order to see, from many points of view, how its very nature is suffering. Once you see that, you will not want to be there anymore. You will want freedom from that condition. The mind intent on emancipation will rise. The great Āryadeva in his *Four Hundred Stanzas* wrote:

> How can anyone who has no aversion
> To this existence take an interest in pacification?
> Like leaving home, it is also hard
> To leave worldly existence behind.

Even if you are in prison, if you don't perceive your life in prison as a problem (if you don't have any objection to the food, or to the way you have to spend your time, or to the people you are imprisoned with) then you won't have any incentive to get out of there. You may want to stay there forever. In a similar way, we think of this prison of cyclic existence as our home. People don't look for the faults of their home; they are comfortable there. In general, everyone thinks that his or her own home is the best place in the world. That is why we say, "There's no place like home." And that is why beings find it so difficult to get out of cyclic existence. It feels like home. We are used to it, deeply attached to it. We want to stay here forever, not think about getting out of it.

That is why we need this method to inspire the interest and desire for emancipation. The method for generating the mind that strives for emancipation is twofold:

a' Contemplating suffering and the cause of suffering

b' Contemplating the twelve links of dependent origination

a' Contemplating suffering and the cause of suffering

In this method, you first meditate on suffering as a result, and then you proceed to contemplate the causes of that suffering (karma and the various afflictions) and how these causes produce their effects, entangling beings in the miseries of cyclic existence.

1' Contemplating the truth of suffering: the faults of cyclic existence

a" Explaining the significance of the Buddha's teaching the truth of suffering first among the four noble truths

Why did the Buddha teach the truth of suffering as the first of the four noble truths? When you think about it, you would expect the *cause* of suffering to come first, because a cause always comes before an effect. But as we all know, in his presentation of the four noble truths the Buddha taught the truth of suffering first, then the cause of suffering, then the cessation, then the path. This way of presenting it appears to be backward, doesn't it? The question is this: "Since causes precede effects, why did the Buddha not follow that order when he said, 'Monks, this is the noble truth of suffering. This is the noble truth of the cause'?"

Tsongkhapa says that the Buddha did not make a mistake when he reversed the order. By inverting cause and effect in this way he was making a crucial point about practice. What was this special point?

From the point of view of his disciples, if they did not first produce the desire to obtain emancipation from cyclic existence, how could he lead them to liberation? In teaching this way the Buddha was pointing to the essential method: first the trainees must generate a sincere desire for liberation. If they lack that interest there will be no basis for any further practice. The Buddha saw that his disciples, like most sentient beings, were deceived by the mistaken view that apprehends the attractions of samsara as sources of pleasure and happiness, when in fact they produce only dissatisfaction and suffering. In this way their minds were enshrouded in the darkness of ignorance.

All beings entrapped in cyclic existence suffer, from the very beginning, from this misapprehension. They are deceived by the attractive appearance of objects of desire, which are, in reality, causes of suffering. That attitude has to change. That cloud of misunderstanding must lift, so that you can see that the splendours of cyclic existence are in the nature of suffering, and are not at all true causes of happiness and joy.

Āryadeva's Four Hundred Stanzas says:

> When there is no end at all
> To this ocean of suffering,
> Why are you childish people
> Not afraid of drowning in it?

He says to us: you immature people, you are like children who have no concept of how big and how deep the ocean is. You are so ignorant of the dangers that even though you are sinking into the turbulent waters, you don't know enough to be afraid. Worldly beings are deceived; like children, they see only the attractive sparkle of the great ocean of samsara, without realising that it is an ocean full of misery, and that they are drowning in it.

The truth is that the splendours of the world are not objects whose true nature is to bestow happiness. Their true nature is to produce all kinds of problems and misery. This is what the Buddha was pointing out when he taught the various aspects of the suffering of cyclic existence. And he did this in order to produce in his disciples disenchantment with cyclic existence, and the thought of renunciation. This is just like parents who warn their children, "Don't touch that stove because it is very hot and you will burn yourself." They do this to stop their children being attracted to an object that looks enticing but is actually very dangerous. Because awakening this awareness in his disciples was so essential to the rest of the path, the Buddha taught the truth of suffering first.

Once you realise that you are in this great ocean of suffering cyclic existence, you have a powerful desire to get out, and you realise that to escape you must turn away from the objects that cause it. This sets you to looking for the sources of samsaric suffering. What is the cause of samsara? Where did it come from? How did it happen? It was to answer these questions that the Buddha taught the second noble truth: the truth of the cause of cyclic existence.

When you analyse these questions you discover that samsaric suffering is created by the many forms of contaminated karma, and that karma itself is produced by the inner obscuring afflictions. The root of those afflictions is the ignorance of grasping at a false conception of self; this is the ignorance that holds the self as something permanent, essential, and real. First,

you impute upon the ever-changing aggregates a permanent sense of self (an egoistic, central "I") and then you become attached to that I. That I becomes the centre of your attention, so that everything you do is to serve the I. All of your actions (including helping friends, harming enemies, loving some, hating others) are created from this self-grasping. By this analysis you come to realise the second noble truth, the cause of suffering: karma and the afflictions.

Is that self-grasping ignorance intrinsic and immoveable, or is there a powerful antidote that can destroy it? Upon analysis you find that this ignorance is not only a wrong, perverted, baseless view of reality, but it is adventitious[15] (the very opposite of intrinsic) and therefore can be eliminated by an effective antidote. Once you realise that you actually can get rid of the very root of all unhappiness so that it will never reappear, you will be inspired to achieve that cessation of suffering. You will think, "I must become completely freed from all of this sorrow by rooting out its cause." This intention is based on realising that you actually have the power to bring about the cessation of suffering. Therefore, the third noble truth, the truth of cessation, was taught third.

A question arises: if it is the case that by realising the truth of suffering people immediately generate a desire for liberation, why didn't the Buddha teach the truth of cessation second, so that people would pursue liberation right after they realise the truth of suffering? That seems like a reasonable question, doesn't it?

There is no fault in the sequence of the four truths. After you realise the truth of suffering, a general desire to be free of cyclic existence does arise. But you still have not understood the causes of that suffering, and you have not yet ascertained that it is possible to achieve the goal of freedom from all sorrow. Without those two interconnected realisations, there is no way to produce a firm and confident resolve: "I will definitely attain the cessation of suffering." It is only after the cause has been analysed and you determine that emancipation is obtainable that the sincere desire to pursue emancipation will arise. Therefore, the truth of cessation was taught third.

The question now is: "What is the method to achieve that goal?" Therefore, as the fourth noble truth the Buddha taught the truth of the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. This fourth truth presents the many different paths you can follow to reach the desired destination.

Maitreya's *Sublime Continuum (Uttara-tantra)* sums up all four truths this way:

> The illness should be recognised, its cause removed,
> Health should be attained, the remedy should be applied.
> Like that, **suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path**
> **Should be recognised, eliminated, attained, and practiced.**

In this quotation Maitreya is comparing spiritual development to the process of ridding yourself of sickness. First you have to realise that you are sick. You have to recognise that you have an undesirable condition and that you need to get free of it. How do you do that? You need to understand the cause of the sickness. Where does it come from? Is it possible to get rid of it? Or is it something that can never be cured? Once you realise the cause of the sickness, and that it can be cured with a certain medical treatment, you naturally decide to do what needs to be done to get rid of that sickness, and that is what you do. You rely on the appropriate remedy, and although it may be hard at times, you pursue the treatment until the disease is cured from the root.

This metaphor points to the special significance of the order of the four noble truths. The Buddha was not merely teaching the cause and effect of the arising and pacification of suffering. He was laying out a method of practice for us, the practitioners, in a format that would be most effective in actually leading us to that pacification of suffering. It is a process of analysis. First, you recognise the result, suffering, as your problem. That leads you to investigate the cause, and to determine that suffering can actually be overcome. You determine that a different result, the cessation of suffering, is possible, so you decide to pursue that much happier result. Then you investigate the cause of that happy result, which is the path, and you practice that

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[15] **Adventitious h**appening as a result of an external factor or chance rather than design or inherent nature: *adventitious similarities.*Coming from outside; not native: *the adventitious population.*

path until you reach your desired goal. That is why the Buddha presented the four noble truths in the way that he did.

The Buddha taught these four noble truths many times throughout the Hinayana and Mahayana scriptures. In his teaching of the four noble truths he summarised the key points of the two causal processes: the cause and effect of entering into cyclic existence, and the cause and effect of how to get out of it. This teaching is extremely important for those who wish to attain emancipation, because it distills all the essential elements of the practice in a format designed especially to lead the disciple directly to the goal. You can think of the four noble truths as the high road into which all the subsidiary paths, lanes, and avenues eventually flow. No matter which direction you come from, everyone must finally travel down this high road; it is the only route to the city of liberation. In order to follow that road, it is essential that students are led along the path of the four noble truths in the order in which they were presented.

By contemplating the truth of suffering from many different points of view, your mind will eventually come around to a feeling of utter revulsion toward the attractions of cyclic existence. This attitude is precisely the reverse of your ordinary attachment to samsara, and it arises naturally, authentically, because you have come to see the splendours of the world for what they are; sources of endless suffering. Until you have produced this authentic attitude of renunciation, your interest in obtaining emancipation will be nothing but words, and everything that you do will only become further causes of suffering.

You can generate that feeling of revulsion for the splendours of cyclic existence, but then what are you going to do about it? How will you get out of that cycle of suffering? In order to know the methods that can lead you out of samsara, you must first identify and understand its root causes: **karma and the afflictions**. You do this by concentrating on the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. Trying to find your way out of cyclic existence without a clear comprehension of its causes is like an archer hoping for a bull's-eye without even seeing the target. If you do not properly understand the causes of bondage in cyclic existence, you will miss the essential points of the path. You will head off in the wrong direction, mistaking for the path to liberation activities that only lead to more suffering. Running down the wrong roads, trying to reach the wrong goals, you will only exhaust yourself, and in the end you will have achieved nothing.

If you do not comprehend suffering, the cause of suffering, and how they are to be eliminated, you will not be able to identify liberation, which brings final pacification to that suffering. If you do not recognise actual liberation, your interest and efforts to attain it will be nothing but a fanciful notion, a self-deception. You may think that you are striving to obtain emancipation, but in actuality you are not.

As Tsongkhapa told us earlier, **these four noble truths contain the essence of all the vital points of the path to liberation. The Buddha taught them in a particular order as a special means for leading his disciples along that path. A disciple who is not led according to the method laid out by the Buddha can go astray, follow the wrong path, and then all his or her efforts will become fruitless. You should keep in mind the significance of the format in which the Buddha taught the four truths, and meditate on them accordingly.**

b" The actual meditation on suffering

In the first part (1") we concentrate on the ways in which cyclic existence is, in general, a suffering experience. Later (chapter 19) we look at the individual forms of suffering encountered in the six realms of sentient beings.

1" Contemplating the general sufferings of cyclic existence

There are a number of different ways of meditating on the general sufferings of cyclic existence. They can be presented in three sets - which are addressed below:

(a) Contemplating the eight types of suffering
(b) Contemplating the six types of suffering (Chapter 18)
(c) Contemplating the three types of suffering (Chapter 19)

Although we are immersed in the miseries of cyclic existence, we don't know how to think about them, how to recognise them, how to analyse them. Therefore, the lamrim system arranges these topics in a way that is easy to access and put to use. This presentation is

based on the sutras and commentaries, where various approaches are introduced. It is useful to have several different presentations because different methods will work for people of different inclinations and capabilities.

Again, the general method we are using to integrate these ideas with our mental continuum is analytical meditation, which directs the mind to logical reasons from many points of view, in order to produce sharp and powerful insights into the true nature of our condition. As with most things in life, the more reasons we have for thinking in a certain way, and the more convinced we are of those reasons, the more forceful our conviction will be and the more energy it will have in motivating our actions.

When you like something, the more reasons you devise for why that object is attractive, the stronger your attachment will become. When you dislike something, the more you concentrate on why that object is disagreeable, the more you will come to hate it. In short, **the more reasons you have for a feeling, the stronger it will become. That is the nature of the mind. If you want to generate the energy to escape from cyclic existence, you need to meditate, from many different points of view, on the reasons why cyclic existence is something to get out of.** This is what we do in the following sections.

(a) Contemplating the eight types of suffering

Tsongkhapa introduces the eight types of suffering with a quotation from Nāgārjuna's *Friendly Letter*:

> My Lord, be disenchanted with cyclic existence, which is the source of many sufferings: not getting what you want, death, disease, old age, and the others.

Nāgārjuna is addressing his friend the king, and advising him on how to train on the spiritual path. Cultivating disenchantment with cyclic existence means bringing to mind the faults of samsara. Nāgārjuna explicitly mentions four types of suffering: not getting what you want, death, sickness, and old age. These are four of the eight types of suffering, and when Nāgārjuna says "and the others," he is implicitly referring to the remaining four. These eight sufferings were taught by the Buddha in many sutras when he explained the truth of suffering.

In the following pages we will be analysing from many different angles the faulty qualities of cyclic existence. It is important to approach these trainings with a clear understanding of how you are going to meditate on these points. First of all, you should remember the explanations of samsaric suffering that we have already discussed as part of the trainings of the being of small scope, and incorporate that understanding where it is relevant here.

But now we are going beyond the discussion of the sufferings of the lower realms, and exploring the faulty nature of all samsaric existence. This introduces practices which are not common to the person of small scope.[16]

Of the two general types of meditation (stabilising and analytical) what we are doing here is called analytical meditation. Nevertheless, it is very important that you maintain a stable concentration on the particular topic you are focused on. For example, if you are meditating on the truth of suffering by way of the eight divisions and its various details, your mind may wander to other topics, such as the truth of cessation. Of course there are all sorts of distractions; some may be virtuous, some non-virtuous, some neutral. But instead of letting your attention be diverted by any of these distractions, you should maintain single-pointed concentration on the topic at hand.

In the practice of stabilising meditation there are two extremes that must be avoided: one is letting the mind get too excited so that it runs after all kinds of extraneous thoughts; the other danger is mental dullness or drowsiness. Even here, in the context of analytical meditation, it is

[16] If you have the capacity and mental acuity to follow all the details, explanations, and quotations that are included here in the Lamrim Chenmo, you should practice these points just as they are presented here. If such a full presentation is too much for you, you can streamline your approach by focusing on the points that Tsongkhapa himself makes, and leave out the quotations from scripture. This will simplify the material and give you a more accessible outline to follow. Tsongkhapa includes a large number of many scriptural passages from the Buddha and the great Indian masters in the Lamrim Chenmo, and he does this to support and elucidate his explanations. If you can, you should include these in your practice because doing so will expand and deepen your understanding. But if your mind only gets confused by so many names and difficult passages, then focus your meditation on the flow of argument that Tsongkhapa himself is making.

essential to avoid these two hindrances. You should maintain your consciousness in a relaxed state of lucid clarity, continuously focused on the subject of meditation.

Śāntideva says in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* that whatever virtuous activities you do, if they are done with a distracted mind, their benefits will be diminished:

> The knower of reality has said
> That even if recitation and physical hardships
> Are practiced for long periods of time,
> They will be meaningless if the mind is distracted elsewhere.

In addition, the *Sutra of Cultivating Faith in the Mahayana* says:

> Child of good lineage: You should understand from this enumeration that whatever emerges from the Mahayana, including faith of the bodhisattvas in the Mahayana path, comes from correctly contemplating the meaning and the teachings with an undistracted mind.

That is the Mahayana practitioner gains results from two aspects of practice: from a mind that is focused and not distracted; and from applying that concentrated mind to analysing the words and meaning of the teachings. These together produce the fruit of the Mahayana.[17]

The point of this passage is that in order to accomplish any of the spiritual virtues of the Hinayana or Mahayana, you must have both undistracted focus and analytical discrimination. The achievement of all the higher qualities on the paths of the bodhisattva, śrāvaka, or pratyekabuddha[18] depends on a mind that has both of these attributes. First, you must be able to remain single-pointed and not waver from the object you are focused upon. For your mind to have this attribute, you must have attained either actual single-pointed concentration, called ***śamatha*** in Sanskrit, or at least a state that is similar to it. Second, you must be able to discern the ultimate or conventional nature of phenomena by means of applying analysis to the virtuous object. The ability to distinguish the ultimate nature of the object is called "highest insight," or ***vipaśyanā*** in Sanskrit, and you must have either actual highest insight or a state that is similar to that.

The *Sutra Unravelling the Intended Meaning* makes this point explicitly:

> Maitreya, you should know that all the virtuous qualities, whether mundane or super-mundane, belonging to śrāvakas, bodhisattvas, or tathāgatas, are the result of single-pointed concentration and highest insight.

You have to have a combination of both of these, but you do not have to fully accomplish them before you can make progress on the path.[19]

In general, the emphasis here is on the union of stabilising and analytical meditation, the union of single-pointed concentration and highest insight. When these two modes of meditation are actualised, joined together, and applied to the analysis of phenomena, meditation becomes very powerful and will be successful.

If you do not unite these two in your practice, when you try to do analytical meditation your mind will tend to wander all over the place. If you try to stabilise the mind by not thinking anything at all, you will not make any progress and you will just end up falling asleep. For meditation to bear the fruit of realisation on the path, you need a union of śamatha and vipaśyanā, or at least a mind that has been developed to a level close to that.

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[17] Tsongkhapa's commentary provides very specific definitions for the terms and phrases appearing in this sutra quotation. He says that "**an undistracted mind**" refers to a mind that is directed to certain virtuous objects and that does not wander off to anything else. The phrase "**the meaning and teachings**" refers to the words of the teachings and their meanings. And "**correctly contemplating**" these words and their meanings means analysing and reflecting with discriminating awareness.

[18] **Pratyekabuddhas** who will definitely become self-realised" has a specific technical meaning here. It means that they will achieve their spiritual goal by accumulating merits for 100 eons, and in their last life they will practice in solitude, "like a rhinoceros," without the aid of a teacher. In contrast, **śrāvakas** attain their goal in an indefinite period of time, and in their last life they do listen to teachings. For both of these beings the attainment they achieve is the elimination of the "obscurations of the afflictions", which liberates them from cyclic existence. They do not achieve the elimination of the "obscurations to knowledge", which only comes with the attainment of perfect buddhahood.

[19] Tsongkhapa says that although this sutra literally says that you need both single-pointed concentration and highest insight, it should be understood that it is sufficient if your mind has reached a level that is similar or close to those realisations. As long as you have a high degree of both undistracted focus and analytical wisdom, you can achieve good results on the path.

(i) The suffering of birth

When you meditate on the truth of suffering in terms of eight types, the first is the suffering of birth. This topic has five points to consider:

1. Birth is suffering because there is pain at the time of birth itself

In four types of birth, the birth process itself is painful: these are birth into the hell realms, birth among the hungry ghosts, birth from a mother's womb, and birth from an egg. Beings born in these four ways experience various forms of severe pain at the time of birth. In general, beings born into the desire realm (especially beings born from a womb or from an egg) have a painful birth. The exception to this are the devas who are born into the form and formless realms; they do not experience any special suffering when they are born.

2. Birth is suffering because it possesses the negative tendencies[20]

This means that when you take a rebirth in cyclic existence, you already possess the causes and conditions for suffering in the form of karma and afflictions. Sometimes the term "negative tendencies" refers to the source or cause of obscuring afflictions. Here it refers to the potential you carry with you, even at the moment of birth, to experience undesirable circumstances. The fact that you possess these negative tendencies means that you have no control over your own future experience. You are completely at the mercy of the karmic seeds and obscuring afflictions (the negative tendencies) that are with you even as you are born. Though you desire happiness and do not want suffering, you have no power to bring this about because you possess these tendencies.

All produced phenomena in the three realms of cyclic existence grow out of and are conducive to the obscuring afflictions. The karma that produces both our individual and shared experience is all an outgrowth of these afflictions; it is all compatible with the afflictions and is incompatible with wisdom.

Once you are born into these samsaric realms possessing these negative tendencies, all of the elements of that lifetime become unsuitable for the virtuous actions leading to happiness and liberation, because they are all outgrowths of the afflictions and incompatible with wisdom. It is like trying to make a gold ornament when the gold itself is adulterated with impurities; that gold will be unworkable.

When you are born possessing the impurities of the negative tendencies, your aspirations to achieve happiness by means of virtuous actions will meet with all kinds of hindrances. These difficulties are the results of the very condition in which you were born. You bring with you into this life, this unsuitability for directing the actions of your body and mind to the virtuous side. Even if you have the interest to dedicate yourself to a spiritual path, you cannot do whatever you wish because you do not really have full control over yourself. You are under the power of your previous karma and afflictions, and limited by the environment into which you were born.

All of the produced phenomena of the external inanimate world (including the earth and the infinite world systems; as well as the inner world of individual sentient beings; their bodies and their minds) are all an outgrowth of karma and afflictions. They are all compatible with and driven by the negative tendencies. You have created your own experience by your own previous karma, and now that world of experience channels your behaviour and sets limits on what you can do in this life. In this sense, your control over yourself is quite limited.

You could say that the karmic seeds (the potentials you bring with you into this life) are like the fuel that feeds the birth, survival, and increase of the afflictions. Because all the factors of your being and of your world are associated with these karmic potentials, their natural tendency is to produce, sustain, and increase afflictions. Because all of the factors that constitute existence within samsara are associated with seeds that produce, sustain, and increase the afflictions, your body-mind continuum and all the conditions of this life are unsuitable to perform in the service of virtue. Even if you try to practice virtue, hindrances will arise because of these circumstances.

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[20] The potential, carried within every being in cyclic existence (in the form of karma and afflictions), to experience undesirable circumstances. Because birth in samsara is inextricably bound up with these negative tendencies, it inevitably contains the potential to manifest pain and suffering.

This is why it is difficult to direct your behaviour onto a virtuous course. You lack the freedom or self-control to do whatever you wish. Your options are limited by the power of these negative tendencies. Once you understand this, you recognise that birth is suffering because it possesses the negative tendencies.

3. Birth is suffering because it is the source of suffering

By taking birth in these three realms of cyclic existence under the power of karma and afflictions, you undergo such sufferings as aging, sickness, and finally death. Birth in this world is the very basis or source of these miserable experiences. If you attain emancipation and thereby cut off this cycle, then these various types of suffering will not happen. But as long as you are born by karma and afflictions into this world, such suffering will be the result.

4. Birth is suffering because birth is the source of obscuring afflictions

Birth is not just the source of suffering, it is also the source of the *cause* of suffering. You are born into this world with sense faculties through which you make contact with objects that you find attractive, unattractive, or neutral. Meeting these objects gives rise to desire, aversion, or ignorance (the three poisons) which are the main roots of samsaric suffering. These unsettle the mind and body, disturbing any sense of peace or satisfaction. Agitated by desire or aversion, you take action that is rooted in ignorance of the true methods to find happiness. That karmic action brings only more unpleasant results, which in turn produce more afflictions. This is the chain of the arising of suffering due to karma and affliction, and it begins, in this life, at the time of birth. In this way suffering is a self-perpetuating cycle: birth is the *result* of the afflictions, but then, once you are born into this body, birth becomes the *source* of even more afflictions. It is these afflictions that make you suffer; they are the real enemy.

Of course, when you are immersed in this cycle you are not aware of the process. You don't think about it; you just react to desire and aversion with more craving or hatred. But once you investigate this process by means of meditation, you discover what is actually happening. You see how birth is itself the source of afflictions in this life.

5. Birth is suffering because it is an undesired separation

It is the very nature of taking birth in cyclic existence that eventually you have to separate from that life. In general, beings want to cling on to the life that they have. They do not want to die; they are terrified of dying. But the inevitable end of all birth is death, separation from all the things you love and desire in this life.

From the ordinary perspective (the perspective of the obscured mind) you may look around at all the pleasures available in this life and think, "What is wrong with this? I am surrounded by all these beautiful things. This is wonderful!" Until you look into your situation with analysis, you don't see anything wrong. This is why you have to practice meditation on the true nature of samsaric birth: to see how it is conditioned by suffering and creates the conditions for more suffering; to recognise its many defects from the point of view of its causes, its effects, and its nature. These meditations remind you that you are born into suffering and the causes of suffering, the negative tendencies.

When you meditate on these faults of taking birth in cyclic existence, the decision will finally arise to get out of samsara, to bring an end to what has been, up to this point, an endless round of rebirth. Then you will begin to work toward that and engage in the real yogic work, the inner spiritual work, that leads to liberation.

The sutras describe many sufferings that you undergo while a foetus in your mother's womb and during childbirth. Candragomin's *Letter to a Student* sums them up:

> Having entered into the hellish womb,
> Closed in with unbearable, foul-smelling filth,
> Confined in the narrow, pitch-black space,
> Your constricted body must endure great pain.

These are elaborated in the *Descent into the Womb Sutra (Garbhāvakrānti-sūtra)*:

> The womb is located above the intestines and below the stomach. It is filled with many types of impurities and is the home of innumerable kinds of bacteria; there are two foul-smelling openings, holes and channels in the bone, and various filthy substances such as urine, brain-like matter, and marrow. The foetus faces the spine with its back to the

> stomach membrane. Month by month it is enriched by the menstrual secretions. The various foods the mother eats are ground up by her two rows of teeth and swallowed; then it is moistened from below by smelly digestive fluids and from above by saliva. The foetus is nourished through the opening of the umbilical cord by the remains of that vomit-like food, through the five stages of foetal development: the meeting of semen and egg, the thickening into a quivering mass, the growing into an oblong, the lengthening into a more defined shape, the hardening into a more solid body. (see Chapter 21)
> Then, with the development of the limbs, it transforms into a complete body. The arms, legs, and cheeks are wrapped up in the amniotic sac where it stinks unbearably like a snot-rag. There the foetus moves up and down.
> The various tastes of food eaten by the mother (such as bitter, sour, pungent, salty, spicy, and astringent) affect it like hot sparks. Like an intestinal worm, it is nourished by these filthy fluids. It has arrived in a swamp that is oozing with unclean, putrefying substances. The strength of its life force is unstable. The inner heat of the mother's body constantly and thoroughly torments, heats, and burns, so that it experiences a powerful, intense, violent, and unbearable sense of suffering.
> To the extent that its mother moves more or less forcefully, it is bounced around, with the head and limbs confined, so that it experiences a sense of suffering that is powerful, intense, violent, unbearable, and hard to imagine. It is like being thrown into a pit of burning coals.

That is the way this sutra describes life in the womb. In other sources it is said that the foetus is harmed when the mother eats either too much or too little food, food that is too greasy, too pungent, too cold, too hot, too salty, too sour, too sweet, too bitter, too spicy, or too astringent. It is also hurt when the mother engages in sexual intercourse, runs too fast or too far, jumps, or swims. When the mother moves in these ways, the child inside has many strange experiences. Some commentaries say that when the mother has sexual intercourse the foetus feels like it is being buried under a mountain of rock, and when she runs it feels like it is falling a long way down. Even certain sitting positions, such as squatting in front of a fire, cause discomfort to the child. The experience of having the mother's bones poking into it is described as being covered over by the stomach, supported by the intestines, bound by the head and four limbs, then being impaled on a stake.

After experiencing such pains in the womb for many months, the infant passes into the birth canal to be born. At that time it undergoes another set of intense pains. This process is again described in Candragomin's *Letter to a Student*:

> It is gradually squeezed the way sesame oil is squeezed from a press,
> Then somehow it is born.
> However, those whose lives are not lost in that process
> Must endure the assault of pain.
>
> The body that rolled about in that filthy place
> Is smeared with slime from the womb and stinks unbearably.
> Memory is lost due to such torment,
> Which is like the culmination of an inflamed wound, or like being ready to vomit.

The process of birth is compared here to being squeezed in an oil press. Of course the baby needs to pass down a very narrow passage between bones and through a very small hole. There is barely enough room for the head to get through and the baby is squeezed and stretched in the process. Though the birth process may be extremely painful and difficult, because of strong karma, most children, amazingly enough, are born alive. Of course some children do die in childbirth, and mothers die as well. These verses make the point that even though one survives birth, everyone experiences great pain during the process. For the infant it is as if its whole body were an open wound, and going through birth is the culmination of that painful experience. During the last stage in the womb, the infant realises how disgusting the environment is, and with a feeling that is almost like wanting to vomit, it feels a strong urge to escape from that confined space.

There are two levels of meaning in the phrase, "*memory is lost*." It is said in the Kālacakra system and in certain other texts that for the first seven months in the womb the baby has no memories, but at seven months it begins to remember its previous life. It retains these memories until it undergoes the trauma of birth, at which time these memories are once again lost. Another interpretation is that the trauma is so severe as you go through childbirth that the memory of it is blacked out; it is just too difficult to remember so much pain.

The meaning of Candragomin's verses are elaborated in the *Descent into the Womb Sutra*:

> Then, when all the small and large limbs are fully developed, the foetus (which is floating in a place of urine, flowing with rotten substances, having an unbearable stench, pitch-black and terrifying if you could see it) turns toward the orifice, which is smeared with urine and excrement and constantly dripping with stinking filth, blood, and pus. Because of the ripening of previous karma, the winds of karma cause its feet to turn up and its head to face downward, toward the opening. With its two arms folded up, it is squeezed to a greater or lesser degree between two mechanisms of bone. The powerful, intense, violent, and unbearable feeling of pain causes all the limbs of the body, as painful as fresh wounds, to turn blue. All the organs of the body become hot. As the slimy residue from the womb disappears, the surface of the body dries out and the lips, throat, and heart become parched.
>
> By the power of causes and conditions, pushed by the karmic winds of the ripening of previous karma, the infant is born (however difficult it may be) from that confined and overwhelmingly terrifying condition. As soon as it is born, the air outside feels like a harsh substance rubbing an open wound. When touched with a hand or cloth, it feels as if it were being cut with a sword. This is the kind of powerful, intense, violent, and unbearable feeling of pain that the newborn endures.

As soon as the baby emerges from the womb it cries, because its body hurts so much. The skin is so sensitive that even the mother's hand feels rough. It is said that, for a newborn baby, being lifted onto the lap or being touched by hot or cold objects feels like the pain of a flayed cow being devoured by insects, or a leper being whipped on his open sores. When the infant was in the womb, it was floating in liquid, but as soon as it emerges its skin is so tender that any contact feels rough and painful.

6. Summary of Birth

When you are meditating on these eight types of suffering, it is especially important to focus on this first one, the suffering of birth, and the last one, the suffering of the appropriating aggregates. These two should be given special emphasis and should be considered in detail. When you meditate on the suffering of birth, you should not be thinking about how terrible it is for that baby over there in someone else's womb. The way to do this meditation is to connect these descriptions with your own birth. You should imagine this terrifying experience happening to you, just as it has in the past and as it will be experienced again and again until you achieve liberation from samsaric rebirth. Even if you are born into the highest, most comfortable human life, your life will start with this misery of birth. You meditate by imagining how it will feel. You should bring your own discriminating wisdom to bear on this meditation and practice it over and over.

(ii) The suffering of aging

Once you are born into your new life, you develop through the various stages of growth. You begin in childhood with a new body and mind, like a fresh lotus flower. You enjoy the strength, vigour, and adaptability of youth, and you don't want to lose any of the shining, energetic qualities that you have at that time. But you have no control over such things, and that youthful vigour quickly passes away. With every moment you are aging, losing the brightness of youth, and getting closer to the aches and pains and losses of old age.

In fact, aging starts in the first moment after birth. In the second moment after birth you are older than you were one moment ago. Day and night, moment by moment, you are getting older and older and older, and there is no way to stop the progression of aging. There are five ways of thinking about this process of aging:

1. The excellent body deteriorates

When you are young your body feels fresh and looks beautiful. People may admire your attractive body. But then you get a little older, and a little older, and then one day you find that people just call you "the old man" or "that old woman." You look in the mirror and you find that your back is bent like a bow. The hair on your head has become completely white, like some kind of white flower. Your forehead is covered in wrinkles, like a row of rafters in the ceiling. (This image refers to houses in Tibet, where the ceiling was marked by a series of lines made by the rafters.)

As you age, the fresh, flexible, youthful vitality of your body is gradually destroyed. You become ugly and undesirable. You have no way to control this process; it happens as a result of the action of karma. Although you desperately want to remain attractive, the opposite happens. That itself is suffering. You don't want to get old. You don't want to get weak, and sick, and die. But it definitely will happen, and there is nothing you can do to stop it.

2. Strength and vigour deteriorate

Aging brings with it a loss of physical strength, as well as the deterioration of the mental and physical faculties. Old men and women who have lost the strength in their muscles can't sit down gracefully. They say that an old person sits down like a heavy sack of dirt that has slipped from a rope; they fall into a chair—thud! And when they try to stand up again, it is not a smooth, relaxed movement; it takes as much effort as trying to raise up the fallen trunk of a large tree. When you walk you teeter and stumble, so that it looks like you are going to fall down. Speech also deteriorates, and eventually your words become unintelligible.

The great yogi Milarepa composed a beautiful song about this. He met an angry old woman who berated him for asking for alms. He sang these verses to her to get her to see her own situation and to turn her mind to the Dharma:

> To lift you from a chair is like pulling out a tent peg;
> With feeble legs
> You waddle like a thieving goose;
> Earth and stone seem to shatter
> When you drop into a seat;
> Senile and clumsy is your body.
> Grandmother, you have no choice but to obey.
> Question your own thought and your mind examine.
> You should practice the Buddha's teaching.
> What you require is a qualified and dependable guru,
> And from that you may find out how you have changed.
>
> Your skin is creased with wrinkles;
> Your bones stand out sharply from your shrunken flesh;
> You are deaf, dumb, imbecilic, eccentric, and tottering;
> You are thrice deformed.
> Grandmother, your ugly face is wrapped in wrinkles.
> Question your own thought and your mind examine.
> You should practice the Buddha's teaching,
> You need a qualified and dependable guru,
> And then things may be different for you.9

Although you often see elderly people in this condition, it never occurs to you, "Soon I will be like this. What will it be like when this happens?" Some people even laugh when they see old people having a hard time. That certainly does not help. When you see what life is like for an old person, you should meditate that the same thing is coming to yourself. While you have the mental and physical ability, you should realise that soon you will lose it. Once you realise that you will decide, "Right now, while I have the opportunity, I am going to make preparations for the future. Because once old age gets a hold of me, I will not be able to do anything."

This kind of resolve, based on analytical reason, is the purpose of meditation. Otherwise, what is the point of thinking about such things? It just makes you miserable. But when you meditate on these sufferings by applying them to yourself and your own condition (when you

see that they are coming to you) that brings good results; that is the purpose.

3. The sense faculties deteriorate

Every day, all the time, the sense faculties are degenerating. Gradually, you do not see or hear as well as you used to. Mentally, the mind begins to forget. Slowly these capacities weaken and disappear. You learn some new name or fact, but soon you can't remember it. Even things you used to know well, you can't remember anymore. Little by little, all the physical and mental faculties deteriorate and some are totally lost.

4. The ability to enjoy sense objects deteriorates

When you get older, sense objects such as food no longer bring the pleasure they once did. Hunger wanes, the ability to taste fades. Even when you desire some food you have always loved, you can't eat it anymore because it makes you physically uncomfortable. The same is true for other sense objects: you can no longer hear beautiful music; you can no longer see beautiful pictures or scenery clearly; even sexual enjoyment and the pleasures of touch no longer have any attraction; and even if they do, you lack the capacity to indulge those desires.

5. The suffering of the diminishment of life

This is the misery of realising that most of your life has ended and now you are approaching death. The arc of your life, like the setting sun, is slipping below the western horizon, and soon you will pass into darkness. Seeing this brings great sorrow and regret.

6. Summary of Aging

These miseries of aging are not far from yourself; they are yourself. They are sitting on your shoulder. You have to contemplate this over and over, and that is what will push you into meaningful practice. Otherwise, practice will be just an interest you have on the side, while your main concern will be worldly sensual pleasure. Then, suddenly, the things just described will happen to you without your realising it.

Aging comes quietly, in a most deceitful manner. It is always there, every day, every moment, working its changes, although you never notice it. In fact, if these changes happened all at once, it would probably make you crazy. If you went to bed one night a healthy, vibrant fifteen-year old, then woke up the next morning and you were eighty-nine, how would you feel? You would be really miserable. Fortunately, it does not happen like that. But it is happening, slowly, in a sneaky way, without your noticing. Therefore, while this sneaky thing is coming, and while you still have the mental and physical energy, you should use your time to make preparations.

The *Extensive Sport Sutra (Lalita-vistara-sūtra)* offers vivid images of the aging process:

> By the process of aging, once youth has passed,
> We are like a lush tree that has been struck by lightning,
> Made decrepit by old age, like a frightening house on the verge of collapse.
> O Sage, tell us quickly how to escape old age.
>
> Old age desiccates the multitude of vigorous women and men,
> Like the branches of a grove of *sal* trees blasted by a hot wind.
> Age steals away our effort, skill, and strength,
> Renders us helpless, like a person stuck in mud.
>
> Aging makes a beautiful form unappealing,
> Aging steals our splendour and robs our strength,
> Aging steals all enjoyment and subjects us to ridicule,
> Aging robs vitality and finally brings us death.

These verses were spoken by the Buddha when he was the young Prince Siddhārtha, confined by his father to the palace grounds so that he would not awaken to the sufferings of the world. But the prince visited the eastern, southern, and western gates of his compound where he witnessed an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. He inquired of his servants whether these sorrows of old age, sickness, and death happened only to the three people he had seen, but was informed that these sufferings happen to everyone. Finally he arrived at the northern gate where he found a monk who had renounced the worldly life and who appeared wise. With these verses he described the sufferings of old age that he had seen, and he inquired of the monk, "O Sage, tell us quickly how to escape old age."

One of the great Kadampa teachers, Geshe Chenngawa, said, "The misery of death is frightful, but it is brief. But how frightful is old age!" Though death is a horrible fate, at least it doesn't last too long. But aging goes on and on, unwanted, progressively getting worse and worse, and in that sense it is actually worse than death itself. Kamapa said, "It is a good

thing that aging takes place little by little. If it came all at once we could hardly bear it."

(iii) The Suffering of Sickness

There are also five ways of contemplating the suffering of sickness:

1. Sickness changes the nature of the body

The suffering of sickness is easy to understand because it is so common. When you have a disease, it changes the qualities of the body. First of all, you usually lose weight. Perhaps here in America people want to get sick because they like to lose weight! But of course being sick is really not pleasant: you lose the strength in your body, your skin becomes dry and loses its lustre, and as your flesh gradually wastes away your whole body becomes thinner and weaker. The body can be completely transformed by disease, so that you don't even recognise the person you used to know.

2. Pain and despair increase and are present most of the time

As sickness increases, physical discomfort also increases and anguish tends to take over your mind. You spend your whole life trying to nourish this body, protect it, and keep it healthy. Nevertheless, something happens you become sick. Once you slip into the pain of disease, the mind soon follows and falls into a state of unhappiness, depression, and despair. Of course the mind and the body affect each other in many ways, and with prolonged ill health you can spend many days and nights in physical pain and mental anguish. Even healthy people will experience the suffering of sickness many times in the course of a lifetime.

3. There is no desire for attractive objects

When you are sick, you lose your interest in the things you usually enjoy; food, drink, and companionship all lose their appeal. Often, the very things you most enjoyed while healthy become objects of aversion and even nausea when you get sick. Even when you still want them, you are told that you shouldn't eat this, or you shouldn't do that, because it will make your condition worse. And even when you don't have restrictions imposed from the outside, you physically lose the ability to do the things you would like to do.

4. You are forced to make use of undesirable objects, although you don't like to do so

When you are sick, not only are you unable to enjoy attractive objects, you have to do things you really do not like. You have to take all kinds of unpleasant medicines. Your food is restricted and often you have to eat and drink things you do not want. Even when these medicines and foods are so horrible you don't want to take them, they are forced upon you by your doctors and family.

Nowadays, when you go to the hospital you are subjected to many uncomfortable, painful, and invasive procedures. In traditional medicine they sometimes used burning with fire as a remedy. Today we have things like chemotherapy, which is chemical poisoning and can make you feel worse than the disease. You will almost certainly be pricked with injections, poked with I.V.s, and jabbed to take blood. And if you require surgery, you will be cut open with sharp blades and sewn up with needles, and your recovery will be long and painful. You don't usually think about these things, but this is what happens when you become ill.

5. You will be separated from this life

The ultimate result of sickness is that you have to separate from this life. All of the harsh treatments you undergo may help for some time. You may live a few more months, or even many years. But you do not have any freedom to determine when you are going to die because you are under the power of karma and afflictions. In the end, if you do not die from other causes, sickness will cause you to separate from this life. When that time comes—when you see that you are not going to recover from your illness, that there is no hope, that now you have to die; your inner mental anguish will increase.

In meditating on the suffering of sickness you should contemplate these points in detail. The *Extensive Sport Sutra* describes the suffering of illness this way:

Hundreds of different diseases threaten sentient beings with a cloud of suffering,
Just as human hunters threaten wild animals.
Observe these beings overwhelmed by old age and sickness,
And quickly explain how to escape from this suffering.

Just as the bitter winds and heavy snows of late winter
Steal the vitality from the grasses, tree limbs, and forest herbs,
In the same way sickness steals the vitality of living beings
As it weakens their faculties, decays their appearance, and diminishes their strength.

In the end it will exhaust a fortune in money or grain.
Disease always humbles living beings.
It harms them and is enemy to all that they desire,
Torturing them like the sun burning down from the sky.

(iv) The suffering of death

There are also five points to contemplate in the meditation on the suffering of death:

1. You are separated from objects that are attractive and wonderful

At the time of death, you of course have to separate from everything. All the things you valued during life must be left behind: all the wealth you have accumulated, all the land, property, clothes, food, and things you have enjoyed. Even if you owned all the wealth in the universe, you have to leave it behind when you die. You cannot take even a single penny with you. During your life you took so much trouble to accumulate that wealth. You thought it would bring you some kind of special pleasure, some degree of safety, and many other benefits. But at the time of death, it is of no use at all. That itself is a miserable truth to face.

As Śāntideva says in *Engaging* in the Bodhisattva Deeds:

Leaving all I must depart alone.
But through not having understood this
I committed various kinds of evil
For the sake of my friends and foes.

2. You are separated from many close relatives

Though you may have many loving relatives who nurse you and stand by you in your last days, none of them can travel with you when you die. Your spouse who was with you through all the ups and downs of your life, your children whom you supported, nurtured, and protected; as much as they might love you and want to help you, there is nothing they can do. You die alone, and alone you go to your next life.

3. You are separated from many close companions

You will leave behind not only your close family, but also your friends, students, teachers, co-workers, and all the people you enjoyed spending time with while you were alive. Even if you were a powerful ruler with millions of subjects, not one of them can follow you at the time of death. Even if every sentient being was your good friend, at the time of death you would have to leave them all behind.

4. You are separated from an attractive and wonderful body

At the time of death you must leave behind your own body as well as all the external things that brought you joy. The body you have had from the time you were in your mother's womb (the body that has been with you every moment of this lifetime) has to be left behind.

5. At the time of death you experience terrible pain and unhappiness

At the actual time of death you go through so many powerful experiences. Your family and close friends gather around you. They are crying, trying to ease your pain, to hold you and comfort you, but nothing they do can help. You feel them slipping away. All the people, the familiar faces, the familiar objects, are all slipping away. Now you are facing the unknown, a future that is completely black and uncertain. "Where will I go? Am I going to hell? Am I heading to painful horrors in my next life?"

These kinds of fears fill your mind, but there is no reassurance to be found anywhere. You have no perception of what lies in store in the future. Physically, your organs are failing. Mental-

ly, you are getting weaker and fear is overwhelming your thoughts. Perhaps you wish to do a little virtuous practice to prepare yourself for what lies ahead, but it is too late. Everything is completely too late. Śāntideva says in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*:

> When seized by the messengers of death,
> What benefit will friends and relatives afford?
> My merit alone shall protect me then,
> But upon that I have never relied.

6. Summary of Suffering of Death

You should meditate on these points over and over until you produce a genuine and heartfelt sense of sorrow and disenchantment with the worldly concerns that have occupied you until now. When that happens, hold on to that feeling and use it to propel your practice. Continue these meditations until you generate the genuine spontaneous thought of renunciation.

The *Extensive Sport Sutra* says:

> At the time you die and pass on to another life,
> You must separate forever from esteemed and beloved people.
> You will not return, nor ever meet again,
> Like a leaf fallen from a tree or a waterfall that never flows backward.
>
> Death makes the powerful powerless.
> Death sweeps you away like a flood carries off a log.
> People go alone, with no one else, without friends;
> Possessing karma that must ripen, they have no control.
>
> Death seizes innumerable living beings—
> As a sea monster consumes swarms of creatures,
> As the *garuḍa* grasps a snake or a lion takes an elephant,
> Just as fire wipes out the grass, trees, and all the living creatures.

In these verses, the "sea monster" is a beast called a *makara* in Sanskrit, which looks like a giant crocodile with an elephant's trunk. The makara lies sleeping on the ocean floor for a long time with its huge jaws open. Many fish and other sea creatures settle and make their home in its mouth. They produce children, and the population grows and grows until one day the makara wakes up, closes its mouth, and swallows them all at once. That is the way death lies in wait to gobble up the multitude of creatures in the world.

The garuḍa is a type of bird famous for its ability to capture and eat serpents. Most animals avoid poisonous snakes because it is so hard to grab them in a way that keeps them from turning around and biting. But the garuḍa has a special technique of grasping the snake in its talons and then holding the middle of the snake with its teeth. In this way the giant eagle-like creature controls the snake so that it cannot bite or get away. In the same way, when you are grasped by death you will be powerless to escape.

Though these images from the sutras may appear to be mythological, the points that they illustrate are undeniable facts. When you meditate on these points, you should not think that these are just fantastic tales, but analyse your situation until you realise that the fundamental process that is being described here is real life and death.

(v) The suffering of encountering the unpleasant

Once again there are five points to contemplate:

1. By merely encountering your enemies, you suffer and are made unhappy

Once you have decided that someone is your enemy, all you have to do is meet him on the street, or see her across the room, and immediately you feel angry and disturbed.

2. You fear that you will be punished by them

When you have enemies, you are always fearful of what they might do to you. At work, at school, in your relationships, you feel that you must always be on your guard against their actions and schemes. This causes great anxiety & stress and can make life quite difficult at times.

3. You fear that they will spread malicious rumours about you

You not only worry about the actions of your enemies, but sometimes their words can do even more damage. They may be talking behind your back, spreading rumours, true or false, that will damage your reputation. With this kind of malicious gossip going on, you never know what people are thinking about you.

4. You dread dying

Of course, the most unpleasant thing you have to meet with is death itself. Though you may not spend much time thinking about it when you are young, as you get closer and closer to the end of your life the prospect of death can become a real source of anguish. Especially if you have not used your life meaningfully by preparing for death. If you know you have wasted your life, and created all sorts of non-virtuous karmic potentials, then you have something to dread.

5. You fear that, because of your non-Dharmic actions, you are destined for a lower rebirth

All non-virtuous actions are contrary to the Dharma teachings. If you know that you have committed many such actions, you will certainly worry about your next rebirth. Knowing that you are likely to go to a miserable realm, your suffering will actually begin in this life, because you will be possessed by fear, sorrow, and regret.

(vi) The suffering of separating from the pleasant

This point is illustrated by five manifestations of the pain of being separated from cherished friends or relatives:

1. When you are separated from your loved ones, grief arises in your mind

You may have family, friends, or a spouse whom you love so much that you don't want to be separated from them for even one moment. But you have no control over that. The day will certainly come when you have to leave them forever, and when that time arrives you will be overwhelmed with grief.

2. When you are separated from your loved ones, you mourn audibly

Often these feelings of loss are so powerful that people express their grief with sobbing, wailing, screaming and other verbal expressions of sorrow

3. When you are separated from your loved ones, it causes you to harm your own body

In some cases the grief is so unbearable that people actually harm themselves. We speak of "beating your breast" or "tearing out your hair." Sometimes people are so distraught they try to take their own lives.

4. When you recall the qualities of the departed, you yearn for them and feel depressed

You have such fond and treasured memories of the person you have lost, but now you realise that you will never see him or her again. Now the memories themselves become a source of sorrow.

5. You can no longer enjoy those you have lost

If your loved ones were still present, you could enjoy their company and all the pleasure that brought you. But now they are gone and you can never access those good feelings again.

In short, you will have to separate from every single thing that brings you happiness and pleasure in this world. That is the nature of your condition.

You can do nothing to prevent that separation and you have no control over when it will happen. You are under the control of karma and afflictions, and that itself is great suffering. You should meditate on these five points until they are integrated with your mind.

It is not only in death that such separations occur. Moving location; leaves friends and loved ones behind. Loss of cherished possessions; through theft or just deterioration and breakage. Homesickness. Loneliness.

(vii) The suffering of not getting what you want

In the course of a lifetime we have so many different desires, and often they end in disappointment. Sometimes we work hard to achieve something we really want (perhaps a special job, or a marriage) but we fail to achieve that goal despite all our efforts. These are examples of the suffering of not getting what you want. This topic has five points, which are similar to the

preceding contemplations on separating from what is pleasant. You can do the same meditations, but instead of meditating on things you must separate from, think about things you desire but do not obtain; wealth, fame, honour, love, etc. When you have a strong desire for an object but fail to obtain it, you experience the same types of suffering in the previous section.

Examples of seeking but not getting what one desires are farmers who work hard to cultivate their fields, but the crop fails; or business people who spend many hours trying to build up their business, but in the end they go bankrupt. You can think of many other situations in which you wanted something very much, worked very hard to achieve that goal, but in the end were disappointed. It is very beneficial to add examples from your own experience, using your own intelligence and insight. The point of all these meditations is to convince your own mind of the truth of the suffering nature of samsaric experience. To plant that insight firmly in your mental continuum, it is very useful to relate these ideas to your own experience, because that is what will make it real for you. Can be as simple as a feeling of entitlement not being realised. Not being able to afford to purchase cherished possessions. Fear of missing out probably fits in here.

(viii) The suffering of the appropriating aggregates

The Buddha said, "In sum, the five appropriating aggregates are suffering." Here we concentrate on the meaning of that statement. In what way are the five aggregates that combine to make up this body-mind continuum the very nature of suffering?

First, it is useful to understand why we call these the "appropriating" aggregates. "Appropriating" has the sense of "taking" or "grasping." It means to grasp (out of attachment to things of the present, and out of desire for things of the future) not wanting to lose those things, wanting them to remain forever. It is in this sense that the five aggregates are grasping or appropriating.

This is a case of what we call "applying the name of the cause to the result."[21] The term "appropriating" carries the sense of attachment and desire, which are the cause, and that

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[21]"**Applying the name of the cause to the result**" is a way to linguistically and conceptually convey the direct relationship between a cause and its effect by using the name or characteristic of the cause to describe the result. This practice helps to emphasise how the qualities of the cause are carried over and manifest in the result, providing a clearer understanding of the interconnectedness between cause and effect.

Examples

1. **Wood Fire:**
- **Explanation**: A "wood fire" is a fire that arises from burning wood. Here, the fire (result) is described using the term "wood" (cause). The identity of the cause (wood) is applied to the result (fire) to emphasise that the fire's characteristics are directly influenced by the type of material that is burning.
- **Clarification**: This means that the fire has certain properties (such as the way it burns, its smell, the heat it produces) that are directly attributable to the wood being burned.

2. **Rice Porridge:**
- **Explanation**: "Rice porridge" is a type of porridge made from rice. The porridge (result) is described using the term "rice" (cause). The name of the cause (rice) is given to the result (porridge) to indicate that the porridge's qualities and characteristics are derived from the rice.
- **Clarification**: The texture, flavour, and nutritional content of the porridge are due to the rice used in its preparation.

3. **Metal Bridge:**
- **Explanation**: A "metal bridge" is a bridge constructed from metal. The bridge (result) is described using the term "metal" (cause). The identity of the cause (metal) is applied to the result (bridge) to highlight that the bridge's properties (strength, durability, and appearance) are influenced by the material used.
- **Clarification**: The structural integrity and longevity of the bridge are attributes of the metal from which it is made.

Buddhist Context

In Buddhism, this concept can be used to illustrate how certain qualities or attributes of causes are carried over to their results.

1. **Karmic Consequences:**
- **Example**: A "generous act" (cause) leading to "generosity karma" (result). The result (karmic consequence) is described by the cause (generous act) to indicate that the positive outcome is directly influenced by the original generous action.
- **Clarification**: The favourable conditions that arise in the future are directly tied to the initial act of generosity.

2. **Meditative States:**
- **Example**: "Calm-abiding meditation" (cause) leading to "calm mind" (result). The result (a calm mind) is described by the cause (calm-abiding meditation) to emphasise that the tranquility of the mind is a direct result of the meditative practice.
- **Clarification**: The peaceful and focused state of the mind experienced is a direct outcome of engaging in calm-abiding meditation practices.

3. **Pure Land:**
- **Example**: "Pure intentions" (cause) leading to "Pure Land rebirth" (result). The result (rebirth in the Pure Land) is described using the term "pure" (intentions) to indicate that the purity of one's intentions leads to a rebirth in a pure realm.
- **Clarification**: The characteristics of the rebirth experience, such as its purity and auspiciousness, are directly influenced by the purity of one's intentions and actions.

name is given to the aggregates, which are the result. Think of the term "wood fire." A wood fire is a fire (the result) that arises from wood (the cause); the name of the cause is given to the result and we call it a wood fire. Similarly, we have the five aggregates, and the combination of these five aggregates constitutes this body-mind continuum. The cause of these five aggregates is previous attachment and desire, which created karma, which brought this combination of aggregates into being. Therefore, the name of the cause, appropriating attachment and desire, is given to the result, the five aggregates.

Actually, because of the cyclical nature of samsara, we can also look at this as a case of the "name of the result being given to the cause." From this perspective, we have taken this life with these five aggregates, and during this life our body-mind continuum has continuously created attachment and desire. In this case, the result is the appropriating attachment and desire, and that name is given to the cause, which is the five aggregates. An example of this would be an "apple tree"; a tree that produces apples. The tree is the cause, but the name of the result, apples, is given to the cause and we call it an apple tree.

Why did the Buddha say that the nature of these five appropriating aggregates is suffering?

1. They are vessels of future suffering

What do these five aggregates accomplish? The present aggregates bring future suffering; they are a vessel linking the current body-mind continuum to future misery. By creating karma out of attachment and desire, they construct future unhappiness and perpetuate suffering into future lives. That is, just by taking these aggregates in this life you insure future suffering.

2. The five appropriating aggregates are vessels of suffering that already exists[22]

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[22] The phrase "**The five appropriating aggregates are vessels of suffering that already exists**" suggests that the aggregates not only lead to new forms of suffering when appropriated as self, but also contain and perpetuate pre-existing suffering. This means that suffering is inherent within the very nature of the aggregates due to past actions, conditions, and the fundamental structure of samsaric existence. This emphasises that the aggregates inherently contain and perpetuate pre-existing suffering due to past conditions and actions. Recognising this helps practitioners understand the deep roots of dukkha and the necessity of addressing both present and past causes of suffering. By developing mindfulness, ethical conduct, wisdom, and compassion, one can gradually transform these aggregates and move towards liberation from the cycle of samsara.

Understanding Pre-existing Suffering in the Aggregates

1. **Form (Rupa)**
   - **Vessel of Pre-existing Suffering**: The physical body is a repository of past karma and inherent vulnerabilities, such as aging, sickness, and death. These conditions are not newly created but are manifestations of suffering already embedded in the physical form.
   - **Example**: A person is born with a genetic disorder (pre-existing suffering) that leads to chronic pain and disability throughout their life. The physical body, as an aggregate, carries this pre-existing suffering.
2. **Feeling (Vedana)**
   - **Vessel of Pre-existing Suffering**: Feelings or sensations are conditioned by past experiences and karma. The sensations of pain, discomfort, and unease are often rooted in prior conditions and actions.
   - **Example**: A person who experienced trauma in the past may have persistent feelings of anxiety and fear (pre-existing suffering) that affect their present emotional state.
3. **Perception (Sanna)**
   - **Vessel of Pre-existing Suffering**: Perceptions are influenced by past conditioning and mental imprints. Misperceptions and distorted views that lead to suffering are often deeply ingrained from prior experiences.
   - **Example**: A person who has grown up with constant criticism may develop a perception of inadequacy and low self-worth (pre-existing suffering) that affects their current self-image.
4. **Mental Formations (Sankhara)**
   - **Vessel of Pre-existing Suffering**: Mental formations include habitual patterns, karmic imprints, and emotional responses conditioned by past actions and experiences. These formations often carry pre-existing suffering in the form of ingrained negative tendencies and reactions.
   - **Example**: A person with a history of anger issues may have habitual anger responses (pre-existing suffering) triggered by minor provocations, leading to ongoing suffering.
5. **Consciousness (Vinnana)**
   - **Vessel of Pre-existing Suffering**: Consciousness is shaped by past karma and experiences, carrying forward the imprints of previous suffering. The continuous stream of consciousness perpetuates the cycle of suffering through ongoing mental activities and awareness.
   - **Example**: A person who has experienced significant loss may have a consciousness that is frequently occupied with thoughts of grief and sorrow (pre-existing suffering), affecting their present awareness.

Implications of Pre-existing Suffering

The recognition that the five aggregates are vessels of pre-existing suffering highlights the deeply ingrained nature of suffering within samsaric existence. This understanding underscores the pervasive and persistent nature of dukkha, which is not merely a result of present actions but also a continuation of past conditions and experiences.

As you know, plenty of suffering already exists in this life. It is due to the fact that you have taken this samsaric body that you are subject to sickness, aging, separating from the things you want, meeting the things you don't want, and death.

3. They are vessels of the suffering of pain

Having taken this body, you are subject to all the mental and physical ills, discomforts, disappointments, and pain that we commonly call "suffering" in the world. This most obvious form of suffering is called the "suffering of pain" or the "suffering of suffering." This body-mind continuum, made up of this combination of aggregates, is the vessel for all of these miseries. This and the next two types of suffering will be elaborated upon later when we explain "the three types of suffering" in chapter 19.

4. They are vessels of the suffering of change

The suffering of change means that all samsaric pleasure transforms into some form of suffering. Happiness switches into misery. Everything changes. It is the nature of these five aggregates that when some happiness or pleasure arises, it cannot be sustained or increased indefinitely, but inevitably changes into dissatisfaction and suffering.

You may recall that previously we discussed how the nature of birth in cyclic existence is suffering because it possesses the "negative tendencies." This means that when you take a samsaric rebirth you already possess the causes and conditions of suffering in the form of karma and afflictions. These negative tendencies mean that from the moment you take birth by appropriating these five aggregates, you carry with you the potential to experience undesirable circumstances.

The five aggregates are vessels of the suffering of pain and the suffering of change because of this inseparable connection with the negative tendencies of karma and afflictions. The negative tendencies make this body-mind continuum like an open wound, always sensitive to contact and ready to create pain. The negative tendencies are the seed or potential, always present, for every experience to turn into suffering. Although, for the time being you may be enjoying yourself, and everything seems quite pleasant, that happiness can easily transform into displeasure or pain at any moment. The conditions for that are always there, because your aggregates are not pure; they are contaminated by the negative tendencies, loaded with the potential for pain.

When you contemplate these points, you need to understand that these descriptions are not mere concepts or flights of imagination; this is actually what is happening. You don't realise it. You hide from it, ignore it, deny it, because you are the disciple of ignorance. Ignorance tells you that there is this huge "I," which is the most important thing. It tells you to do everything to make this "I" feel happy. Ignorance tells you that this "I" will last forever, and if you can make it happy, that happiness will last forever. As the disciple of ignorance, you follow that advice. You use your discriminating wisdom to try to fashion stable happiness out of samsaric objects and conditions. The whole point of these meditations is to redirect your wisdom, to enable you to see things as they truly are, not the way you fantasise them to be.

5. They are vessels of the suffering of being conditioned[23]

As soon as they are born, the five appropriating aggregates have the nature of this suffering of conditionality, because *anything* that is conditioned by karma and afflictions has this nature. Sometimes we call this **"pervasive suffering." It is the suffering nature that pervades all conditioned existence because this existence is completely under the power of karma and afflictions.** It is "pervasive" because it pervades both external and internal phenomena, the five aggregates themselves. It pervades your body from your toes up to your head. It pervades all the worlds of existence: the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm. Even divine beings who reside in bliss at the peak of worldly existence have this nature of pervasive suffering, because they have not cut the root of cyclic existence, and their blissful life remains conditioned by karma.

When you realise the truth of suffering by means of the union of single-pointed concentration and highest insight, you vividly realise how this whole samsaric situation is pervaded by

[23] By karma and afflictions. Pervasive suffering.

this subtle nature of suffering. Until then, although you meditate on this as the way things are, it will not be completely believable. You are still what is known as an "immature being." To a small child, everything looks like fun; everything is a toy. Even very dangerous things like a fire, or a bottle of poison, look like sources of pleasure to a child. That is the way objects in the world appear to you until you realise the truth of suffering. **Until you transform yourself, through the discipline of practice, from an immature being into an ārya or "noble being" by realising the conditioned nature of all phenomena, you will not be able to see directly how all those phenomena are the nature of suffering.**

Nevertheless, even if you don't yet see this clearly, **you have to meditate on the suffering of being conditioned.** With effort, contemplating this pervasive nature of suffering from various points of view, your understanding will develop and deepen. As I said, this topic will be explored in more depth later, when we explain the three types of suffering.

In the end **you must realise this most subtle level of pervasive suffering; that the whole of cyclic existence is conditioned by karma and afflictions and is therefore in the nature of suffering. It is seeing this deep, inescapable suffering nature of *everything* within cyclic existence that inspires the thought of renunciation.** If you have not yet felt this attitude of **disenchantment that comes from seeing the faults of this whole situation**, then a genuine, uncontrived thought of renunciation will not arise.

6. Summary of Suffering of the Appropriating Aggregates

This meditation is of the utmost importance. Realising the fundamental faults of cyclic existence, its conditionality, and therefore its nature of suffering, is a prerequisite for engaging in either the Hinayana path of obtaining emancipation for yourself, or the Mahayana path of great compassion for all living beings.

If you haven't produced a sincere thought of renunciation (wanting freedom from cyclic existence for yourself) there will be no way to produce the Mahayana thought of great compassion, which wishes for freedom from samsara for all sentient beings. You may generate some superficial feelings by saying prayers such as, "May all beings be free of suffering," but the **uncontrived great compassion will not come without the genuine thought of renunciation.**

"Great compassion" does not mean some vague feelings of affection for others. It means compassion which takes on the responsibility of rescuing all beings from their unhappy conditions. Great compassion is the determination to free all these beings from the miserable situation in which they are mired, and which you see vividly. Great compassion is taking responsibility to do that. That is the main gate of the Mahayana path. Once you realise great compassion, any practice you do will be dominated by that motivation, and will become true Mahayana practice. Until then, whatever practice you do will not be the actual Mahayana path.

Therefore, whatever path you plan to engage in, it is essential to produce the thought of renunciation. In order to do this you need to refer to scriptural teachings and authoritative commentaries by great masters who evidence a pure understanding of the Buddha's intent. You need to study those scriptures, and once you find some understanding, you need to meditate on that, using analytical meditation, over and over for a long time.

This means you proceed topic by topic, contemplating each one until you are able to fully convince the mind; to draw the mind in that direction. You apply all resources at your disposal: textual sources, various reasons, inferential knowledge, and experiential knowledge. You put everything together and then concentrate; focus on that. If you practice that way, beginning with an educated understanding, then applying meditation that is able to change your ordinary perception, you will finally reach an unshakable realisation.

Tsongkhapa reminds us that what he has presented here is not something he made up by himself. In order to explain the faults of cyclic existence to his disciples, the Buddha presented the truth of suffering in terms of eight types of suffering. Later, Ārya Asaṅga explained the thought of the Buddha by organising it into an extensive path system, and it is that presentation by Asaṅga that Tsongkhapa has followed here.

The famous Kadampa Geshe Potowa said:

> Wherever we are born among the six types of beings, suffering will arise, such as sickness and death. When there is a cause for sickness, there will be sickness. When the cause of death appears, we will die. These do not arise as some sort of unsuitable or accidental events; it is the very character or nature of cyclic existence. **As long as we abide within cyclic existence, there is no escaping it. If we are disgusted by this, we must eliminate birth. For that, we must eliminate its cause.**

What Geshe Potowa is saying is that there is nothing strange about the arising of misery in the world in which we live. It is not something that is not supposed to happen. When there is a cause for getting sick (when we have bodies whose nature is that they are prone to get sick) it is not too surprising that we get sick. Aging, sickness, death happen because there are causes for them to happen. It is not as if dying is some amazing miracle that just suddenly fell out of the sky, something "unsuitable or accidental." **This is the nature of cyclic existence; this is what defines samsara.**

The nature of fire is to burn. If you do not want to get burned you need to get away from the fire. And as long as you remain within cyclic existence, there is no way to escape these suffering outcomes. If you don't like it, the only thing you can do is get out of the whole situation. The only way to do that is to end birth in cyclic existence, and to do that you must eliminate its cause. What is the cause? Karma and the afflictions. They must be eliminated from the root, and you do that by applying the antidotes as they are explained here in the steps of the path to enlightenment.