Chapter 23 Ascertaining the Nature of the Path Leading to Liberation

d) Establishing the nature of the path that leads to liberation

The fourth and final topic[42] in our discussion of the trainings of the being of intermediate scope concerns the nature of the path that leads to liberation from cyclic existence. This discussion begins with advice from Śrī Jagan-mitrānanda from his *Letter to King Candra (Candra-rāja-lekha)* in which he says:

> Although we have sunk into the vastness of cyclic existence,
> A fathomless ocean of unbounded suffering,
> **We are full of excitement and joy, without a trace of fear or dismay.**
> **What is going on in our minds?**
>
> We are constantly engulfed in the flames of blazing troubles:
> Poverty, the difficulty of finding resources, of protecting them, of losing them,
> The pain of separation, sickness, and aging.
> **The pride we take in our pleasure appears to be that of a lunatic.**

The same author continues:

> **Alas! Though worldly beings have eyes, they are blind.**
> **Although you clearly see what is always evident,**
> **You pay no attention whatsoever.**
> **Is your mind as impenetrable as a vajra? (rock)**

In these verses we get the perspective of the *yogi*, the true spiritual practitioner who has realised the disastrous nature of cyclic existence. Such practitioners see sentient beings sinking deeper and deeper into this endless ocean of suffering, and as they sink they are laughing with excitement over their illusory and short-lived pleasures. To the yogi, that is the behaviour of a mad person. It is as if people do not see what is right before their eyes. Or if they do see it, they ignore it. Are their minds made of stone, so that nothing at all can affect them?

These stanzas give us some idea of how we ourselves should be thinking, how we should be exhorting ourselves to wake up to the true nature of cyclic existence, and to stop acting as if life were an endless round of pleasure. When you think clearly about this, and meditate on the faults of samsara, you will get the kind of results that are described by Guhyadatta in the *Edifying Tale of the Seven Maidens (Sapta-kumārikāvadāna)*. This is the story of the daughter of King Kṛkin, an ancient king of Benares at the time of Buddha Kāśyapa.[43] She had a strong thought of renunciation and wanted very much to become a nun, but to do that she needed her father's permission. In this passage she is explaining to her father why she wants to renounce the worldly life:

> We see worldly circumstances as unsteady, like the reflection of the moon in water.
> We see desirable objects as like the shadow of the head of an angry, coiled snake.
> When we see these beings completely engulfed in the fires of suffering,
> We take ourselves to charnel grounds, O King, delighting in the thought of renunciation.

All beings, all things arising in this samsaric world, are like the reflection of the moon in the water: unstable, constantly changing, ungraspable. Just as the image of the moon is formed by light and water, all beings in cyclic existence are formed by karma and afflictions; they are like the reflection of karma and afflictions. They are not firmly established, but are constantly changing, formed and conditioned by karma and afflictions. That is what the princess sees and explains to her father.

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[42] The first three topics are discussed under
2) Training the mind in the stages of the path shared with persons of medium capacity (begins in Chapter 17)
a) The mental training (Chapter 17)
b) The measure of the determination to be free (Chapter 22)
c) Dispelling misconceptions (Chapter 22)

[43] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kassapa_Buddha

When you see how the inanimate universe and all the living beings within it are just like the moon observed in a lake stirred by the wind (never stable for even one moment, constantly transforming) then you see how all objects of desire are insignificant. All the exciting forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures that once looked so juicy now lose their appeal, like a dried-up old bone hanging in a butcher's shop. Still, as long as you remain attracted to them, they are as dangerous as the shadow of a poisonous snake. **When you see how all the sentient beings within samsara are constantly tormented in the fires of the three types of sufferings, the attachments of cyclic existence bring you nothing but a deep-seated feeling of nausea.**

This sense of nausea or disgust is illustrated by the story of a "nomad child of the north." Generally, Tibetans eat tsampa, roasted barley flour. But in the far north, where the nomads run their herds, barley is not easy to get. In this story a nomad child asks his mother for some tsampa. She doesn't have any tsampa, so instead she gives the child nyungma, a certain kind of turnip, which can be prepared in many different ways. First she offers him fresh turnip, but he says, "I don't want that. I want tsampa." Then she tries giving him dried turnip, but the child says, "No. I don't want that. I want tsampa." Then the mother tries cooked turnip, but the boy says, "I don't want that. I want tsampa." Finally she presents him with turnip that is cooked and dried and covered with a sweet sauce, and with this the boy says, "No, I don't want that either." And turning away with a feeling of nausea he exclaims, "All of these are just turnips!"

When you don't like turnips, it doesn't matter how your mother prepares them. It is the same way for the practitioner in cyclic existence. **It doesn't matter where you are, or whether you are surrounded by blissful pleasures or hideous tortures, you should see it all equally in its faulty, suffering nature. You should respond to all forms of samsaric experience with the same feeling of nauseous aversion and the thought, "I want nothing to do with any of it. It is all just cyclic existence!"**

In that way, by contemplating how you have been wandering in cyclic existence from beginningless time, you will produce a strong feeling of dismay and disenchantment. By contemplating how you still have to wander in the same circumstances with no end in sight, you will produce strong fear. When this combination of thoughts arise from deep in the heart, your thought of renunciation will no longer be mere words, but will emerge as an urgent determination to prevent all future birth in cyclic existence. As Nāgārjuna says in his *Friendly Letter*:

> **Understand that cyclic existence is like this:**
> **Whether among the devas, humans, hell beings, hungry ghosts,**
> **Or animals, there is no good rebirth,**
> **It is only a vessel of numerous ills.**

Once you have determined to prevent future birth in cyclic existence, the method you employ will have to destroy its two causes, karma and afflictions. There is no way to be free from samsara without destroying these two causes. We can say that the obscuring afflictions **are the primary root of samsara, and it is most important to destroy these afflictions. This is because, if you do not have any obscuring afflictions, then no matter how many karmic causes you may have, you will not be born in samsara. Karma without affliction is like a dry seed; it will not germinate or yield the fruit of samsaric birth.**

On the other hand, if you have obscuring afflictions, then even if you could somehow eliminate all previously produced karma, the afflictions (which are the root of karma) will only produce more. As long as the afflictions are present you will continue to accumulate karma. That is why we say that it is most important to destroy the afflictions. In order to do that you must meditate on an unmistaken and complete path. Your path of practice must contain all the stages that are necessary to completely remove the afflictions from the root. That kind of comprehensive path is the only one that will actually lead you to emancipation from the trap of cyclic existence. Now we turn to focus on the specific qualities of that path to liberation.

i) What kind of life can overcome cyclic existence

The actual training in the stages of the path to enlightenment, which we call *lamrim*, begins with realising the tremendous value of this life endowed with eight leisures and ten endowments. We discussed this at length in the first volume of this series. You have obtained the eight leisures when you are free of the eight hindrances to engaging in a Dharma practice listed by Nāgārjuna in a passage from his *Friendly Letter*. Nāgārjuna describes the type of life that is best for halting rebirth in cyclic existence as follows:

> To be born with wrong views, as an animal,
> A hungry ghost, or in the hells,
> Taking rebirth in a place without the Buddha's teaching,
> Or as a barbarian in some remote land,
> As an imbecile, or mute, or a long-lived god—
> These are the eight faulty unfavourable conditions.
> Being free from them, you have found an opportunity,
> So strive now to put an end to rebirth.

If you are born in a lower realm the obstacles to pursuing a spiritual path are obvious. Among the hell denizens and hungry ghosts, life is so absorbed in physical pain or desperate hunger that they cannot even think of anything else. At the other end of the spectrum are the devas, who live a life absorbed in peaceful bliss for eons on end. Such beings remain blissfully ignorant of the faults of samsara and the pervasive nature of suffering, so they never think it is necessary to escape from cyclic existence. Also, because their lives are so long, they have no awareness that their happy state will not last forever; they have no way to realise the truth of impermanence. This is a real handicap, because one of the most powerful forces motivating beings to take up religion is their awareness of death and the impermanent nature of existence.

In general, the human rebirth is the most conducive to spiritual pursuits, but even within this human realm there are serious hindrances to practice. You can be born mentally handicapped, lacking the intelligence to understand the teachings. Or you may have physical disabilities that hinder your practice. Even if you are mentally and physically fully qualified, you may be born into a primitive culture, as a "barbarian," where there is little conception of right and wrong or the cause and effect of actions. Even if you are born in a civilised society, it may be a place where the Buddhist teachings are unknown, or a time when no buddha has appeared to teach a path to liberation.

Even if you are free from all these other hindrances, and you are born as a human with a sharp mind and you meet the Buddha's teachings, you may still reject them. Your mind may be inclined to reject the teachings of karma and rebirth, or you may not believe that liberation from samsara and buddhahood are possible. In this case, even though all the favourable conditions are in place for you to engage in a successful Dharma practice, you turn your back on such practice and live your life purely for worldly gratification.

Any being who is not free from all of these hindrances will not have the leisure to practice this path which has the power to destroy all the obscuring afflictions and grant release from the bondage of cyclic existence. Therefore, now that you have obtained a human rebirth that is free of these obstructions, while you hold this precious path in your hands, you must make every effort to use this opportunity to put an end to samsaric rebirth. That is the advice that Nāgārjuna gave to his friend, the king.

When you think about it, the king that Nāgārjuna is writing to did not have anything that you do not have; you have the same leisures and endowments that he had. You are born human, with complete faculties, in a central land where you have access to the Buddhadharma. And, like the king, you have already developed some level of trust and faith in the teachings. Just like the king, you have all the necessary equipment to destroy the afflictions from the root and put an end to samsaric misery. Therefore, it is so important to make use of this opportunity while you have it.

The great practitioner Jangchub Rinchen said, "Now is the time to distinguish ourselves from cattle." And the great Kadampa teacher Potowa said:

In the past we wandered endlessly in samsara and it did not stop by itself, so it is not going to stop by itself now either. Therefore, we must put an end to it, and the time to do this is now, while we have obtained the leisure and endowments.

No matter how much you may hope for it, cyclic existence is never going to go away by itself. If you want the suffering to end, you must make the effort to destroy the causes of suffering from the root. Now that you have in your hands the method to do this, and you have the mental and physical capacity to apply that method, you should get on with it. There will never be a better time, a more auspicious opportunity, to finally bring an end to suffering in cyclic existence.

If you do not use the special capacity of this wonderful life to destroy the root of suffering (but instead spend all your time and energy chasing after temporary comforts such as food, shelter, sensual pleasure, and the thrill of defeating your adversaries or doing neat stuff) then your life is no more meaningful than that of an animal. As Jangchub Rinchen says, now is the time to raise your aspirations above those of cattle.

This life, and the precious little time we have to spend here, is so important. Just gaining a full appreciation of its significance can be a tremendous aid to your practice. The Kadampa geshes often spoke of this life as the border; from here you can turn in one direction that will lead you out of cyclic existence, or you can turn back to where you came from and continue to wander for a long time to come. You stand at the border, and which direction you turn is entirely your choice.

In general, all sentient beings have the capacity to obtain emancipation or buddhahood. In order to fulfil this potential you need to eliminate the obscuring afflictions from the root. To accomplish that task requires a life with unusually favourable conditions; these are the special conditions we have described as the leisures and endowments of the precious human rebirth. Since Tsongkhapa is explaining in this section which type of life and livelihood is the best to practice the Dharma, he now goes on to explain the special virtues of living as an ordained monk or nun.

a' The Advantages of the Ordained Life

Among humans who have all of the leisures and endowments there are many different lifestyles. Within the context of Buddhist practice and culture there are basically two ways of living: as a layperson, or as an ordained monk or nun. Those who remain in the household life usually encounter many more obstacles to practice, and this constitutes a significant disadvantage to life as a layperson. Therefore, the best kind of life for overcoming cyclic existence is the life of a renunciate, and wise people truly rejoice in taking ordination. [In Tibetan, the term for taking ordination is *rabjung*, which literally means: "rising out (*jung*) of the householder's life to a better (*rab*) kind of life."]

Whether you have found a way to become ordained or not, it is beneficial to recognise and contemplate the virtues of leading the life of a renunciate and the disadvantages of the householder's life. For those who have already been ordained, this practice will reinforce confidence in their choice. Those who have not yet ordained will establish positive predispositions to take ordination at some time in the future. For those who already have such predispositions, this practice will awaken that potential and inspire them to act on it. Because meditating on the virtues of ordination in comparison to the disadvantages of the householder's life has all these benefits, Tsongkhapa says that he will explain this practice in some detail.

When you study this section it is important to keep in mind that Tsongkhapa is *not* saying that ordained monastics are the only people who can attain liberation, and that laypeople do not have a chance, which is not the case. The point emphasised here is that the ordained life has many advantages for those who are on the path, and it is useful to know what those advantages are so that you can make a wise choice at some appropriate time in the future.

The underlying principle here is that, in general, the best type of life for bringing an end to cyclic existence is the life of an ordained monastic. This is because those who live the life of a householder encounter so many hindrances and interruptions to their practice, and most of those hindrances are avoided by those who enter the monastic life. Householders have so

many concerns, which are all forms of dissatisfaction and suffering. If they are poor, they exhaust themselves trying to acquire wealth. When they have wealth, they face the problem of how to protect it. So whether they are rich or poor there is no stable happiness. Out of ignorance they believe that finding riches and holding onto wealth will bring true happiness.

This delusion of grasping at material comforts as the ultimate source of happiness is itself the result of previous negative karma. Although right now you have the opportunity to completely escape all of these petty concerns, the predispositions you have created by habitually chasing after material comfort in previous lifetimes cause you to waste this precious opportunity by repeating that senseless behaviour over and over again.

In fact, this practice of contemplating the benefits of ordination and the disadvantages of lay life is a way of creating positive predispositions, so that in the future you will find it easy to turn away from worldly concerns and pursue the path to liberation with all your energy. Though you may not be able to take ordination right now and take advantage of these benefits in this present life, by creating these predispositions you will reap the benefits at some later time. It may be later in this same lifetime, or it may be a future life. Once those causes are there, they only need to be reawakened. But if you do not plant these seeds, they will never ripen for you in the future. If you have the proper predispositions, in your next life you could be born as a child who has the interest in becoming a monk or nun from a very early age, and has the opportunity to do so. In this way you can create not only the causes to have that special inclination, but also the causes to be born into a situation where you meet pure religious teachings and excellent Mahayana teachers. **If you use this life to create such conditions in the future, you have really accomplished a great deal.**

The *Garland of Birth Stories* says:

> Never think of the householder's life as happiness;
> It is like a prison.
> Whether they are rich or poor,
> Those who remain as householders have a great disability.
> One is afflicted by having to protect wealth,
> The other is exhausted by seeking after it.
> Whether they are poor or rich,
> Neither one has happiness.
> The delusion that finds joy in that life
> Is the result of non-virtuous action.

Therefore, Tsongkhapa says, those who have taken ordination should not hold many worldly goods and strive for still more wealth; if they engage in that kind of activity they are no different from householders. For those who remain in the lay life it is difficult to practice real Dharma because their circumstances require so many activities that are actually contrary to the Dharma.

In the same tale from the *Garland of Birth Stories* it says:

> When you do the work of a householder,
> It is impossible not to tell lies,
> And it is inappropriate not to punish
> Others who do you harm.
> If you try to practice Dharma, your lay work will suffer.
> If you stick to householders duties, what Dharma can you accomplish?
> The work of Dharma is completely peaceful;
> The goals of the householder are accomplished by forceful action.
> Since lay life has this fault of being contradictory to the Dharma,
> Who, wanting to benefit themselves, would remain a householder?

When you engage in the commerce of worldly life it is very difficult not to tell lies, or at least bend the truth to your own advantage. Since your primary goal is to advance the prosperity of your household, it is almost foolish *not* to say things that are untrue when it would be beneficial (in the worldly sense) to do so. For laypeople, it seems, sometimes you just have to lie.

When other people harm you, take advantage of you, or cheat you, you have to defend your interests and protect your family by punishing the offenders so that they will not do that again.

When someone steals your family's property, you cannot merely meditate on patience and on cherishing others more than yourself as a monk or nun might do. It would almost be irresponsible not to defend your family by aggressively defending their economic interests.

Of course, once you have achieved a certain level of stability, it is possible to mix your Dharma practice with householder activity. For bodhisattvas and others with high levels of realisation, every activity (regardless of how worldly it may appear) becomes meaningful Dharma action. But in the early stages of a practice it is extremely difficult to do justice to both of these endeavours at the same time, because the requirements of one often conflict with the responsibilities of the other.

Basically, the Dharma is about achieving peace, and it uses peaceful means. In order to succeed at the work of a layperson you have to use forceful, harsh, even fierce and ruthless means to achieve your goals. This kind of wrathful activity does not accord well with the peaceful attitude you are trying to cultivate in your Dharma practice. And if you try to remain completely peaceful and passive in your worldly pursuits, you will not succeed at what needs to be done.

The same text continues:

> Like a nest full of the vipers of arrogance, pride, and ignorance,
> The household life destroys the blissful happiness of peace.
> The householder lives with so many unbearable sufferings,
> Who would stay in such a snake-pit?

Over and over you should contemplate the faults of remaining in the household life as they are described in these examples, and you should aspire to enter the religious life of an ordained renunciate.

But merely becoming a monk or a nun is not sufficient. You should learn to be satisfied with the bare necessities of such a life: simple monastic robes, a plain begging bowl, and food given to you as alms as your sole source of sustenance. It is important to cultivate this kind of joyful contentment with whatever meagre resources come your way, and to feel that whatever comes is enough.

Actually, **one of the worst obstacles is insatiability, the lack of contentment. It is a state of mind that never knows how to be satisfied.** No matter how much wealth you accumulate, you still crave more. We see this among very rich people, or very powerful rulers; no matter how much they have they always crave more and more. This is a state of mind that completely prevents you from recognising the unsatisfactory nature of samsaric wonders. **It is a tremendous obstacle to entering the spiritual path.**

The opposite of insatiability is satisfaction, and renunciates who have achieved this quality of satisfaction repair to a place of solitude to purify their own inner afflictions. Then they **pray and strive to be of benefit to others, and to become the means by which others are able to progress on the path.** For example, the householders who offer them food as they go on their begging rounds gain merit. Making offerings to bodhisattvas and other serious spiritual practitioners is one of the most powerful means of accumulating great merit.

Earlier we mentioned the princess described in the *Edifying Tale of the Seven Maidens* by Guhyadatta. Her only aspiration was to become a nun and retire from the world to pursue the path to liberation. In her explanation to her father of why she wishes to leave the luxuries of the royal household, we find a beautiful description of the pure aims of a renunciate:

> When will I be able to do as I wish,
> To shave my hair,
> Wear rags from the rubbish heap,
> And retire to a solitary place?
> When will I be able to beg for alms,
> Blameless, wandering from house to house,
> Looking no further ahead than the length of a yoke,
> Carrying an earthen begging bowl?
> Having cleansed the swamps where the thorns of the afflictions grow,

Without attachment to wealth or esteem,
When will I become the object of charity,
For those who live in the towns?

Renunciates have no need of fine clothes. They can pick out of the rubbish old clothes that others have worn and thrown away. They can patch them up and wear them to protect their body from the cold and from the sun. **There is no reason to wear fine garments because they are not concerned with how they look; only with maintaining good health and a long life so that they can continue to practice.**

If you are following the Vinaya rules for monks and nuns carefully, when you walk around you should keep your eyes focused just a short distance in front of you, rather than looking around at all the interesting sights. It is said in these stanzas that you should gaze ahead only a yard or so, the length of a yoke that is used to fasten oxen or yaks to a plow. This is because **the sense faculties, especially the eye organs, are so powerful, and have such a capacity to stimulate the afflictions. You see something attractive and suddenly attachment rises. You see someone you don't like, and suddenly you are angry. The senses are constantly sending invitations to the afflictions, welcoming them into your mind. You need to use many different methods to control them.**

The princess asks when she can go on begging rounds, carrying a modest clay alms bowl; there is no need to own some fancy vessel made of silver or gold. Also, householders are constantly accusing each other and attacking those they don't agree with, or people they don't like, but **when you live in that kind of simplicity no one criticises, blames, or attacks you.** The mendicant, wearing tattered robes and carrying a simple bowl, is free of all that nonsense.

The afflictions are like thorns that constantly prick you with desire and hostility. They are thorn bushes that grow in the mud of ignorance, the swamp of cyclic existence. When you pull out the afflictions by cleaning away the mud in which they grow, you become a truly worthy object of generosity for the householders who live in the towns where you seek alms. You benefit both for yourself and, by becoming an extraordinary field of merit, you help all those who offer you alms. Why? Because, by virtue of your own good qualities, their act of generosity will produce greatly increased results.

The *Edifying Tale of the Seven Maidens* continues:

When will I become unattached to my body,
Rising from a bed of grass,
My clothes laden with frost,
Living on the most basic food and drink?

When will I lie down beneath a tree,
Wearing clothes of soft grass
As green as a parrot,
To enjoy this life's blissful feast?

These stanzas point out how **satisfaction is the greatest wealth**. When you are happy with whatever comes to you, the entire natural world becomes your mansion, and whatever simple food comes your way is like a feast. You can sleep in the forest on a bed of grass, and when you get up your clothes will be decorated with the morning frost. This is the wealth of the person who sincerely renounces all worldly concerns.

Compare that easy satisfaction with our usual obsessions with how we look, what we wear, and what we eat. For many people it seems as though their whole life is dedicated to serving their body; they spend all their time trying to look good, adorning their body with elaborate clothing. Wearing functional clothes to protect the body is not enough; they have to be beautiful, expensive, fancy, and up to date. And eating simple foods in order to survive is never enough; they want many different tastes and fancy dishes that are complicated to prepare. The princess asks when she will be able to leave such worldly concerns behind, and enter the gloriously simple life of the mendicant in the forest.

As humans, we don't easily experience the blissful states of meditative equipoise that are known to beings in the form and formless realms. But **within this human life, you experience**

a deep sense of inner peace (a constant and abiding happiness that is itself a form of bliss) when you are satisfied with everything just as it is. As the princess says, **though the mendicants in the forest owns nothing, whatever they encounter in this life is to them like a joyous feast.**

You should contemplate these beautiful words of the princess again and again. If you are able to take ordination as a monk or a nun in this life, that is the best result. But even if you cannot ordain in your current life, this practice will turn your mind in that direction. **Although it may be clear to you that you will not become ordained in this life, you can begin to aspire to it in the future. The powerful aspiration prayer of the princess awakens you to the marvellous attributes of the monastic life. It counteracts the common misconception that monasticism has no purpose, is outdated, or a waste of time. Cultivating this admiration for the monastic life, and the aspiration to enter that life in the future, will plant the seeds that will eventually ripen into the opportunity to enter this state. Planting seeds for the future is itself an essential Dharma practice.**

Finally, the Princess describes the highest goal of the monastic life:

> When will I live in a meadow by a river,
> Observing over and over
> How the world of this life
> Is like the coming and going of the waves?
>
> When will I become
> Free of desire for samsara's pleasures,
> Uprooting the view of the transitory collections,
> The mother of all wrong views?
>
> When will I come to realise
> That the animate and inanimate worlds
> Are just like dreams, hallucinations, magic shows,
> Clouds, or a city of odour-eaters?

What better place is there to meditate on the truth of impermanence than sitting in a mountain pasture by the banks of river? In the summer the grass is green and thick and the wild flowers light up the field with their bright colours. But as the seasons change the grass grows brown, the leaves drop from the trees, and the flowers wilt and disappear. In fact, **when you watch the natural world closely, you see how everything is changing in every moment. Then it is not so hard to see how your own body, mind, and life are constantly moving in the same way; how whole worlds of creation arise, and then fade away, just like the ripples on the passing river.**

Nothing in the outer world of creation or the inner life of the mind remains as you wish it to be. All expectations are subject to disappointment and suffering. Although beautiful objects appear so real and so attractive, when you examine them closely you find that everything is as illusory and insubstantial as a dream or a magical illusion. Everything is impermanent, constantly changing, ultimately lacking in any substantial reality.

The root of cyclic existence, the producer of the many types of wrong views, is grasping at a misconceived notion of self. That self-grasping egotism is destroyed by the wisdom that analyses and realises the true nature of the self. According to Buddhist teachings, **there is no unitary, absolute, inherently existent self within this body and mind. What there is, is an aggregation of many physical parts and mental functions; what we call the five aggregates. And each of these parts is itself not partless or independent, but is made up of other parts, and arises in dependence on causes and conditions. And each thing that arises is transitory, changing in every moment, and finally perishable.**

When we examine reality with analytical wisdom in this way, we find nothing that is real, substantially existent, or unitary. However, that is precisely the way we ignorantly conceive and grasp at the self: as a real, substantially existent, unitary self, which we call "I." That is our ordinary way of thinking, and based on that innate sense of I, we conceive

of real objects around us that are "mine," over which we have dominion. The egotism that grasps at an absolute self or soul (that kind of wrong view) is the cause of attachment, hostility, and all the other afflictions. It is the fundamental root of cyclic existence; we call it the "view of the transitory collections."[44] That fundamental ignorance about the true nature of self is what must be removed from the root.

Living the life of an ordained nun and aspiring to these highest of realisations was the practice of this princess. By meditating on this, and admiring that type of practice, you too will eventually be able to follow that path. The Kadampa Geshe Potowa referred to this text by Guhyadatta and the attitude of satisfaction with the monastic life when he said:

> Tonight a heavy snow fell on my small hut. It was just like something that happened in the *Edifying Tale of the Seven Maidens*, and this made me very happy. My only desire is to practice in this way; nothing else concerns me.

Another great Kadampa, Geshe Chekawa said:

> If it happens that someone is living in an austere mountain valley, practicing like a sage, then truly that child was well bred by his father.

A well-bred child is one who comes to master all the skills and good qualities of character that his father has to teach. Here, we should understand that Geshe Chekawa is referring to a child's spiritual father, or *guru*.

And another Kadampa, Geshe Sharawa, suggested to his monk disciples this clever method to generate virtuous thoughts among the laity:

> When the householders are overwhelmed with work, you should put on your finest dress and go to see them. They will think, "Ah! Isn't the ordained life marvellous!" and this will plant the predispositions to become ordained in the future.

You can imagine the farmers at a busy time, exhausted, covered in dust and sweat, and then a monk casually walks by in crisp, clean robes, looking like he has nothing important to do. Wouldn't the hard-working peasants think, "What a wonderful life that must be!"?

The *Questions of Householder Ugra Sutra (Gṛha-paty-ugra-paripṛcchā-sūtra)* says that bodhisattvas who are living as householders should have the following aspiration:

> When will I be able to take leave of this householder's life, which is a source of suffering, and practice as a renunciate? When will I be able to perform the ritual of ordination into the Sangha, the ritual of confession, the ritual of release from the summer retreat, and the ritual of veneration of the teacher? With these thoughts the bodhisattva who remains in the household should rejoice in the aspiration to take ordination.

In this passage the bodhisattva who has remained a layperson is being encouraged see the householder's life as a source of hindrances to practice, and to cultivate an aspiration to enter the monastic life.

At the time of the Buddha, the Sangha would assemble to perform various ritual activities (most of which are still observed today) and it is these duties of the Sangha that are being referred to here. The ritual of confession is performed by monks and nuns twice each month when they gather to confess to one another whatever vows they have broken in the preceding period. Through this process they restore those virtues that have degenerated, and purify the negative actions they have committed.

The custom in the Buddha's day was for the Sangha to gather at a monastic settlement, called a *vihāra*, and spend the three months of the summer rainy season in retreat. At the beginning of the retreat a formal ritual would mark the sealing up of the monastery, and from that day until the end of the retreat the monks or nuns were not supposed to go beyond the limits specified as the border of the retreat. There were special exceptions, such as parental illness, but the principle is that you stay within the borders during the entire retreat. The reason for entering retreat is to protect the practitioner from the many distractions and pitfalls of everyday life. Within that monastic setting you are much less likely to be distracted by other people and worldly activities; you won't be traveling around so you won't have to deal with so many in-

[44] The view of the transitory collections is discussed in chapter 20 under the heading: "Identifying the obscuring afflictions."

sects, or wild animals, and you will have the solitude, peace, and quiet to engage more deeply in your meditative practice.

On the first day of the rainy season retreat (the sixteenth day of what is usually the sixth month on the lunar calendar) the borders of the retreat are sealed, everyone takes a vow not to transgress those limits except for some exceptional reason, and the retreat begins. During the retreat a special set of monastic rules applies, which is somewhat modified from the ordinary guidelines. Then, at the end of the retreat, another special ceremony is held, this time to open the gates and release the limits and restrictions that were established at the beginning. Then, everyone enjoys a special holiday for several weeks!

The main point is that all of these monastic activities are directed purely toward emancipation and buddhahood. Even if you are on the bodhisattva path, if you remain as a householder you inevitably get bogged down in problems ("How do we produce more grain from this field?") and disputes ("That property belongs to me, not you!"). All such worldly concerns are the opposite of Sangha activity and are antagonistic to the peaceful mind you are cultivating on the path. This is why even **bodhisattvas who are living the householder's life should aspire to become ordained monastics**.

There are several levels of ordination vows. Some of the activities that are mentioned in this list are only performed by fully ordained monks and nuns, so the implication of this passage is that **bodhisattvas should aspire to taking the full ordination of a bhikṣu or bhikṣuṇi.**

The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* by Maitreya says:

> Those who have entered the religious order
> Possess immeasurable virtues.
> Therefore, bodhisattvas who take and observe vows,
> Are superior to those who are householders.

Therefore, Tsongkhapa says, the life of the ordained renunciate is praised as the best way of life for those who seek personal liberation from cyclic existence. Not only that, the life of a renunciate is also the best for those who seek the omniscience of buddhahood by means of either the Mahayana perfection vehicle or the tantric vehicle. Mahayana practitioners are striving to obtain complete omniscience in order to save other sentient beings. Because they cannot bear to see the infinite sufferings of the beings in cyclic existence, and they take responsibility for ending that suffering, they seek the quickest, most powerful methods to achieve this goal. The fastest, most sophisticated (and also most dangerous) method is tantric practice. But even for those who enter into that Vajrayana path, the renunciate's life is best.

For the Mahayana practitioner there are three levels of vows: the vow of individual liberation (*prātimokṣa*), the bodhisattva vow, and the tantric vow. Among these, the vow of the ordained renunciate referred to here as the best basis for all levels of practice is the vow of individual liberation. As its name suggests, the intention of this vow is to lead the individual to his or her own emancipation from cyclic existence. Living according to this vow, as a monk or nun, is the key to achieving that goal. In fact, some level of prātimokṣa vow is indispensable to attaining liberation from samsara.

But beyond that, the vow of individual liberation also empowers and increases the effectiveness of the other two vows by insuring the purity of the actions that underlie them. In this way, the vow of individual liberation is the foundation of all Mahayana practice; it is the root of the teaching. It is like the great earth, upon which all other structures are built; it is the basis of all development and growth. Therefore, you should never think that this vow is only for Hinayana practitioners. **Whether you are Hinayana or Mahayana, you should always maintain the highest respect for the vow of individual liberation.**

As we have said many times, the human life, with its many qualities of leisure and opportunity, is the best form of life for practicing the path to liberation. The section we are now concluding, with its many quotations from sutras and aspirational poetry, has been showing us the ways in which the life of an ordained monk or nun is the best among the many types of human life, because renunciates are able to fully dedicate their mind and body to attaining freedom from cyclic existence.

This does not mean that you cannot practice as a layperson, or that the householder's life is

completely meaningless. But in general, lay life means living in the world, accumulating wealth, producing children, and concentrating on the innumerable activities necessary to survive and prosper amidst the challenges of the world. When you are so wrapped up in that worldly context, it is difficult to turn in the opposite direction and try to be free from samsara. Although you may aspire to emancipation, it is difficult to do what needs to be done in order to attain it.

When you become ordained you renounce all those worldly concerns and you leave behind the life focused on temporary happiness, sensual pleasure, wealth, fame, and praise. All of these are then seen to be like nothing, and all your energy goes toward freedom from cyclic existence. From the perspective of the renunciate, this fortunate, powerful human life is a vehicle, an instrument to be used to gain emancipation. In order to succeed in that journey it is necessary to protect this body and preserve this life. For that purpose you need adequate clothes to protect you from the weather, and sufficient food and drink to sustain a healthy body. You need nourishment, but simple food is sufficient. And once you have enough, what purpose is served by additional food and clothes? The essence of the life of the renunciate is to be satisfied with simple things, to use just what you need and to be satisfied with what you have, to find joy in the simple pleasure of having enough.

The real meaning of entering the religious order is not that I sit here with yellow or red robes and shave my head. It doesn't mean that I am sitting here as some kind of stupid monk with no particular purpose, telling you that the monk's life is the best and the lay life is the worst. Taking ordination means learning to be satisfied with simple things. It means learning to live with much less attachment, learning to be satisfied with whatever comes. All of the external signs (the robes and shaved head) are markers and reminders designed to reinforce that inner attitude; they set you apart from the world of samsaric concerns and remind you and others that your goals lie beyond the things of this world.

Once you have that calm sense of satisfaction, and that separation from worldly concerns, then you can fully turn your attention and your energy toward the training that leads to freedom. You can concentrate all the action of your body, speech, and mind on that single purpose. When you say, "I now renounce cyclic existence," every aspect of your life takes on a different meaning.

These are the benefits of taking ordination and the disadvantages of remaining in the householder's life. But we should be clear that just as the quality of monks or nuns is not measured by their robes or haircut, but by their mental attitude, **for laypeople** the quality of their lives is not measured by the clothes they wear or their long hair. **If they apply their time and energy to the path of liberation, and actually control the actions of their body, speech, and mind so that they are constantly accumulating merit and refraining from non-virtue, and if their inner mental attitude is one of peaceful satisfaction rather than constant craving, then there is no problem; such people are also on the road to liberation from cyclic existence.**

The distinction that has been made here is that *in general* it is much more difficult to engage in a complete, wholehearted practice when you are involved in the worldly concerns of a layperson. This is especially true in the early stages of practice. Later on, when your motivation is more powerful and your concentration more stable, your practice will be able to stand on its own and will not be damaged by external conditions. This is the way the high bodhisattva lives in the world in order to help others without being distracted from the path by samsaric attractions. But until you have achieved that degree of stability, the advice here is that the life of a renunciate is the best for achieving the goal of liberation.

ii) What kind of path you must cultivate to overcome cyclic existence

We have established the kind of life that is required if you want to overcome cyclic existence. We now examine the nature of the path that will lead you to that goal. Nāgārjuna says in his *Friendly Letter*:

> If your head or your clothes suddenly caught fire,
> Rather than trying to put it out,
> You should strive to put an end to rebirth,
> Because there is no purpose more important than this.

By means of ethical conduct, wisdom, and concentration,
Attain nirvana—the undefiled, contained state of peace,
Inexhaustible, beyond aging and death,
Free of earth, water, fire, wind, sun, and moon.

In these stanzas Nāgārjuna is telling his friend the king that gaining freedom from the sufferings of cyclic existence is so urgent that even if your hair catches fire you should not take the time to put it out! Why? Because once you are born into a miserable rebirth under the power of karma and afflictions you will be subject to every imaginable form of suffering and you will have no control over your future. But if you succeed in attaining emancipation you will never need to worry about these gross forms of suffering again.

But how do you attain liberation? The essence of all the methods are summarised in three trainings: ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom. *Wisdom* is the understanding that realises the true nature of reality. In order for that wisdom to become effective, for it to be realised directly, the mind must be completely calm and stable; therefore you need *concentration*, which is a perfectly focused and stabilised mind. And *ethical conduct* is the indispensable basis upon which all good qualities, including wisdom and concentration, are built. When you combine these three you have all the necessary conditions that lead to nirvana, a state that is beyond suffering.

Certain non-Buddhists believe that nirvana is an actual earthly place, but it is not like that. It is a mental state of complete peace in which all suffering, with its causes, has completely ceased. It is "undefiled" because all of the inner stains, the obscuring afflictions, have been completely removed. Once you obtain that state of nirvana you no longer need to experience the sufferings of old age, sickness, and death. This is referring to *conditioned* death, death that occurs under the power of karma and afflictions. Though bodhisattvas still undergo death, it is under their own control, and it is done for the beneficial purpose of helping other sentient beings.

Once you attain that state it is "inexhaustible"; it remains forever. It is not a state that is produced out of the material elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. Some people worship the sun or the moon, but nirvana is not such a place. It is a state of being free of the afflictions and the suffering that they cause. Nāgārjuna tells the king *that* is the kind of nirvana you should obtain.

Since the entire path that leads to that goal is encompassed by the three trainings, the *Lamrim Chenmo* now proceeds to explain those three trainings in detail. But at this point we are still studying the practices of the being of intermediate scope. The trainings of concentration and wisdom will be explained later, when we look at the Mahayana path, the path of the being of great scope. At this stage of his explanation Tsongkhapa will only explain the training of ethical conduct.

a' Specifying the number of trainings as three

You don't need very many methods to attain liberation; three is enough. Only three; that sounds pretty easy, doesn't it? But first we need to understand why three is actually sufficient, and this is explained under the following three headings:

1' Specifying the number in terms of the stages of subduing the mind
2' Specifying the number in terms of the results
3' Specifying the number in terms of the objects to be abandoned

1' Specifying the number in terms of the stages of subduing the mind

Everything that a practitioner needs to do is included within these three trainings. First of all, the training in *ethical conduct* will enable you to subdue and take control of the mind. Ordinarily the mind is untamed, like a wild elephant. It runs wherever it wants to in a completely uncontrolled manner, and like a wild elephant, if you do not bring it under control it becomes very dangerous. The uncontrolled mind leads you to many harmful actions, which in turn lead to endless rebirths in bad migrations.

To control a *wild* elephant you have to contain it within a limited space, and you have to make sure it does not escape from that containment. Ethical conduct uses precepts and vows to contain the mind within the space of virtuous behaviour, and thereby protects you from the

damage that the wild elephant of the mind can do. The ordinary, distracted mind usually chases after sense objects; following uncontrollably whatever appears to the eyes, ears, nose and so forth. The first step in taking control of that unruly mind is to set boundaries beyond which you will not let the mind wander. This is the function of training in ethical conduct: it establishes limits and restricts the body, speech, and mind from straying into non-virtuous areas. This becomes a powerful means of protection, and it works simply by making rules and keeping strictly within the boundaries of those rules.

Once you have begun to control the negative tendencies by restraining the distracted mind, you must institute the positive training of *concentration*, called *samādhi* in Sanskrit. This means settling down the fluctuating mind, stabilising it in meditative equipoise. By training in concentration your mind becomes pliable; you are able to do with your mind just what you wish. Once you reach an advanced level of concentration you will be able to maintain your attention on whatever object you choose, focusing without distraction for as long as you wish.

The mind is not free from suffering because it is enmeshed in a web of obscuring afflictions, and the root of those afflictions is ignorance. It is the training of *wisdom* that is the direct antidote to the cause of suffering in cyclic existence. Wisdom cuts the root of ignorance by seeing reality as it truly is.

From this brief and simple analysis we can see that for any practitioner who desires emancipation, all that is required to achieve that goal is encompassed in these three trainings. The ultimate wish of such a practitioner will be fulfilled if he or she properly practices and completes these three stages of subduing the mind: ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom. Thus, we can say that these three are sufficient, and no other methods are necessary.

2' Specifying the number in terms of the results

We have spoken previously of the two goals of sentient beings. The first is the temporary goal of a high rebirth within cyclic existence. The second is the ultimate goal, what we call the "definite good," which is emancipation from cyclic existence, and ultimately, the perfect enlightenment of buddhahood. These three trainings are all you need to accomplish these two desired results.

The temporary goal, higher rebirth, is divided into two: higher rebirth in the desire realm, and rebirth in the form and formless realms. To achieve these two goals requires, respectively, the two trainings of ethical conduct and concentration. Maintaining pure ethical conduct is the cause of taking rebirth among the humans or devas of the desire realm. This means practicing the ten virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind, and avoiding the ten non-virtuous actions. If you do not maintain ethical conduct (if you perform many harmful actions) the result will be rebirth in the three lower realms.

The result of training in concentration is rebirth in the form or formless realms. After you attain single-pointed concentration you can develop various levels of meditative absorption. Depending on which level of meditative absorption you achieve in this lifetime you will be reborn in a corresponding upper realm in your next life. By obtaining one of the first four concentrations you will be born in the corresponding level of the form realm; by attaining one of the four formless absorptions you will be born in the corresponding level of the formless realm.

The result of the training in wisdom is the final goal of emancipation, the definite good. Thus, these three trainings are all that is necessary to achieve both the temporary and final goals of sentient beings. These first two ways of establishing the number of trainings as three are taught in Asaṅga's *Levels of Yogic Deed*s.

3' Specifying the number in terms of the objects to be abandoned

Some earlier teachers said that the number of trainings can also be established as three in terms of the afflictions to be abandoned. They explained ethical conduct as the training that disowns and prevents the afflictions. Ethical conduct directly blocks you from doing harmful actions, but it only works temporarily, in a present circumstance, and it does not eliminate the afflictions in any ultimate fashion.

The training of concentration can be a powerful tool for suppressing afflictions when they arise. In fact, the method of practice we call the "mundane path" is a technique for temporarily suppressing the afflictions that is common to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists, and it can

lead to the highest levels of meditative absorption. It involves attaining progressively higher meditative states by concentrating on the virtues of the higher state, the one you are trying to achieve, in comparison to the faults of the lower state that you have already achieved. By this method you progressively suppress the afflictions of each level by meditating on its faults. Although this can be a very useful tool, it too does not eliminate the afflictions from the root. As an analogy, you can imagine how meditating on love will temporarily subdue hatred. It works similarly to that. By meditating on the impurities of a particular realm, attachment to *that* level is suppressed. In this way, nearly all of the obscuring afflictions of the three realms can be temporarily suppressed. However, it is only when such concentration is combined with the training of wisdom that the afflictions can be eliminated from the root.

To summarise, we can see that from three points of view the three trainings are sufficient to lead to the highest goals of emancipation and buddhahood. In many sutras and commentaries you will find the path described in terms of three trainings, so it is useful to understand how all the stages of practice are subsumed in these three.

b' Ascertaining the order of the three trainings

Does the order of the three trainings have any significance? Usually they are presented with ethical conduct first, then concentration, and finally wisdom. Asaṅga's *Levels of Yogic Deeds* quotes a passage from the *Sutra Requested by Brahma (Brahmā-paripṛcchā-sūtra)* in which the three trainings are presented in that order:

> Ethical conduct is a very firm foundation.
> The peaceful mind of concentration has a joyous quality.
> With wisdom you gain the view of the āryas, which you should have,
> And forsake the view of sinners, which you should abandon.

In his comments on this verse Tsongkhapa says that ethical conduct is the root or foundation because the other two arise from it, and without ethical conduct you will not achieve concentration or wisdom. Concentration depends on ethical conduct, and takes joy in placing the mind in meditative equipoise. Without taming the mind and restraining its habit to chase after desirable sense objects, you will not be able to meditate or attain concentration. Wisdom depends on concentration, and in order to see reality just as it is, it leads one to possess the view of an ārya being and to eschew the view of sinners. In order to realise that kind of wisdom, you must have the control and peace of concentration.

This stanza demonstrates that the three trainings are presented in this order because they depend on one another and build on one another. Without taming the mind through ethical conduct you will not gain concentration; without concentration you will not achieve wisdom. You must develop these trainings in this order, and that is why they are presented this way.