Chapter 24 The Nature of the Three Trainings[45]

c' The Nature of the Three Trainings

The final section on the path of the being of intermediate scope describes **the nature of the three trainings, beginning with ethical conduct.** Once again the *Sutra Requested by Brahma*, as quoted in the *Levels of Yogic Deeds*, is a primary source for this topic:

> **Ethical conduct has six branches.**
> **Concentration is the four blissful abodes.**
> **The four aspects of the four noble truths**
> **Are pure eternal wisdom.**

1' Outline of the Three Trainings

a" Ethical Conduct has Six Branches

The sutra says that **ethical conduct possesses *six branches*** as follows:

1. The **first is *possessing ethical conduct*, which means refraining from the ten non-virtues and practicing the ten virtuous actions.**
2. The **second is being *bound by the vows of individual liberation*. These first two aspects of ethical conduct are instrumental in attaining emancipation, and they definitely lead to full liberation. By possessing ethical conduct you refrain from harmful actions. In order to support that practice of self-control you take vows that commit you to that effort; you bind yourself by vows to virtuous action.**
3. The **third is *ritual*, correctly performing certain rituals that are taught in the Vinaya. Having bound yourself to virtuous practice by means of vows, there are many ritual activities that are prescribed in the Vinaya.** We have mentioned some of these before, such as the **confession ceremony twice each month**. There are also daily activities that are supposed to be done in certain formal ways, such as **blessing food before you eat it, wearing clean, proper robes, or showing respect to your teacher** in specific ways.
4. **Fourth is the *range of activity*, keeping pure conduct by maintaining the kind of pure environment that supports virtuous practice. For example, you avoid going to certain places where you know you might be tempted into harmful actions, or you avoid associating with certain kinds of people. To really keep pure ethical conduct you have to attend to every detail of your life, so that ordinary activities like eating, walking, or looking around do not lead you in a wayward direction. For this to work you have to insure that your environment (the people and places that constitute the range of your activities) is supportive of your practice.**
   - **The third and the fourth branches represent ethical conduct that is unimpeachable and pure. When you are meticulous in performing the prescribed rites of the Vinaya, and careful about where you go and whom you associate with, your practice will be above reproach and your behaviour will always be admirable.**
5. **Fifth is *viewing even small infractions with apprehension*. Even very small negative actions can cause very bad results. Therefore, you should regard even the most subtle misdeeds as dangerous. The big, obvious actions are easy to recognise and so easier to avoid. But sometimes you may think, "This little thing will not make any difference; it will be okay if I do this." But once you make friends with "okay," many unfortunate things can happen. When you guard your behaviour in this meticulous way you are practicing ethical conduct that does not degenerate. (What you walk past.)**
6. **The sixth branch is *correctly studying and undertaking the basic trainings*. In order to actually carry out this meticulous practice you must have a very clear understanding of what is right and what is wrong, down to the smallest details. There are many situations in which you may commit non-virtues simply because you do not know what the**

[45] See Buddhism Glossary Advanced 'The Three Trainings'

correct course of action should be. Therefore, it is important to study the teachings on ethical conduct and the detailed explanations of the vows and precepts that are found in the Vinaya. When it comes to difficult situations, you should always check with your teacher, or with those you trust who are knowledgeable and live up to those standards themselves. Studying the meaning of the vows, consulting your teacher, and observing the precepts properly, creates a practice that is pure and unmistaken.

With these six qualities your practice of ethical conduct will become firm, stable, and deep, and it will form the ideal foundation for all further progress on the path. That explains the first line of this stanza, "Ethical conduct has six branches."

b" Concentration is the Four Blissful Abodes

The second line, "Concentration is the four blissful abodes," refers to the training in concentration. What are those four abodes of mind? They are the four *concentrations (dhyāna)*, which are four levels of meditative equipoise, each one corresponding to a particular level of the upper realms. When you attain one of these concentrations through meditation, you achieve a special kind of mental bliss; even though your body remains in the human realm, your mind abides blissfully on a higher plane of existence. At the ordinary, grosser levels of consciousness, the mind is agitated, uneasy, and difficult to control. But when, as the result of entering meditative equipoise, this agitation is relieved, a feeling of bliss arises, and you settle into a more peaceful state, your mind becomes more pliable, and you are able to let it remain undisturbed wherever you want it to be.

When you attain the meditative equipoise of the first concentration, you experience both a physical feeling of pleasure and a blissful mental peace. In order to reach such a level you have to temporarily suppress all of the afflictions of the desire realm, as we were just discussing. This naturally produces a more subtle level of mental peace and bliss. As you achieve more subtle levels of absorption, you attain the higher levels of concentration, and at each level you experience a more subtle form of mental bliss. The attainment of these four concentrations is common to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. If you do not attain at least one of these four, you cannot proceed to any of the higher realisations on the Buddhist path.

c" Four Aspects of the Four Noble Truths Gives Sixteen Aspects

The next line of the stanza reads, **"The four aspects of the four noble truths." Each of the four noble truths has four aspects, as follows:**

1. **The truth of suffering has the aspects of being impermanent, suffering, empty, and selfless.**
2. **The truth of the cause of suffering has the aspects of being cause, origin, arising, and condition.**
3. **The truth of the cessation of suffering has the aspects of being cessation, pacification, excellence, and freedom.**
4. **Truth of the path has the aspects of being path, correctness, achievement, and deliverance.**

The third training, that of *wisdom*, is the direct realisation of the four noble truths, and each truth is realised with its four aspects. The direct realisation of these sixteen aspects is the wisdom that cuts the root of cyclic existence. That is the nature of the training of wisdom.

Tsongkhapa says that if he were only teaching the path of the being of intermediate scope, he would provide a detailed presentation of all three trainings at this point, but instead he will limit himself to an explanation of the training of ethical conduct. The other two trainings will be discussed extensively in the remainder of the *Lamrim Chenmo*, which lays out the path of the being of great scope. This is a Mahayana text, organised for Mahayana practitioners, and for them the trainings of concentration and wisdom are better explained in the Mahayana context of striving for perfect buddhahood for the benefit of other sentient beings. Therefore, these two topics are presented in two large sections on single-pointed concentration and highest insight, which will appear in volumes 4 and 5, respectively.

1" The Benefits of Ethical Conduct

The previous discussion has made it quite clear that whether you are ready to take ordination vows or not, **if you want to make any progress on the spiritual path it is vitally important to maintain pure conduct. The kind of enthusiasm and constant effort this requires can only come from a deep appreciation of the benefits of such conduct. If you don't understand the benefits of behaving virtuously and the consequences of harmful behaviour, you will never develop the inspiration to make ethical conduct the centre of your practice.** This is true of any difficult activity: if you don't see much benefit, you won't want to do it. **Therefore, to begin this practice you must contemplate its benefits repeatedly and from many different points of view until a genuine enthusiasm for practicing virtue arises from deep in your heart.**

What are the benefits of practicing ethical conduct? They are described this way in the *Great Final Nirvana Sutra*:

> Ethical conduct is the stairway to all virtues. It is the foundation, just as the earth is the foundation of all plants and so forth. It precedes all virtues just as the leader of the merchants goes first, before all the other merchants. It is the victory banner of all virtues, like the upraised victory banner of Indra. It decisively cuts the route to bad migrations and all non-virtue. It is like the medicine tree, which cures the illness of non-virtue. It is the stock of provisions for the dangerous road of cyclic existence. It is the armaments that defeat the enemies of the afflictions. It is the magical formula that counteracts the poisonous snakes of the afflictions. It is the bridge that crosses over the water of non-virtue.

There are many steps on the stairway to emancipation, and ethical conduct is the very first one. It is like the threshold that marks the entrance to a house; **you cannot enter the house of liberation without crossing the threshold of ethical conduct. A banner of victory symbolises the conquest of a dangerous enemy; when you are able to conquer bodily negative actions, verbal negative actions, and mental negative actions (the root of all troubles) that is the real spiritual banner of victory.**

The journey through cyclic existence is very long and filled with terrifying obstacles. It is a journey into the unknown, because after death you will go to a future life that is a complete mystery to you now. What kind of provisions will be useful for such a dangerous and unpredictable journey? **The best provisions, the necessary provisions, are just this practice of ethical conduct. Because, as another line in this quotation says, by this practice you will cut off the route that leads to suffering rebirths, and you open up the bridge that leads across the water of samsara to the far shore of liberation.**

Nāgārjuna says in his *Friendly Letter*:

> As the earth is the foundation for the animate and inanimate worlds,
> **Ethical conduct is said to be the foundation of all good qualities.**

And the *Tantra Requested by Subāhu* says:

> Just as all crops grow perfectly
> In dependence on the earth,
> **All of the highest, positive results depend on ethical conduct**
> **Moistened by the water of compassion.**

Human beings strive for many worldly positive results, such as long life, wealth, honour, fame, and to be reborn in a happy state in the future. The cause for all of these desirable ends is the meritorious action of pure ethical conduct. Of course the ultimate, highest goals of the Buddhist path are liberation from cyclic existence and the perfect enlightenment of buddhahood, and these two also **depend on ethical conduct as their foundation**. Even the ultimate purpose of the bodhisattva, to place all other beings in the bliss of buddhahood, grows from the ground of ethical conduct when one's actions are nourished with the water of compassion. When you plant your seeds of virtue in earth that has been prepared with vows, and you add the moisture of great compassion, you will reap the harvest of perfect enlightenment.

These are the benefits of taking vows and practicing ethical conduct as taught in the sutras. You should contemplate these examples to develop a firm understanding of these benefits.

It is helpful to think about the disadvantages of not maintaining pure conduct. For example, if you take a vow but then break it, the consequences can be very serious. Even without taking a vow, if you habitually perform non-virtuous activities, you will suffer many unhappy results. It is not enough to merely take religious vows; you must carry through your commitment and keep your vows purely. Because of this, for some the taking of vows is very beneficial, but for others it creates many problems. It says in the *Sutra Beloved of Monks (Bhikṣu-prareju-sūtra)*:

> For some ethical conduct leads to happiness;
> For some ethical conduct leads to suffering.
> Those who maintain ethical conduct find happiness;
> Those who break ethical conduct find suffering.

If you take religious vows and keep them, the only result will be happiness. If you take vows, but instead of keeping them you constantly break them, they will become the cause of misery. It is much better not to take vows than to take them but not keep them, because taking a vow and then transgressing it creates a much heavier negative action than committing that same action without a vow. Therefore, it is quite important to investigate the faults of transgressing vows so that you will gain a full appreciation of their power and respect them.

2" Causes and Remedies

The way to practice this is to understand what causes people to commit non-virtuous actions, and to know how to apply the antidotes to those causes. In general, there are four causes that bring about infractions of ethical conduct: not knowing the precepts, carelessness, having no respect for the precepts, having various afflictions.

- **The antidote to not knowing the precepts (which explain what is right and what is wrong) is to listen to an explanation of ethical conduct from a qualified teacher. Then you must study and contemplate what you have learned until you clearly understand which actions are beneficial and which are harmful.**
- **Carelessness** is a state of mind which simply has no regard for virtuous behaviour and does not care what other people think. **The remedy for carelessness is to cultivate the following variety of mental factors, which will replace this heedlessness with a focused attention and a determination to act well.**
  - **You should cultivate *mindfulness*, which is the quality of mind that does not forget which objects are suitable to engage in and which should be avoided.**
  - **You should cultivate *introspective awareness*, which examines what is passing through the three doors of body, speech, and mind in each moment, and understands what is right to engage in and what is wrong.**
  - **You should cultivate a sense of *shame*, which shuns faulty behaviour with respect to oneself or the Dharma.**
  - **You should cultivate *embarrassment*, which shuns behaviour that is considered blameworthy by others.[46]**
  - **You should cultivate *trepidation*, which fears the result that will be experienced when non-virtuous actions ripen.**
  - **And you should constantly be concerned with preventing your virtue from degenerating and your non-virtue from increasing.**
- **The antidote to having no respect for the precepts is to cultivate respect for the Buddha, who taught the importance of this system of ethics. Based on your respect for the teacher, you should cultivate respect for his system of ethics and the rules he prescribed. Furthermore, you should cultivate respect for those practitioners who observe those rules with great care.**
- **The antidote to having various afflictions is to examine your own mental continuum to**

[46] There is a subtle distinction made between the mental factors of shame and embarrassment, which are generally defined in terms of their opposites. Not having respect for virtue or people who have virtuous qualities is shamelessness. Immodesty, the opposite of embarrassment, is an attitude that does not regard disgraceful conduct with fear. Some commentators define them slightly differently. They say that not refraining from non-virtue in regard to oneself is shamelessness, while not refraining from non-virtue in regard to others is immodesty.

determine which afflictions predominate and have the most influence over your mind. Once you have identified them, you must make a concerted effort to apply the appropriate antidotes, cultivating the qualities that counteract those afflictions, and working hard to eliminate them from the root. If you don't make this kind of effort (if you take a lackadaisical attitude towards the precepts and think, "I can commit small infractions and it won't do much harm") you are headed for nothing but trouble.

The *Exegesis of the Discipline* says:

> Those who take lightly and transgress in small ways
> What the compassionate Buddha taught
> Will earn from that suffering that is out of their control,
> Just as a mango orchard declines when its protective hedge is breached.
> Here in the world, some may violate the king's edicts a few times
> And never get punished,
> But those who improperly transgress the precepts of the Sage
> Will become animals, like the *nāga* Elapatra.

Some farmers plant a thick, thorny hedge, like a fence, around their orchards to protect their trees. If that hedge is damaged or deteriorates, animals or thieves can get through and the orchard may suffer. Although nothing has directly damaged the fruit, the orchard has become vulnerable and eventually the fruit will be lost. This metaphor is applied to the Buddha's precepts, and especially to the minor rules, which were established to build a fence around the central practice of ethical conduct.

We need to understand the distinction between **two different kinds of non-virtuous actions: *misdeeds by nature* and *misdeeds of disobedience*. Misdeeds by nature are actions that are intrinsically harmful and will always yield unpleasant results. Whether you have taken a vow or not, when you perform a misdeed by nature (such as killing someone) you are accumulating negative karmic potential. In contrast, misdeeds of disobedience are actions that are not intrinsically bad, but are negative karma because they violate rules prescribed by the Buddha. If you have never taken any vows, which commit you to uphold a set of rules prescribed by the Buddha, a misdeed of disobedience is not a negative action for you.**

Killing or stealing are examples of misdeeds by nature. Examples of misdeeds of disobedience are drinking intoxicants or, for a monk, eating at improper times. Drinking, for example, is not intrinsically evil, and alcohol can be taken with a good motivation, for example as medicine. But drinking alcohol is forbidden for the sake of safeguarding the other precepts, because when you are intoxicated you are more likely to commit harmful actions. In this way, the minor precepts laid down by the Buddha are intended to act as a fence that guard against the weightier actions, which are intrinsically non-virtuous.

The point of this stanza is that once that protective fence has been breached (once you begin to break the minor rules, which may seem harmless at first) you have opened the way to much heavier transgressions and these will eventually destroy your Dharma practice and your future. In worldly matters you can often get away with breaking minor laws. But it does not work that way when it comes to the cause and effect of karma. When you break the precepts that were prescribed by the Buddha, those negative actions will naturally ripen into very unfortunate results, such as being born as an animal like the nāga Elapatra.

The story of the nāga Elapatra is told in the Vinaya. One day the Buddha was teaching to a large crowd when a stranger, dressed in the fine clothes of a prince, arrived to listen to the teachings. This being was actually the nāga Elapatra, who had been transformed by the magical power of the Buddha so that he could attend these teachings. The Buddha told him to return the following day in his actual form.

The next day Elapatra arrived with a long serpent's body, many legs, and a tree growing out of his head. The crowd took one look at this strange creature and began to flee in horror. The Buddha reassured everyone and told them that this was the same being who had appeared the

previous day in the form of a prince. He told them to sit down while he explained Elapatra's situation. Many millions of years before, at the time of Buddha Kāśyapa, this being was a young man who was ordained as a monk. He became a yogi and lived in a cave for a long time. Outside his cave grew a bush that was covered in sharp thorns, and as he passed by his robes would often get caught on these thorns and torn. This irritated him so much that one day he went out and chopped down the bush.

The Vinaya rules forbid monks and nuns from cutting trees, crops, grass, or any growing vegetation. This is not because the plants themselves are considered living beings, but because they contain and support so many different life forms. There are special circumstances in which cutting plants is permitted, but in general it is a transgression of the vows to do this.

Because it was such a minor infraction, this young monk thought it would not be a problem to cut down this bush. However, the actual karmic result was that he was born as this nāga, Elapatra, and a tree grew out of the side of his head. Whenever the wind blew it caused him great pain. This story demonstrates that once you have taken vows, even a small infraction of the precepts will result in serious karmic consequences. Although cutting a bush is not in itself negative karma, since it violates the vows of a monk it is a misdeed of disobedience; the negative karma comes from breaking the rules one has promised to uphold.

You should therefore always make a concerted effort to avoid even the smallest violations of vows you have taken. If something happens so that you cannot avoid breaking some rule, do not carelessly ignore your misdeed and do nothing about it. Whether your action was a misdeed by nature or a misdeed of disobedience, you should try to purify and repair the breach as best you can by means of confession, as the Buddha explained in the Vinaya.

If your action was a misdeed by nature, you can purify it by means of the *four opponent powers* of confession as we discussed in chapter 15 (Cultivating Ethical Behaviour) of this volume. Of course, purifying a harmful action does not necessarily mean that you are completely freed of all consequences and that the root of the action has been cut. There are different levels of purification. But when you apply an effective antidote, at least you know that the weightiness of the result will be reduced. You are placing some limit on the negative consequences of that action.

Even if you can't fully apply the antidote of confession, it is beneficial simply to maintain a mental awareness that you have done wrong, and a lingering sense of regret about what you have done. Even when you could not help doing a negative action, you should reflect on the negative consequences of that action, and even generate fear of what will come in the future because of it; you are then at least applying a countervailing force against the negative karmic potential. If you do this, the result of the action will be mitigated because you are not participating in it with mental enthusiasm. In general, you should know that there are many different kinds of antidotes for negative actions, and by studying and listening to teachings you should learn how to apply the powers of purification.

Nuns and monks perform a purification ritual in which they recite the *Prātimokṣa Sutra*[47] every two weeks. In this ritual the abbot or preceptor puts questions to the assembly and they directly confess their transgressions to each other. There are many detailed rules indicating when and how you should confess various categories of infractions. Eg, some infractions can be confessed to one other fully ordained monk; others require at least four to hear the confession. What Tsongkhapa is saying here is that anyone who has taken vows should confess his or her downfalls in accordance with the instructions found in the Buddha's teachings.

3" Keeping Vows Purely

The *Sutra Requested by Brahma*, quoted by Asaṅga in the *Levels of Yogic Deeds*, says:

> Rely upon the training in ethical conduct,
> Apply it assiduously from the heart,

[47] These are for monks and nuns. 227 rules for monks and 311 for nuns.

Do not give it up in the future,
And do not break it, even for the sake of your life.
Engage in the study and practice of the Vinaya,
And abide in it always with perseverance.

This stanza stresses that you should engage in the training of ethical conduct from your heart, and once you make commitments and take vows, you should not give them up in the future. Don't fall into a discouraged state of mind and think, "I cannot do this any more; this vow is too difficult for me to sustain." Some people take a vow and then want to give it back as soon as it becomes inconvenient or difficult to keep. They discover that they do not like a vow they have taken, so they just want to go out and break it. You should not do that. Do not abandon the vows you have taken.

You should not break your vows even at the cost of your life. Here we are talking about the *vows of individual liberation,* the *prātimokṣa vows*. In the context of the Hinayana system, you take these vows for the purpose of attaining your own emancipation from cyclic existence. Based on that premise, you should never commit even a single non-virtuous action, no matter what. There are exceptions made with regard to some of the minor precepts, but in general, the principle in the Vinaya is that you should not break a vow even if it costs you your life. **When it comes to major negative actions such as killing another being, there are no exceptions. If you have the choice of killing another person or losing your own life, the Vinaya says that you should lose your life.**

However, **once you have taken the *bodhisattva vows* in the Mahayana system and you have developed the special Mahayana attitude, then the rules are a little bit different. At this level you are not working only for your own individual liberation but for the sake of all sentient beings. In certain circumstances, actions that are usually forbidden are permitted for the person on the bodhisattva path. With bodhicitta as their motivation and using discerning wisdom to determine the consequences of their deeds, Mahayana practitioners may use special means when they are sure those will be of benefit. They may even be allowed to kill if it will help many other beings.** On the Hinayana path this is always forbidden but, **in the context of the Mahayana, lying or killing can be permissible for a special purpose.** As Nāgārjuna says in his *Precious Garland*:

Sometimes what is thought harmful
Is regarded as helpful by the wise.
General rules and their exceptions
Are commended in all treatises.
Who with intelligence would deride
The explanation in the Great Vehicle
Of deeds motivated by compassion
And of stainless wisdom!

The stanza quoted by Asaṅga concludes by saying that you need to both practice and study the Vinaya, because in order to maintain the precepts faithfully you must know what they are, and understand them.

In the *Sutra on Having Pure Ethical Discipline (Śīla-saṃyukta-sūtra)* the Buddha explains the reason why maintaining pure ethical conduct and protecting your vows are more important than giving up your life:

> O monks and nuns, dying and separating from your life is fine. But dying with broken and degenerated ethical conduct is not the same. Why is that? Because dying and separating from this life is only the exhaustion of this particular span of life. But when you die with broken and degenerated ethical conduct, you will experience a great downfall; you will give up happiness and be separated from the lineage of high rebirth for ten million lifetimes.

The Buddha says that dying is nothing more than the exhaustion of this temporary life. But if you die with broken vows and degenerated conduct, you may be separated from high rebirth for a very long time to come. You will experience the helpless states of animals,

hungry ghosts, or even the horrors of the hells. Once you start moving in the downward direction there is always a tendency to continue spiralling down and down, so it can be many millions of lifetimes before you see a happy rebirth again.

If you maintain pure ethical conduct, when you die you will only be exchanging an old body for a young and fresh one. You may even obtain a better rebirth than the one you have right now. In this sense, dying with pure ethical conduct is not a terrible thing. But dying with broken vows and degenerated conduct is a very dangerous situation.

You should also think, "If keeping my vows was not as important as prolonging my life, then shaving off my hair and putting on these religious robes had no purpose." The purpose of making these external changes in your appearance is only to change your inner mental attitude, which will change the action of your body, speech, and mind. It represents the movement of mind from impure worldly concerns to the pure thought that is concerned only for liberation. The *King of Concentrations Sutra* says:

> For those who have gone forth through ordination into these teachings of the Buddha,
> But perform non-virtuous actions,
> Who think that wealth and crops are the essence of life,
> Who hanker after horses, cows, and vehicles,
> Who have not earnestly applied themselves to any of the trainings,
> Why did they even bother to shave their heads?

If you want to escape from this cyclic existence, which was created by karma and afflictions, the vehicle that can take you to the city of emancipation is pure ethical conduct. Without that vehicle you cannot reach your destination, and instead of arriving at the city of emancipation you will return again to samsara where you will be hammered by various forms of misery. The Buddha gave the following example in the *King of Concentrations Sutra*:

> When a person is attacked by a band of thieves,
> Wishing to stay alive he will try his best to flee.
> If his feet are not capable of carrying him away quickly,
> The thieves will seize and overcome him.
>
> Like that, ignorant people whose ethical conduct has declined,
> Although they want to escape from conditioned existence,
> Cannot flee because their vehicle of ethical conduct is impaired,
> So they will be overcome by sickness, aging, and death.

Therefore, this sutra says:

> The trainings I prescribed
> For laypeople wearing ordinary clothes—
> At that degenerate time, even fully ordained monks
> Will not have those trainings.

In the passage just quoted, the Buddha is looking into the future and saying that a time will come when even ordained monastics will not be able to keep the five basic vows that he prescribed for lay disciples in his own time. During times when the practice of the Dharma has degenerated (such as the age we are living in now) it becomes very difficult to maintain precepts with perfect purity, and it is very rare to find someone who is doing it. A fully ordained monk has 253 rules to observe, and a fully ordained nun has 364, so of course it is rare to find someone who can keep them all with perfect purity. **The Buddha is saying here that it will become rare to find someone who can keep even five!**

When such a time comes (and we are living in such a time today) it becomes especially meritorious to train in ethical conduct and maintain pure precepts. Because it is so much more difficult, the merits of maintaining pure precepts will actually be greater than they were at the extremely auspicious time of the Buddha. Therefore, there is great benefit in striving to maintain pure ethics. As this sutra says, even keeping one precept purely for one day and night creates great merits:

> For ten million eons, as many as sands in the Ganges,
> With a pure mind I paid homage to infinite buddhas,

> Offering food, drink, umbrellas,
> Banners, lamps, and garlands.
>
> Yet the merits are infinitely greater than that,
> For anyone who practices just one ethical training day and night,
> At a time when the holy Dharma is perishing,
> And the teachings of the Sugata are disappearing.

If you make vast offerings, with deep faith, to the exalted field of the buddhas, the merits are virtually measureless. This is what the Buddha himself did. Nevertheless, the Buddha says in this sutra that at a time like our current age, when his teaching is degenerating (when inner spiritual practice is dying and materialistic concerns dominate people's minds) **if you keep one precept of ethical conduct purely, all the time, day and night, the merits will actually be greater than those infinite offerings to the buddhas.**

We may be living in a degenerate time, but we still have the opportunity to accumulate great merits by simply trying hard to maintain pure conduct. Even if you can't keep all the precepts strictly every day, all the time, you can at least apply yourself on special days. For example, on days when you are free from work and you have some spare time, you can take the one-day ordination vows with the motivation: "In order to benefit all sentient beings I will keep these vows purely for the next twenty-four hours."[48]

This is the kind of practice you can do, even in this so-called "degenerate time," and the benefits will be great. Controlling the actions of your body, speech, and mind is the heart of the Dharma, the foundation of all progress on the path to enlightenment. When you train in the precepts of ethical conduct, you free yourself from your ordinary, habitual behaviour by setting boundaries beyond which you will not let your mind and body go. When you keep your vows purely for one whole day, you gain great confidence in your own capacity to change, and with this confidence you gain more and more control over your own behaviour.

You may get the idea, "I can break this rule now and it won't make any difference because I can confess and purify it later." But this won't work, because you lack the resolve, "I will never do this again in the future." The essence of confession is the clear understanding, through wisdom and reason, of the consequences of the negative action you have done; growing from that comes a determination to avoid such actions in the future. If you genuinely, sincerely, and deeply feel both *regret* and *resolve*, your confession will be strong and the purification will be effective.

If these two are not in your heart, then no matter how much you confess, you will not succeed in purifying the karma. If you harbour the attitude, "I can do this action now and then later I can confess," it is the same as eating poison with the thought, "I will eat poison today and then later I will take the antidote." This approach is a little like an elephant taking a bath. When an elephant gets hot it goes to the water hole and sprays itself with water. Then it feels too wet so it leaves the water and covers itself with dust. Now it is all dirty again, so it goes back to the water hole and takes another bath. This approach doesn't get you anywhere. The danger of this mistaken way of thinking is addressed in the *Lion's Roar of Maitreya Sutra (Maitreya-mahā-siṃha-nāda-sūtra):*

> Maitreya, in future times, during the last five hundred years of the teachings, some bodhisattvas who remain householders and some who have ordained will say this: "Non-virtuous karma can be completely wiped out by confessing the fault." They will disclose the downfall with the attitude, "After I have performed the non-virtuous act, I will confess it." They do not take on the resolve to refrain from the action in the future. I tell you that these people possess the karma of death. And what do I mean by death? For example,

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[48] The one-day ordination vows are a set of vows *(upavāsa; bsnyen gnas)* taken by laypeople; one essentially takes ordination and commits to observing eight precepts for one full day. The first five of these precepts are the same as the five vows of a lay person *(upāsaka; dge bsnyen):* not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to take intoxicants, and to refrain from sexual misconduct (which is here extended to include all sexual activity). **The three additional vows are: (1) not to eat after the midday meal; (2) not to sing, dance, or play music, and not to wear rosaries as ornaments, jewellery, or perfumes; and (3) not to use a high or grand seat or bed. The vows are taken before dawn and they last for twenty-four hours.**

> it is like someone who eats poison. Having created their own time of death, they fall into the wrong kind of rebirths.

And the same sutra goes on:

> Maitreya, what I call "poison" in the noble Dharma of the Vinaya is this: transgressing the basic trainings as I have explained them. Therefore, do not eat this poison.

In these two passages transgressing the ethical precepts that the Buddha has prescribed is compared to eating poison. **The object of maintaining pure ethics is to progress to the state of liberation, which is a *deathless* state. When you violate these ethical standards you put yourself under the power of karma and afflictions; you make yourself subject to the destroyer: death. After you eat the poison of non-virtuous behaviour, you guarantee that you will experience the pain of death.**

But **the poison of transgressing the Buddha's ethics is not like ordinary poison, because ordinary poison can only end this single life, and that is something that will eventually happen anyway. But when you take the poison of breaking the precepts, you send yourself in a downward direction that can cause misery and pain for many lifetimes to come. The destroyer of the heart of the spiritual life is non-virtuous action, breaking the precepts, negative karma. This is what poisons the spiritual life. Therefore, the Buddha says, you should not eat this very dangerous poison.**

4" Ethical Conduct in Tantric Practice

Protecting vows and ethical conduct in this way is certainly the obligation of those who have taken the vows of individual liberation. But even those who have entered the highest Mahayana practice of tantra are obliged to guard the vows of individual liberation in the same way. In fact, except for a few exceptions mentioned here in the *Tantra Requested by Subāhu*, tantric practitioners are supposed to be *even more careful* and strict in their observance of the ethical precepts:

> All of the Vinaya rules which I, the Conqueror, taught,
> All the precepts of ethical conduct of the vows of individual liberation,
> Should be observed by lay practitioners of tantra,
> With the exception of the external marks and rituals.

Even householders who have taken the tantric vows and practice the path of tantra are expected by the Buddha to observe the vows of individual liberation set forth in the Vinaya. Because they are not monks and nuns, they can set aside those rules that relate to the "external marks" of renunciates, such as shaving the head, wearing religious robes, and so forth. They are also not required to perform certain monastic rituals, such as accepting offered food in a special manner, and blessing that food in a special way.

Since all the rest of the Vinaya rules are to be followed by lay tantric practitioners, it goes without saying that those rules should be observed by ordained tantric practitioners as well. In order to enter tantric practice, you have to take the tantric vows, and in order to do that you first have to take the bodhisattva vows. Monks and nuns who do this have already taken the vows of individual liberation, and of course they have to keep all of those vows without any exceptions.

In fact, the root of accomplishing any of the spiritual attainments of the tantric vehicle is maintaining pure ethical conduct. As it says in the *Tantra Requested by Subāhu*:

> The root of the tantric vehicle is, **first of all, ethical conduct,**
> **Followed by persevering effort, patience,**
> **Faith in the Conqueror, the mind of enlightenment,**
> **Tantra itself, and the absence of laziness.**
> Just as a great ruler who holds the seven precious possessions
> Can subdue all beings without difficulty,
> So a tantric practitioner who possesses these seven things
> Tames non-virtuous action.

The Cakravartin kings, the world-conquering emperors of ancient India, possessed seven treasures that enabled them to rule virtuously, harmoniously, and without challenge. These

seven are: the precious wheel, the precious jewel, the precious queen, the precious minister, the precious elephant, the precious horse, the precious army general, and the great treasure vase. When we offer a mandala representing the entire universe to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, we include these seven treasures in the mandala because they are symbols of benevolent worldly power. When a king possesses them, he is able to rule without violence or coercion; instead he uses the wisdom of virtuous action. Under his righteous leadership, the subjects will follow the king onto the virtuous path.

In the same way, tantric practitioners have *seven treasures* enabling them to achieve the spiritual attainments that are the goal of tantric practice. **The root of that practice is ethical conduct, and from that root grow the other qualities of *diligence, patience, faith, and freedom from laziness*. The motivation is *bodhicitta*, the mind of enlightenment, which undertakes this practice in order to benefit all sentient beings.** With those qualities as the basis, you then require the tantra itself: the specific practices of secret mantra through which you enter into the practice of a specific meditational deity Tantra has many marvellous methods for transforming and controlling both the inner mental life and the outer conditions of the practitioner. **When you apply these tantric methods with the proper motivation, supported by the precious qualities of diligence, patience, and faith, you will be able to control non-virtuous behaviour,** just as the Cakravartin king subdues his adversaries without difficulty.

The *Root Tantra of Mañjuśrī (Mañjuśrī-mūla-tantra)* says:

> Those who recite mantras but weaken their ethical conduct
> Will not achieve the highest spiritual attainments.
> They will not even achieve mediocre attainments,
> They won't even reach the lowest attainment.
>
> The King of Sages did not teach that those
> With corrupted discipline can achieve the tantric attainments.
> They are not even going in the same direction
> As those who are heading for the city of nirvana.
>
> How can disobedient immature people like this
> Achieve the attainments of tantra?
> How can these beings with corrupted ethical conduct
> Go to happy rebirths?
>
> Since none of them will reach the higher realms,
> Nor attain high states of bliss,
> It goes without saying that they will not achieve
> The attainments of the tantra taught by the Conqueror.

The *Root Tantra of Mañjuśrī* is describing the various benefits of tantric practice. Through the recitation of mantras many high spiritual attainments (*siddhis*) are possible; these include both mundane attainments and supermundane attainments. But no matter how many millions of mantras you recite, if you let your ethical conduct deteriorate and you do not keep the vows of individual liberation, the bodhisattva vows, and the tantric vows purely, you will not achieve even the lowest level of spiritual attainment. In other words, ethical conduct is the foundation of all tantric attainments. People who let their conduct degenerate in this way are like disobedient children. How could such immature people ever complete the tantric path? Since they will not even attain a happy rebirth in the future, how could they possibly attain the culmination of the tantric path?

We have already discussed how pure ethical conduct is the foundation of all positive results, from a higher rebirth in the next lifetime to emancipation from all of cyclic existence. The general point of these passages is to establish that keeping pure ethics and guarding vows is absolutely essential to any progress on the tantric path as well. In this regard, there is no difference between the sutra path and the tantric path: **all good results, from worldly good fortune to the highest realisation of buddhahood, begin with and depend on pure ethical conduct.**

5" Advice from the Kadampa Geshes

The great Tibetan Kadampa geshes, who were the direct disciples of Atiśa, emphasised the practice of ethical conduct. Many of them were great yogis who lived in caves and meditation huts in a place near Lhasa called Phenpo. They were famous not only as great practitioners, but they also had a special style of teaching the Dharma through pithy sayings. Many of these sayings were collected and form a treasury of instructions on the topics of the lamrim.

We have here a series of their statements on ethical conduct, and the first quotation is from Geshe Kamlungba, who lived mostly in caves. He was known as someone who would cry and cry and cry when he practiced bodhicitta meditation. Meditating on love and compassion, he would reflect on the sufferings of beings in samsara, and this would cause him to break down in tears of sympathy. He said this about ethical conduct:

> When famine arises, everything centres on barley. In the same way, all positive results depend on ethical conduct. Therefore, apply yourself to this. If you do not pay attention to the cause and effect of karma, pure ethics will not come. Therefore, it is advised to think about that.

In Tibet barley was the staple food. Other than barley there was not much else to eat. So in times of famine, getting some barley became the focus of everyone's attention. In a similar way, whatever good results you may desire (whether worldly happiness, higher rebirth, or emancipation) it all comes down to ethical conduct. And pure ethical conduct in turn depends on understanding and thinking about karma and its results, the way that good or bad actions bring happy or unpleasant results. If you are not aware of this natural causality, it is difficult to apply yourself earnestly to the practice of pure ethics. When you are aware, and you continue to think about the way good karma brings happy results, it becomes much easier to tolerate adverse circumstances or to resist dangerous temptations, because you know that in the future you will reap good results.

Another Kadampa, Geshe Sharawa said:

> In general, whether good or bad arises in your experience, you should rely on the Dharma. And within the Dharma, if you depend on the explanations in the Vinaya you will not need to keep starting over, your behaviour will become naturally and consistently pure, you will be content, and you will be confident that the final outcome will be excellent.

Regardless of what happens in your life, if you rely on the rules of the Vinaya and its detailed guidance on how to behave, you will be rewarded with the following five benefits:

(1) Your practice will be constant; you will not need to try many different things and keep starting over again.
(2) Your behaviour will naturally become pure and
(3) consistently virtuous, rather than sometimes good and sometimes bad. A pure mind is a satisfied mind, so
(4) your mental attitude will become one of joyous contentment. It often happens that people who have all the physical comforts they require still suffer, because of feelings of guilt, anger, or frustration, from deep mental anguish. But when your actions are pure, your mind is at peace because
(5) you are confident of the result. This confidence in the eventual outcome of your actions is the fifth and final benefit, and it means you are able to make sacrifices and tolerate difficult conditions because you are sure of reaching your goal.

Geshe Dromtonpa said:

> Some groups, who rely on the Vinaya, disdain tantric practice. Others, who rely on tantra, disdain the Vinaya. The understanding that the Vinaya is the companion of the tantra, and the tantra is the companion of the Vinaya, is only found in the teaching lineage of my guru.

Here Dromtonpa is referring to the period in Tibetan history, not so many years before his own time, when many corrupt forms of tantric practice had become widespread. The first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet ended around 838 C.E., when the anti-Buddhist king Langdarma attained the throne by assassinating his brother, the devout Dharma king Ralpachen. Although

Langdarma was himself assassinated after only five years in power, the century following his reign was a dark period in Tibetan history, during which the political cohesion of the state disintegrated and most of the pure lineages of Buddhist practice were wiped out or forced underground.

Corrupt forms of Buddhist tantra, emphasising magical elements and sexual practices, were propagated by lay people who had no real understanding of Buddhist tantric principles. At the same time, so-called tantric "masters" from India taught practices based on Hindu tantric lineages, which were quite different from the Buddhist system. One method was called "union and release," which referred to sexual union and release from cyclic existence by means of animal or even human sacrifice. In the absence of living Buddhist lineages, this kind of corrupt and harmful conduct, masquerading as Buddhist tantra, came to dominate the religious landscape of Tibet. This scene, in which pure Buddhist practice had been supplanted by wrong view and wrong practice, was the context in which Atiśa was invited to visit Tibet.

It was Atiśa who reestablished the Vinaya and the monastic lineage in Tibet. It was Atiśa who reestablished the basic Buddhist view that Vinaya and tantra are entirely complementary and mutually supportive, that they are in no way contradictory. It was this teaching of Atiśa that the Kadampa lineage carried on and established as the authentic Buddhist view throughout Tibetan Buddhism. And Atiśa himself described the preeminent place of the Vinaya this way:

> When I was in India, when important matters or unexpected events arose, we would assemble the scholars of the scriptures to determine whether there was any objection to be found in the Tripiṭaka to a proposed solution, or whether it contradicted anything in the Tripiṭaka. Based on that determination we would proceed with our decision.
>
> In addition to this, we at Vikramaśīla would also determine whether there was any objection to the proposed actions in the conduct permitted for a bodhisattva or whether it was contradictory to the bodhisattva's conduct. In any case, the final decision was made by the masters of the Vinaya.

Atiśa is talking about the way important decisions were made at the great monasteries of North India such as Nālandā, Odantapuri, and Vikramaśīla. He says that the greatest scholars would assemble and investigate whether a particular plan of action was in any way contradictory to the *three baskets (tripiṭaka)* of the Buddhist canon: the Sutra-piṭaka, Vinaya-piṭaka, and Abhidharma-piṭaka. At his own monastery of Vikramaśīla, they would also inquire to see if the plan contradicted the bodhisattva vows. In the end, it was the scholars of the Vinaya that would make the final decision, based on whether the actions were contradictory to anything in the Vinaya.

The great teacher Neusurpa had this to say about how to keep ethical conduct purely:

> **For now, this battle against the inner afflictions is the only thing that is important. If you do not fight against the afflictions, pure ethical conduct will not come. In that case, you will not succeed in the trainings of concentration and wisdom, which, respectively, suppress the afflictions and eliminate them from the root. Then, as the Buddha has said, you will have to wander continually in cyclic existence.**
>
> Therefore, as I have said before, **you must identify the obscuring afflictions, contemplate their faults and the benefits of eliminating them, and plant the mental spies of mindfulness and introspective alertness. Then, you must regularly puncture whichever affliction sticks its head out.**
>
> Furthermore, **as soon as any affliction arises in your mind, you should see it as your enemy and attack it.** Otherwise, if you tolerate the affliction when it first arises, you will nurture it with unwholesome thinking until you have no means to fight against it and you fall under its power.

Neusurpa is saying that, in your present situation, there is no point in blaming everybody else for your problems; the only enemies you should be fighting against are your own afflictions. The fight is inside, against the inner enemies. They are the source of all impure action.

6" Combatting the Afflictions

To succeed in this struggle you first have to identify the enemy. This means you must know the six rudimentary afflictions, which are listed by Vasubandhu in the *Treasury of Knowledge* as **attachment, hostility, ignorance, pride, doubt, and wrong views.** These, says Vasubandhu, are the roots of cyclic existence. They are the roots from which non-virtuous karma grows. From these, many other subsidiary afflictions branch off and arise in different forms. **You need to recognise them not merely as some terms in a book, but you need to be able to spot them immediately when they arise in your mind. When the enemy comes knocking at your door, you need to know it is the enemy so you can close the door tight.**

Once you know what the afflictions look like, you need to think about the great harm they can do to you and also realise what great benefits you will get when they are permanently removed. Then you **protect yourself from these enemies by establishing the spies of mindfulness and introspective alertness at the door of the mind. Mindfulness is like a tether that restrains the mind, keeping it from wandering away from its object of attention. Introspective alertness is the spy that is constantly checking what is coming in and going out, what the mind and body are doing. Then, whenever an affliction dares to stick its head out, it is spotted by these mental spies; you immediately strike it with the spear of wisdom and destroy it with the inner antidotes.** This is the way great practitioners guard their minds.

You have to fight this battle against the inner enemies constantly, with vigilance. Once you see the enemy, you have to ask yourself, "How can I get rid of this? What kind of antidote should I use?" There are many different types of antidotes for the different types of afflictions. When hatred or anger arises, for example, you might meditate on love. When desire arises, you might meditate on impermanence, or the impure nature of the object. You have to be knowledgeable as well as creative in finding the right method that works to temporarily suppress the affliction disturbing you at any particular moment. Ultimately, **it is through meditation on emptiness that you will get rid of this affliction from the root. The point here is to recognise the affliction as an enemy and be ready to defend against it.**

Without that constant vigilance, the afflictions will sneak up on you. When one arises you will not pay it much attention, you will be okay with it, and then it will begin to do its work. If you give the enemy this kind of opportunity, it will only get stronger and stronger. Your own misperceptions and mistaken imputations will feed it, and lead you to surrender to its power.

Think of what happens, for example, if an attractive person appears and you feel desire for him or her. If you do not counteract that afflictive desire, you will start to think how beautiful, how nice, how wonderful that person is. You begin imputing qualities that the object does not actually have. Fundamentally, you impute a pure nature on something that is impure; you impute a pleasant nature on something whose nature is suffering; and you impute a permanent nature on something that is impermanent. This process of imputation feeds the attachment so that it grows sharper and stronger. In the end, the affliction wins the battle and you are totally under its power. This is what will happen if you do not constantly battle the obscuring afflictions. If you sincerely make this effort, but are still not able to prevent a strong affliction from entering your mind, you should at least strive to shorten and reduce its effect. **Never let an affliction persist without trying to counteract it. If you consistently apply the countermeasures, eventually you will be able to reduce the effect of any affliction and turn it away.**

In Nāgārjuna's *Friendly Letter* we find the image of three types of drawing: a drawing on the water, which dissolves as soon as it is created; a drawing in the dust, which will stay for a while, but eventually is blown away; and a drawing in stone, which remains for a very long time. An affliction should be like a drawing on the water; although it may appear, it should be dispersed almost immediately. If you can't fully achieve that, your affliction should be like a drawing in dust; though it persists for a while, eventually it will be wiped out. When it comes to the virtuous qualities, the cultivation of the antidotes, they should be like drawings in stone; although they take some time to create, once they are established they remain solid and stable for as long as you need to rely on them.

Understand the mind can be like a drawing
On water, in earth, or in stone.
For those with afflictions it is best if it is the first;
For those who seek the Dharma it should be the last.

For serious practitioners who spend their whole life trying to train the mind, at the beginning their virtuous thoughts may be like drawings on water; they don't last very long. Then, as their practice becomes stronger, the virtuous qualities remain longer and longer, until finally they are as firmly established as a carving in stone. Conversely, the negative attitudes get weaker and weaker, more and more unstable, and they end up as drawings on water. Once you reach that level, where the afflictions arise but are immediately dispersed, it becomes easy to eliminate them from the root.

Śāntideva says in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*:

This shall be my obsession:
Despising the afflictions, I shall meet them in battle,
Making an exception those afflictions
That destroy other afflictions.
Let me be burned to death,
Let me have my head chopped off,
But I will never submit in any way
To the enemy of the obscuring afflictions.

Sometimes our approach to the afflictions takes the form of hatred. We resent them because they cause all of our problems. We focus on the way wrong view, attachment, and the other afflictions damage our life and steal our happiness. Seeing that, we grow to despise them as our worst enemies. Then we resolve to destroy that enemy. This is the way Dharma practitioners should direct their anger.

Ordinarily, people do the opposite. They consider the afflictions to be their friends and they try to make them happy. They believe that the enemy is external, someone who is interfering with their attempts to satisfy their desires. **The Dharma practitioner knows that the enemy is inside, and they determine to do battle with that enemy.**

This kind of hatred, which is directed towards the afflictions, is not itself an affliction. It is the destroyer of afflictions. It is the thought, "What can I do to get rid of this enemy? How can I destroy the enemy that is trying to destroy me?" As the stanza above says, this should even become your obsession—concentrating on what you can do to injure, harm, and destroy these afflictions. This attitude takes on the form of hatred, but it is not hatred, because it *destroys* hatred. This is the way practitioners should think.

Whatever happens, you should never bow down and submit to the afflictions. It doesn't matter if you are burned to death or have your head chopped off. The worst that your external enemies can do is kill you. You are going to die anyway, so that is not too serious. But when someone comes to kill you, if you obey your ignorance and turn your mind over to powerful anger and hatred, and if you die with that state of mind, then you will suffer a double injury. Physically, your killer has taken away this life. But by surrendering to your inner enemy you have destroyed your own chances of finding good rebirths in the future. So, not only have you lost this physical body, but your spiritual life is also destroyed.

When others come to attack you, they are operating under the power of their own inner afflictions of ignorance and hatred. So who is the enemy? Is it those people attacking you or is it their afflictions? The enemy of those attackers is compelling them to perform all kinds of harmful actions that will cause them a great deal of suffering in the future. But if you get angry in response, then the attackers' afflictions have also taken control of you! Now your mind is doing the same thing that their mind is doing.

This stanza is therefore saying in essence, **"I will never bow down to anger and the other afflictions. It does not matter if they burn me and kill me. I will never surrender for even a moment to powerful hatred towards the people who harm me."** This is the practice of the

true bodhisattva practitioner.

Geshe Puchungwa said, "Although I am powerfully oppressed by the afflictions, from underneath I can still snarl with gritted teeth." When Potowa heard that he said, "If you do that, you will immediately turn away from the afflictions."

In the following verses Śāntideva goes on to say that in one way the afflictions are easier to conquer than an ordinary enemy, such as an invading army Although you may defeat an enemy army and drive it out of your country, there is always the chance that its troops will regroup, regain their strength, and return to attack you again. The afflictions are not like that. If you are able to drive them out of your mental continuum by eliminating them from the root, there is no place else for them to go. There is no way for them to regroup and return to cause you more trouble. Once you have eliminated them from the root they will never come back. The only reason you are not able to eliminate them from the root is that you do not make the kind of determined, persevering effort that is required.

> Even when ordinary enemies are expelled from the country,
> They may settle in another place and take control.
> Having recovered their strength they will return.
> The enemy of the afflictions does not work that way.
> The various afflictions are cast out by the eye of wisdom.
> Once cleared out of my mind, where will they go?
> Where can they rest, in order to return and do me harm?
> But with a weak mind, I totally lack persevering effort.

Therefore, says Nyugrumpa, **you should not be lazy. As soon as you detect an affliction arising in your mind, you should take action to defend against it:**

> When an affliction appears, do not be lazy, but fend it off by applying the antidote. If you cannot prevent it, get up and arrange a mandala and other offerings. Present them to your guru and meditational deities, and request inspiration to overcome the affliction. Focusing on the affliction, recite the mantras of wrathful deities. As a result of these practices the affliction will subside.

Langri Tangpa has this simple advice: "Even changing your sitting position or turning your head will cause the afflictions to dissipate." And Gonpawa also said that when it comes to protecting yourself from the obscuring afflictions, "What is better than keeping a watch over your mind day and night?"

As for the Great Lord Atiśa, the teacher of this lamrim tradition, whenever he met someone he would greet them with the question, "Have you had a good mind?" He didn't say "How are you?" He asked, "Have you had a good mind?" What did he mean by that?

First of all, **the key is to have a very kind, loving attitude towards other sentient beings, cultivating the bodhicitta motivation to work for the benefit of others. The second essential aspect is to guard your mind so that it is not dominated by the afflictions. You must be prepared to apply an antidote whenever a harmful thought begins to rise; that is the meaning of a "good mind."** In this way Atiśa was always concerned with the other person's mental attitude: was it good, straight, warm, and kind? It is difficult to find all those qualities in a person, but when that happens it is wonderful to see and so enjoyable to experience the company of that person.

7" How to Eliminate the Individual Afflictions (first five)

Since all negative actions begin from one of the inner afflictions, you need to guard your mind against them and fight them when they appear. What, then, is the best method for defeating each type of affliction? Here we will discuss **methods for eliminating some of the obscuring afflictions,[49] beginning with the three poisons: the three basic afflictions from which all other subsidiary afflictions branch off.**

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[49] In the presentation of six obscuring afflictions, the sixth one is wrong view. In this section, only the first five are discussed. In the presentation of ten obscuring afflictions, wrong view is subdivided into five distinct erroneous views. This is discussed in chapter 20 under the heading "Identifying the obscuring afflictions."

(a) Ignorance & Wisdom

We begin with ***ignorance***. **This affliction acts as the basis for all the others, has the most far-reaching consequences, and is the most difficult to remove. Ignorance is like the root of a poison tree.** It is much easier to cut off the leaves, branches, and even the trunk of the tree than to pull out the root. But until you have pulled that root out of the ground, you have not permanently eradicated the danger of that tree. **We therefore need to know how we can eliminate ignorance, the root of all other afflictions.**

The antidote for ignorance is to study, contemplate, and meditate on the various aspects of dependent origination.

- **You need to concentrate on the cause and effect relationship whereby virtue creates happiness and non-virtue produces suffering.**
- **You need to master the process of the twelve links of dependent origination by which beings enter into cyclic existence, and through which they can gain freedom from it. If you have familiarised your mind with this process of dependent origination (first by studying it and then by integrating it with your mind in meditation) you will not be troubled by any of the five wrong views, which are the fundamental creators of all negative thoughts and actions.**

(b) Hostility & Patience

The second of the three poisons is *hostility*. When you give your mind over to anger and hatred, the results are sure to be suffering in this life and in the future. Hostile thoughts lead to harmful actions, which result in future pain, as well as destroy the meritorious roots of virtue that have accumulated by past virtuous actions. Just as a powerful forest fire indiscriminately destroys the most beautiful flowers, trees, and wildlife, just a few minutes of uncontrolled anger can completely wipe out the roots of virtue accumulated over many previous lifetimes. Candrakīrti says in his *Commentary on the "Middle Way"*:

> Anger directed towards a son of the conquerors
> Destroys, in an instant, the merit from generosity and ethical conduct
> Accumulated over hundreds of eons.
> Therefore, **there is no non-virtue greater than impatience**.

In an instant of anger many lifetimes of positive potential can be wiped out. **Merits are created when you cherish others and you act in ways intended to help them. The basic meaning of pure ethical conduct is to not harm others, to protect others from injury.**

Patience and all other virtuous actions are positive by virtue of the way in which they affect other beings. In precisely the same way, hostility is negative by virtue of its damaging effects on others. Anger and hatred are the desire to hurt others, the wish to make them suffer. The actions unleashed by such a motivation are the opposite of merits. To the extent that this negative attitude becomes strong, the positive ones become weak. To say that the positive potential of merits is destroyed by hostility does not mean it is physically burned up as in a fire. "To be destroyed" here means that those virtuous seeds (those propensities for happy future experiences) become less able to bring about their results. The power of the hostile mind damages the capacity of positive potentials to yield their fruit. This is why we say that hostility is the enemy that destroys past virtues.

Śāntideva says in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*: "**There is no non-virtue like hatred.**" It is the most powerful of all the negative attitudes. When hatred arises, it is not simply the enemy of the person you hate, it **is *your own worst enemy***. Therefore, **you should never allow it an opening. Never think that you can get friendly with it for a little while, because once you let it in the door, it will grow stronger and stronger until it has you under its power. You close the door to hostility by recognising it as your own worst enemy and by cultivating the powerful antidote of patience.** Use your wisdom to understand the situation, and instead of opening the way to anger, be wide open to patience. As Śāntideva says, **patience will bring peace to your mind, calm to your surroundings,** and pacify the hostility of others:

Whoever assiduously overcomes anger
Finds happiness in this and other lives.

Making a concerted effort to develop and strengthen patience is the best way to fight the enemy of hostility. When we explain the perfection of patience in a subsequent volume of this series, we will get into this topic in more detail. Right now, at this stage of your practice, it is very difficult to eliminate hostility from the root. In fact, the root is ignorance, and the wisdom that eliminates ignorance comes only at a higher stage of realisation. But right now it is entirely possible to overcome hostility by shutting it out, suppressing it, not letting it rise.

You may think that this is only a temporary solution, and that the seeds still lie dormant in your mental continuum. However, **shutting out hostility, even temporarily, is a great victory in the battle against negative karma.** If hostile feelings are not in your mind, you will not take actions that harm others. When mental action is subdued, bodily action is naturally controlled. You no longer feel the need to use harsh speech or deceitful words. In this way, the person who wins the battle with the inner enemy of hostility also defeats the destructive power of non-virtuous karma. That person will be safe, happy, and content in this life and in lives to come.

(c) Attachment - craving and grasping

The third of the three poisons is *attachment*. What do we mean by attachment? Attachment is the affliction that empowers and actualises previously accumulated virtuous and non-virtuous karmic seeds so that they have the power to ripen into happy or suffering forms of rebirth.

In this life, and in all previous lives, you have performed innumerable actions and each action planted a seed, a certain type of propensity, in your mind-stream. When the necessary conditions are met, a particular seed will ripen into experience in your current life. The seeds of the most powerful karmas, so-called "projecting karmas," have the potential to ripen into new rebirths. **Each seed remains dormant until it is nourished and activated by the moisture of the affliction of attachment.**

Within the twelve links of dependent origination, the afflictions that actualise dormant seeds are craving and grasping, the eighth and ninth links. At that point the projecting karmic seed is reactivated and ready to yield its fruit in a new rebirth. Just as seeds we plant in the ground require moisture to germinate and bring forth a sprout, attachment is the moisture that actualises the already planted karmic seeds so they can ripen into the results of experience. We discussed this earlier in the presentation of craving, grasping, and existence; the eighth, ninth, and tenth links of dependent origination.

When it comes to virtuous karmic seeds or "merits," if they are not nourished by attachment, the result will be emancipation and buddhahood. But **while you are enmeshed in cyclic existence your actions are habitually dominated by attachment; especially attachment to a mistaken notion of self.** This is why you are constantly experiencing the unpleasantness of samsaric results. When you cultivate pure states of mind such as love, compassion, and bodhicitta (which are free of attachment) the results initially will be higher rebirth, and eventually you will transcend samsaric results completely.

Human beings live in the desire realm, where the predominant form of attachment is attachment to sense objects: beautiful forms, sweet fragrances, luscious tastes, and especially exciting touch, as in sexual contact. Life in the desire realm is dominated by the desire for the experience of contact with these sense objects. Most people spend their whole lives chasing after that contact. Then, depending on whether a particular object provides pleasant or unpleasant experience, attachment to one and hostility to the other emerges. Life in the desire realm has this quality of fluctuating between pleasure and pain, happiness and sorrow. We almost never get a chance to experience the constant bliss of the upper realms, where beings abide in the peace of meditative equipoise for eons on end. Our desire is more physical. It is a craving for the feelings that arise when the conditions for a sensory experience come together; when a sense object, sense faculty, and consciousness meet, the experience dawns. When the object is attractive we experience pleasure, and attachment arises as the craving for more of that feeling. When the object is unattractive, hostility arises in the form of a desire to make that object

go away. This is the perpetual cycle of existence, in which contact with an object generates a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling, which generates the afflictions of attachment or hostility, which generates karmic action, which produces birth in a body that will have more contact with more sense objects.

To counteract that attachment serious practitioners meditate on the undesirable nature of inner and outer objects, and on the faults of becoming attached to seemingly desirable objects. For example, a common antidote to the attachment of sexual desire is to mentally open up the skin of the body you desire and look at what is really in there. This is the technique of investigating the true, impure nature of apparently attractive objects, and it is a very effective method to pacify attachment.

You should also meditate on the unhappy consequences of letting yourself get attached to sensual pleasures. Although an object may appear very attractive, and experiencing it may provide some degree of pleasure for a short time, you have to analyse the long-range results of indulging in that desire. You need to consider how brief moments of pleasure can lead to very long-term suffering. If you examine and meditate on the consequences of attachment, you will be able to turn down the fires of desire, and eventually you will overcome this affliction.

The great master Vasubandhu said:

> The five animals—deer, elephant, butterfly, fish, and bee—
> Are overcome by five different types of objects.
> If one single object can overwhelm them,
> Why wouldn't all five overcome those who constantly resort to them.

The metaphor used in this verse draws on a cultural notion that may not be literally true, but it makes a point about human beings. It is said that each one of these animals is absorbed in a single sense object. Deer are attached to beautiful sounds; so, it is said, they follow sounds into the range of the hunter and there lose their lives. Butterflies or, more precisely, moths are attached to light, so they fly into the fire of lamps and die. The point is that their attachment to a single sense object destroys them in the end. As for the other animals, I am not sure how their attachments destroy them, but the tradition is that elephants are attached to touch, bees are attached to smell, and fish are attached to taste. Vasubandhu asks, "If these animals can be destroyed by their attachment to only one type of sense object, what will happen to us humans, who are constantly attached to all five!" We have many different ways of destroying ourselves, many different desires that can damage our future lives.

Therefore, those who are real practitioners (who are seeking not merely temporary enjoyment but the everlasting happiness of emancipation) fight this affliction of attachment to sensual pleasures with all their energy. They do not allow an opening for desire to enter and overwhelm their minds. And when the enemy does manage to get in, they immediately try to cast it out by applying effective countermeasures. They **never let the enemy of attachment infiltrate and gather strength in their minds.**

As Nāgārjuna said, when afflictions appear in your mind, they should be like drawings on water, which disperse as soon as they are created. If you cannot erase them immediately, they should be like drawings in sand, which sit for a little while but are soon blown away. You should never allow attachment to establish itself in your mind like a carving in stone, because its consequences will stay with you for a very long time.

(d) The eight worldly concerns[50] & Death

We humans have a special problem with what are called the "eight worldly concerns." These eight occur easily but are difficult to get away from. They are **divided into two groups: the four positive goals and the four negative ones. The four positive worldly goals are wealth, fame, praise, and pleasure.** Most people are attached to **wealth** in some way, and many sacrifice their whole life chasing after it. ***Fame*** is one of the most seductive attachments. Even great spiritual practitioners, who have transcended any craving for wealth, still have an attach-

[50] See Advanced Glossary 'Eight Worldly Dharmas'

ment to fame lingering in the back of their minds. People do extreme and dangerous things to acquire fame; some even give up their lives for it. Often people think that after they die their fame will live on. But it doesn't always happen that way, and many people who were once world-famous are now totally forgotten.

Praise is similar to fame but it is more direct and immediate. The pleasure comes from actually hearing the praise, not from what will happen after you die. Everybody enjoys being praised with sweet words such as, "You are wonderful, you are beautiful, you are great." Such sounds make almost anyone feel happy. In fact, when someone is praising you and gets interrupted, you may become mad, or feel disappointed that the praise has stopped.

Finally there is ***pleasure***, and of course everyone wants pleasure, enjoyment, a feeling of happiness. When we speak of the eight worldly concerns, we are not talking about the bliss of enlightenment, the ultimate state of "pleasure." The problem is that we are attached to temporary pleasure, which generally takes the form of sensual enjoyment here in the desire realm. This brings some short-lived experience of comfort and release, but our attachment to that experience leads to compulsive behaviour and all kinds of non-virtuous actions.

The second four of the eight worldly concerns are the opposites of these four positive worldly goals: poverty, disgrace, blame, and pain. No one wants to experience these states and everyone tries to avoid them.

These eight are the worldly goals that absorb the attention and time of most human lives. They have no higher, spiritual value. They do not lead to any everlasting, stable form of happiness. Therefore, spiritual practitioners should strive to avoid falling under their influence by cultivating the antidotes to these forms of attachment.

As Nāgārjuna says in the *Friendly Letter*, "A wise person has no interest in the eight worldly concerns." Wise people apply their time and energy in the opposite direction; they try to avoid becoming attached to these worldly goals. They apply methods that lead them away from samsaric attachment and towards freedom from that attachment. What are those methods? How do you counteract attachment to the eight worldly concerns? **You should meditate on the faults of cyclic existence in general and, in particular, you should cultivate mindfulness of death. Realising the actual suffering nature of this samsaric existence (that life is short and is soon coming to an end) will undermine compulsive attachment to these worldly attractions.** We have already discussed the general sufferings of cyclic existence and the suffering of death earlier in this volume.

Although you may not die today, you can never be sure. You should always keep death in mind and ask yourself, "If I die today, then what?" **You should cultivate a deep-seated awareness that death is certain, its time is uncertain, and because death is always looming, you must prepare yourself for what will come afterward. It is this awareness that redirects your energy from the common concerns of surviving and prospering in just this current life, and turns your attention to higher goals.**

If you don't remember death, your only concerns are the gratifications of this temporary life. Since you have no higher purpose, you apply all your talent, time, and energy to acquiring those four positive goals; you spend your entire life chasing after them. But at the end, as you approach your hour of death, what do you have that can protect you after you leave this life?

The state of mind of a true practitioner is to think of this life as merely a brief rest stop on a long journey. When you are traveling on a long trip and you stop somewhere for a meal, or perhaps to sleep overnight, you do not become attached to that rest stop. You don't spend all your time preparing to stay in that place, because it is clear that you are only passing through, and that you still have a long way to go in your journey. Similarly, when we set out with the goal of reaching liberation from cyclic existence, we are embarking on a very long spiritual journey. **This present life is nothing more than a temporary way station where we have a chance to make preparations for the rest of the trip. That is the work of a practitioner: to use this peaceful life with its many opportunities to prepare for the rest of the journey to enlightenment.**

(e) Pride & Still in Samsara

So far, from among the six rudimentary afflictions, we have discussed the three poisons: the three fundamental afflictions of ignorance, hostility, and attachment. The next affliction we need to consider is *pride*. **Pride is one of the biggest obstacles to entering and progressing on the spiritual path. The path we are following here leads to emancipation and ultimate enlightenment.** It is difficult to even meet this path, but **if you are obscured by pride, then even when you get a chance to practice such a path, you will not be able to take advantage of it. Your pride won't let you even listen to the teachers who can show you the path. You don't want to learn from others because you think that you already know everything.**

We say that **this conceited attitude is like a balloon: you are all puffed up, but inside you are completely empty.** You think you know everything, but inside you have no understanding and no true realisation. When a balloon is filled up with air, nothing else can go inside. In the same way, **pride prevents these teachings from penetrating your heart and mind, and it thereby prevents you from engaging in the path in this life.**

When you consider yourself superior, you naturally look down on everyone else. You think that you are the highest and best, so you treat everyone else as inferior to you. This karma causes precisely the opposite result in future rebirths: you will be born as the most menial kind of servant, looked down upon by everyone else in society. In other words, you will experience just exactly what you did to others in this lifetime. When you are born as a lowly servant you are compelled to follow the commands of others. You have no control over your own life or how you spend your time, so even if you wanted to pursue a spiritual path you would not be permitted to do so. In this way, pride obstructs the path both in this lifetime and in future rebirths. Understanding that pride leads to all of these problems, you should do your best to abandon this affliction.

How do you eliminate pride? Nāgārjuna explains the method this way in his *Friendly Letter*:

> If you consider over and over again,
> "Because of my own actions I have not transcended
> Sickness, aging, death, or separation from the desirable,"
> By means of that antidote you will not become puffed up with pride.

He is saying that **the antidote to pride is to realise that you are still completely enmeshed in the web of cyclic existence; you are still subject to all of its sufferings, and who do you have to blame for your condition? No one but yourself, because your sufferings are nothing but the results of your own previous actions. You have to meditate on this again and again because often the tendency is to blame others, to look outside for the cause of your difficulties. What you need to do is to face the truth: "It is all my fault."**

That is the antidote to pride. You are admitting to yourself that you are not so great, **that you have not come very far in freeing yourself from the miseries that all other beings have to face. And the cause of those miseries is nothing other than your own arrogant, ignorant actions. When you constantly think about that, there will be no room to get puffed up with pride. Understanding the cause and effect of karma will actually make you more humble. It will make you more accepting of the adversity that you encounter in your life. And instead of trying to blame others for your difficulties, it will inspire you to correct your harmful behaviour, and to redirect your energy to the methods that will bring better conditions in the future.**

When you accept responsibility for your own circumstances, you open yourself up for all the good qualities of the path and the instruction of the teachers to come in. You are like a balloon in which all of the stale air of arrogance has been squeezed out, so that now it is ready for the fresh air of wisdom to come in.

(f) Doubt and wrong views - especially karma

The next in our list of six rudimentary afflictions is **doubt**. This does not refer to just any kind of doubt, but to instances of doubt that interfere with spiritual practice. When you hold onto doubt about the teachings or the teacher, you are limited by reservations about engaging the

path with full enthusiasm. This hesitation, based on doubt, can be a serious obstruction to entering and making progress on the path.

For example, in your study of the four noble truths you learn about the truth of suffering, its cause, the cessation of suffering, and the path to that cessation. When you first learn about these four, it is proper to examine and analyse whether they are true or not. But if you conclude, "This is probably not the way things are. This doesn't seem to have any value and I don't think I should get involved with this," then you have created a major mental block that will prevent any serious practice.

Similarly, when you get involved with Buddhism you will hear about the Three Jewels of Refuge. The Buddha is said to be the perfect teacher, who has attained the perfection of enlightenment and is able to lead us to that same goal. Is this true or not? The Dharma Jewel is the supreme method, taught by the Buddha, which is supposed to lead us to buddhahood. Does this method work or not? The Sangha Jewel consists of those individuals who are seriously pursuing that method and who are people you can trust to assist you on the path. Is the Sangha a trustworthy refuge or not? For Buddhists, their whole practice is based on these Three Jewels of Refuge. If you don't believe that this teacher, and the method he taught, and the path he described, are actually reliable and have the capacity to lead you to the cessation of suffering, how can you enter that path? If you don't trust the Three Jewels, how can you turn to them for refuge?

We are not talking about replacing doubt with blind faith. Stable trust and faith arise from studying the scriptures, listening to knowledgeable teachers, applying logical analysis, and meditation. You have to build faith on a foundation of reason and understanding. When you do that, all doubts are dispelled with confidence, and your practice becomes resolute; it rests on a firm foundation of irreversible faith.

The teaching on karma and its results is the place where doubt can be most destructive, and where faith must be relied on in the beginning. According to Buddhism, virtuous action brings only happy results and harmful action brings only suffering. This is the general law of karma. In the scriptures the Buddha taught the details of karma by recounting particular cases in which a person performed a certain action in one lifetime and reaped a concordant result in a later lifetime. It takes a very high level of realisation to see previous or future lives, so ordinary people like us cannot see this process of cause and effect operating over several lives. Nor can we access this field of knowledge through logical thinking.

But sometimes we can see the cause and effect of karma operating within one lifetime. We often see people experiencing the results of their own actions. We can learn more of the details of how karma operates by studying the scriptures and commentaries and listening to teachings. But when it comes to eliminating doubt (when you try to make a judgment of the validity of this description of how karma operates over numerous lifetimes) there is really no substitute for faith. Faith is built on learning, trust in your teachers, analysis, and meditation, but because you cannot know directly, or by logical inference, the detailed operations of karmic cause and effect, you have to develop a level of faith that these teachings of the Buddha are true.

If you develop strong faith in the cause and effect of karma, based on trust in the word of the Buddha and the eminent teachers of the lineage, your practice will become strong. On the other hand, if you reject this possibility based on a superficial understanding (or even worse, if you slip into wrong view with the thought, "This cannot be true; these things are nothing but someone's stupid imagination") then you face a huge obstacle to entering the path, and a great danger of disregarding the karmic consequences of your deeds.

Therefore, you must be very careful about how you handle doubt in your mind, especially doubt about karmic cause and effect. It is not uncommon for doubt to arise in the mind, but you need to observe which way your mind is tilting. It is one thing to think, "I am not sure about karma and rebirth. I am not completely convinced this is absolutely true. But this is the teaching of the Buddha, and of my teachers, so I will continue to think about it, and take it as a serious possibility." This is a balanced approach, which does not close down your mind but opens you up to a deeper understanding. It is a different matter if you find yourself leaning towards the wrong view that cause and effect definitely do not operate through the agency of karma. The attitude that thinks, "There is no proof for this; I cannot see it, therefore I doubt it can be

true"; that is the dangerous area to fall into. That is the attitude you need to watch out for and you need to fight against.

In general, **the method to counteract doubt is to build wisdom based on knowledge, reason, and the experience of meditation. You need to build up a firm foundation of understanding the four noble truths, the Three Jewels, and the cause and effect of karma. Then, through your practice of study, analysis, and meditation, wisdom will dawn, and unshakable confidence will replace your wavering doubt.**

(g) The subsidiary afflictions

Growing out of those six rudimentary afflictions, like branches growing out of a root and trunk, are many subsidiary afflictions. These afflictions are very common, they arise easily, and when they do they interrupt your practice and obstruct your pursuit of virtue. **The subsidiary afflictions that are discussed here are excitement, regret, lethargy, sleep, laziness, carelessness, immodesty, forgetfulness, and inattention.** It is important to be able to recognise these afflictions and understand the problems they produce. It is only when you understand their faults and see that they are your enemies that you will be able to apply effective antidotes. Then, as soon as one appears, you determine that you will defeat it and drive it out of your mind. Even if you can't completely destroy it, you can weaken its power and shorten its duration so it will do less harm.

We have a series of quotations which describe the disadvantages of various afflictions. The first is from the *Friendly Letter* of Nāgārjuna:

> Excitement and regret, malice, lethargy and sleep,
> Desire for pleasure, and doubt—
> Understand these five afflictions
> As thieves that steal the treasure of virtue.

Excitement is a distracted mind that wants to wander away from the object of focus and go towards desired objects. When you are sitting in meditation and trying to concentrate, excitement is the part of the mind that says, "I don't want to sit here; I want to think about that over there." It **is the mind being distracted by pleasurable past experiences; it wants to enjoy that memory by returning to it and thinking about it.**

As for ***regret***, there is **a kind of sorrow that you should have when you have done something wrong.** When you have committed non-virtuous actions and subsequently understood the faults of those actions, regret is a very positive step towards purifying those misdeeds. But **regret towards virtuous actions is a problem**. For example, if others abuse you verbally, you may decide that instead of responding with anger and harsh words, you will be patient and try to calm them down by being friendly in return. But later, when you think back on the incident, your anger rises and you think, "Why did I do that? I let them get away with their insults when I should have attacked them and made them feel as bad as they made me feel." This is **regret towards virtuous action and it directly undermines your virtuous practice.**

Lethargy causes the mind to become dark, listless, and insensitive, so you cannot discern the object of attention clearly. It makes the mind and body feel heavy, and it leads to **sleepiness.**

The faults associated with some of these subsidiary afflictions are elaborated in the *Exhortation to Wholehearted Resolve (Adhyāśaya-saṃcodana- sūtra):*

> Phlegm, wind, and bile
> Occur predominantly in the bodies
> Of those who take pleasure in **sleep and lethargy**.
> Their elements are completely out of balance.
>
> For those who take pleasure in **lethargy and sleep**,
> Their stomachs are not clean due to impure food.
> Their bodies feel heavy, their complexions are unhealthy,
> And even the words they speak are unclear.

And it continues:

Those who take pleasure in **lethargy and sleep**
Become confused and their interest in Dharma declines.
They degenerate from even the virtues of immature beings,
Their positive qualities decline and they head towards darkness.

Concerning ***laziness***, the *Mindfulness of the Excellent Teaching* says:

The single foundation of the afflictions
Is laziness. Whoever has it—
Whoever has a single instance of **laziness**—
Is a person completely without the Dharma.

Laziness is a state of mind that hinders you from applying yourself to virtuous action (even to obtain a worldly goal) because of a lack of energy or sleepiness. Even when you want to take positive action, because of your laziness you lack the will, and you are seduced by the pleasure of lying down, doing nothing, and falling asleep. Laziness undermines enthusiastic perseverance, causes previously acquired virtuous qualities to degenerate, and prevents future virtues from developing.

About ***carelessness***, the *Collection of Indicative Verses* says:

Those who indulge in **careless** behaviour
Are immature people who waste their minds.
Wise people take great care,
The way a merchant protects his precious goods.

Concerning the affliction of ***immodesty***, the *Garland of Birth Stories* says:

It would be better to wear rags and carry a beggar's bowl,
While watching the opulence of your enemy's mansion,
Than to cast aside shame, violating the Dharma in your mind,
Even if it brought you dominion over the gods.

On ***forgetfulness***, Nāgārjuna says in his *Friendly Letter*:

Lord, mindfulness of the body is taught
As the only road for those traveling to the state of the Sugatas.
Attend to mindfulness and guard it well,
For when it degenerates all virtues will be destroyed.

And Śāntideva has this to say about ***inattention*** in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*:

Even those who are learned, possess faith,
And apply themselves with diligent perseverance,
Will become defiled by downfalls
Because of the fault of **inattention**.

The affliction of inattention is a lack of introspective alertness. It is not knowing what is going on in your body and mind, and it is due to a lack of interest and lack of awareness. As we have discussed, **introspective alertness is a mental spy that constantly observes what is coming in and what is going out of the mind-body continuum. If you want to maintain pure ethical conduct, mindfulness and introspective alertness must constantly be working together, standing guard at the door of the senses. The affliction of inattention (the lack of introspective alertness) is like being without protection. When there is no guard at the door, there is no telling what negative thoughts and actions may take hold of your body and mind.**

Therefore, Śāntideva says, even a highly qualified person who has studied the teachings and understands the difference between good and bad must pay attention to what is going on in his or her mind. Even for those who have faith in the Dharma and are working hard on the path, if they fail to pay attention to what is happening in their mind and what they are doing with their body, their ethics will become corrupted.

8" The Highest Spiritual Attainment

These stanzas provide a concise presentation of the dangers you face if you fall under the influence of these rudimentary and subsidiary afflictions. Tsongkhapa offers this advice: even if you are not able to completely prevent these afflictions from arising, it is ab-

solutely essential that you understand that they are true enemies. You must not befriend them and take their side, so that when they say, "Do this," you respond, "Yes, my lord." That is the indispensable message of this teaching right now: you must see these afflictions as enemies, take the side of the antidotes, and strive to eliminate them. Whatever level of vows you have taken, whatever system of ethical conduct you have committed to, whether you are a layperson or a fully ordained renunciate, you should protect the purity of those commitments. Even though you cannot achieve everything you hope for right now, if you pursue this endeavour with perseverance you will eventually succeed. This was the heart of the practice of the great Kadampa practitioners, who were the direct students of Atiśa.

The glorious Gonpawa, a disciple of Atiśa, said to Neusurpa:

> If tomorrow or the day after, someone were to ask all of your virtuous practitioners, "What is the very pith of the special instructions?" the answer might come: "It is to obtain supernatural knowledge," or "To achieve a direct vision of one's meditational deity." However, the answer should be: "It is making my understanding of the cause and effect of karma more and more certain, so that I can protect the purity of whatever vows I have taken."

Gonpawa was not satisfied by the idea that high tantric achievements, like a direct experience of the deity, was the essence of the practice. To him a person who said, "I saw my deity," was nothing too great. **The real practitioner would say that understanding karma is the heart of the matter.** It is based on that understanding that you will be able to keep whatever vows you have taken, whether they are vows of individual liberation, bodhisattva vows, or tantric vows. In his view, that is the best form of practice. If you maintain pure ethical conduct, you have established a foundation upon which you can build all the other practices of the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana systems. All inner development must begin with this foundation. The person who recognises that is the true practitioner.

Many Buddhist teachings make this point: the purpose of Buddhist practice is to subdue the obscuring afflictions; the cause of negative actions, and negative actions are the cause of all future suffering. By eliminating the afflictions and preventing non-virtuous actions, you place yourself on the path to freedom. All levels of practice (from personal emancipation up to perfect buddhahood in order to liberate other sentient beings) grow from that fundamental discipline of maintaining pure ethical conduct.

Therefore, when we speak of the spiritual attainments that result from prolonged meditation practice, the "common" or "lower" attainments are the seemingly miraculous powers, such as directly communicating with your meditational deity, or such powers as accumulating wealth, living a long life, or reading minds. **The "highest" spiritual attainment is actually diminishing the power of the afflictions, and eventually eliminating them from the root.** When your meditation starts producing that kind of result, then you know you are on the right track.

When people in the world get into a bitter disagreement, they turn all their attention and energy toward actions intended to damage their enemy. Of course, the main result of those actions will be suffering for themselves in this and future lives. Nevertheless, there is no limit to the discomfort, pain, and injury that people will endure in order to defeat and destroy an enemy. Some are even willing to sacrifice their lives for no other purpose than to harm those they dislike. Then, when the fight is over, people proudly display their battle scars to show off their heroism and say, "Here is the wound I received when I helped to crush the foe."

If people are willing to bear such burdens and go to such extremes to accomplish worldly, non-virtuous goals, which will only bring them disastrous consequences in the future, how much more sensible and appropriate it is to bear the difficulties you may encounter in the effort to destroy the obscuring afflictions. Since **the afflictions are the real enemy, the true source of all your difficulties, you should be willing to endure any hardship to accomplish the ultimate goal of bringing an end to them.**

When you destroy an external enemy, nothing good comes of it. You only bring suffering upon them and upon yourself, and there is a good chance that their supporters will return for

revenge. But **when you destroy the inner enemy of the afflictions, they can never return**, and the consequences will be nothing but peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering. Then, if you return from the hardships of years spent meditating in a cave and you show off the sores on your legs, or the pain in your back, you will be justified in saying, "This is the wound I received while battling the inner afflictions in my cave." There is no comparison between this kind of heroism and the other.

This is exactly what the great Śāntideva says in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*:

> If even scars inflicted by meaningless enemies
> Are displayed on the body like ornaments,
> Why should suffering be a hardship for me,
> Who unfailingly strives to achieve the great purpose?

The "great purpose" is to attain enlightenment for the sake of other sentient beings. A practitioner who sincerely wants to achieve that goal must be willing to put up with many types of discomfort and even physical pain. But if you are enduring suffering for the sake of ultimate emancipation, why would you consider that to be a hardship? In that case, the hardship itself becomes the antidote, the cause of emancipation. In this verse by Śāntideva, the practitioner is asking himself this question: "Why can't I happily endure the troubles I will face on this path when the goal is such a great and ultimate purpose?"

Those who struggle against the inner enemy of the afflictions will ultimately achieve victory. That is why the Buddha is often called the "Victorious One" or the "Conqueror" in the scriptures. The person who realises that victory is the one who is properly called a "hero." Ordinary heroes, renowned in battle and famous for killing many enemies, have not really accomplished very much because the people they killed were going to die anyway. What is heroic about that? You might as well kill a corpse. When you kill your human enemies the only thing you accomplish is to bring suffering on yourself, because only you will experience the results of that karma. Your enemy only gets death, which is their fate in any case. But you heap terrible new sufferings upon yourself, which is, after all, just what your enemy would wish. Śāntideva puts it:

> Those who utterly disregard all sufferings
> To destroy enemies such as hatred—
> They are the conquering heroes,
> The others merely kill corpses.

Therefore, Śāntideva says a little later, you should remain fearless and unperturbed by the afflictions, because you have the power to conquer them:

> When I find myself encircled by a crowd of afflictions,
> I shall stand up to them in a thousand ways;
> Just as lions are not bothered by foxes and such,
> I will not be harmed by the host of afflictions.

You live with the afflictions constantly threatening you; one minute desire is arising, the next minute jealousy, and then comes hatred. You must understand clearly that these are your most dangerous enemies, and you must stand up to them with courage. Standing up to them means always resisting the urge to yield to their temptations. In order to do that you may face many discomforts, hardships, and pain, but whatever difficulties you may face, you must bear them with the enthusiasm of knowing that you are on the path that will finally vanquish these enemies.

Śāntideva says that you should be like the lion, who is the king of the beasts. A lion may be surrounded by foxes, or jackals, or other animals who might like to kill and eat him, but it does not bother him, and he rests with utter confidence, because he knows that he has the power to subdue all of his enemies. Like the lion, your mind should rest with the confidence that, through the cultivation of wisdom and virtuous practice, you cannot be defeated by any afflictions, and that ultimately you have the power to subdue them.

In this way, says Tsongkhapa, you should not let any of the factors that are contradictory to the path harm or disturb you. Instead, you should conquer them all. As a practitioner, wherever you stay (whether it is in a solitary cave or in the swirl of busy crowds) you should never allow yourself to be wounded by the afflictions. You should rest comfortably in the safety of compas-

sion, loving-kindness, and virtuous thought. Regardless of what conditions you encounter, what adversity may seem to block your way, you should rest securely under the indestructible protection of pure ethical conduct, the compassionate motivation, and the wisdom that sees the true nature of things.

That is the real victory over the afflictions. When you practice with that approach you will be able to maintain pure ethical conduct, and with that you will build a solid foundation for all future progress on the spiritual path. When you plant seeds in pure, good earth, healthy and abundant fruit will grow. Building a foundation of pure ethical conduct is just like the good earth, and all of the abundant fruit of the spiritual path will grow out of that pure ground.