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# Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual let us spend some time with our meditation practice. [Meditation]

It is important to generate a most positive motivation for receiving the teachings along the following lines: In order to benefit all sentient beings, to liberate them from all suffering and guide them to ultimate happiness, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well.

## **Presenting the characteristics of the being of middle scope (cont.)**

### **Practices of a middle scope being**

Continuing on from our last session the commentary presents:

According to Geshe Sharawa, the actual path of the person of middling scope is presented in the text by saying 'Turning away from worldly pleasures' which indicates true suffering and 'destructive actions' which indicates true origin; 'Those who seek peace for themselves alone' indicates true cessation and 'avoiding' indicates true path.

So as explained here, the verse on the medium scope from the root text i.e. verse 4, actually encompasses the four noble truths.

The sequence of the four noble truths in which the truth of suffering is presented first, followed by the truth of origination, and then the truth of cessation followed by the truth of the path, is said to be the sequence of how one meditates on them. So, one first meditates on the truth of suffering, followed by the truth of origination, and then the truth of cessation followed by the truth of the path. However, in the cause and effect sequence of the Four Noble Truths, the truth of origin comes first followed by the truth of suffering, and the truth of the path is followed by the truth of cessation.

Then the commentary further explains:

Indeed, the four noble truths are the main meditational objects for those seeking liberation, and also the main body of the path of the person of middling scope, as the twelve interdependent links are included in these as well.

It is appropriate here to understand why these truths are referred to as 'noble truths'. A simple way to understand this is that if they are truths for *noble beings* then it must mean that they are not truths for ordinary beings. Indeed, the four truths can only be seen directly by *arya* beings, whilst ordinary beings are unable to perceive them directly as truths. For *arya* or noble beings there is no discrepancy between the appearance and the actual mode of existence of phenomena, so what they perceive are called 'truths'.

This does not relate to grasping at true or false existence; they are called truths because they are perceived directly by noble beings. For example, in relation to the four attributes of the first noble truth, while the appropriated aggregates are impermanent, ordinary beings see them as permanent.

They don't see functional phenomena within their actual mode of existence, but rather as permanent phenomena. Furthermore, while contaminated phenomena are in the nature of suffering, ordinary beings see them as a source of pleasure and happiness. And while all existing phenomena are selfless and empty, ordinary beings perceive them as having a self and being inherently existent.

Although ordinary beings can gain an understanding of impermanence to a certain degree, they cannot see impermanence directly or perceptually. Similarly, ordinary beings can have an understanding of selflessness and emptiness, but they are not able to perceive it directly. Only noble beings have the ability to perceive the subtle attributes and ultimate mode of existence of phenomena directly. Using these examples we can understand what is being explained here. So, if someone were to pose a question such as, 'Isn't it true that whatever exists can be perceived by ordinary beings?' You need to be ready with the answer that it can be perceived, but not directly. This brings up many memories of the debates I did in my younger days. Of course, if we were to go into all the debates, we would spend a long time in debates.

Coming back to the main point, what is being explained here is that there is no other means other than meditating on the four noble truths in order to abandon cyclic existence and attain liberation. While there are extensive explanations on the twelve interdependent links, in this commentary it merely introduces it by saying that they are included in the four noble truths.

To understand how the twelve interdependent links become causes to be reborn in cyclic existence, they can be categorised into two: the twelve interdependent links which serve as a cause to be reborn in the lower realms, and the twelve interdependent links which are a cause to be reborn in the higher realms. Initially, to avoid being reborn in the lower realm, one meditates on the reverse order of the twelve interdependent links which are a specific cause to be born in the lower realm. In that instance, the twelve interdependent links that serve as a cause to be born in a higher realm are something that is to be adopted. For the small scope being, you need to understand that the twelve interdependent links to obtain a high status are something to be adopted, as they serve as a means to be reborn in the higher realms. But for a being of medium scope, the twelve interdependent links that serve as a specific cause to be reborn in higher realms, are considered an abandonment. Thus, by abandoning and reversing the twelve interdependent links, and developing renunciation and disenchantment towards the entire cyclic existence, the medium scope beings strive to achieve liberation.

Geshe Pujungwa is said to have incorporated the twelve interdependent links in all of his practices. Thus, it is said to be a unique presentation of this master where the practices of all the three types of beings are incorporated within the understanding of twelve interdependent links. In a text it explains Geshe Pujungwa's presentation. Through contemplation one can reverse the twelve interdependent links which serve as a cause to be born in the lower realms, which then becomes a means of practice that is in conjunction with the small scope. Contemplating the means to reverse the twelve interdependent links that are a cause to be reborn as a human or in the form and formless god realms, becomes a means of practice that is in conjunction with the medium scope.

From one's own experience of suffering and having contemplated the sufferings of cyclic existence, one relates to all other sentient beings, recognising how other sentient beings are also conditioned to experience the various types of suffering due to the twelve interdependent links. Then one will develop unconditional love and compassion for all sentient beings. Then by generating bodhicitta and engaging in the deeds of the six perfections, it becomes the practice of the great scope. These are very profound ways to relate to the twelve interdependent links. As explained in the teachings, when one develops love and compassion for sentient beings with the understanding of how they are caught in cyclic existence, the love and compassion one feels for other sentient beings is incredibly vast and profound.

Let us now list the twelve interdependent links; the older students can recall them for us:

- Ignorance
- Karmic formation
- Consciousness
- Name and form
- Six sources
- Contact
- Feeling
- Craving
- Grasping
- Existence
- Birth
- Aging and death

As mentioned earlier, the twelve interdependent links are subsumed into the four noble truths, so it is appropriate here to understand how they are included in the four noble truths.

They are firstly subsumed into two truths: the truth of origination and the truth of suffering. As a debate point, it is explained that if something is a truth of origination, it necessarily has to also be a truth of suffering, but if something is truth of suffering, it doesn't necessarily have to be a truth of origination. That is how it is explained.

How many of the twelve links are delusions? Is ignorance a delusion? Yes. The eighth is craving. Is that a delusion or not? Yes. Is grasping a delusion? Yes. So, within the twelve interdependent links there are three which are delusions.

The second link is karmic formation and the tenth is existence, which is also karma, right? So within the twelve interdependent links there are two which are karma. Now, altogether we have five which are included in the truth of origination. So the remaining links are subsumed into the truth of suffering. Is that clear? So, now we've understood how the twelve interdependent links are subsumed into the four noble truths: there are three causes which are delusions, and two which are karma, and the remainder are the truth of suffering.

What we need to understand is that the means by which beings circle in cyclic existence, are none other than by the conditioning of the twelve interdependent links. Rebirth in the lower realms is through a particular process within the twelve interdependent links that causes them to be reborn in the lower realms. Rebirth in the higher realms is again through the specific links which are causes to be reborn in the higher realms. The great master Nagarjuna confirmed that there is no other means to be reborn in cyclic existence other than relying on the twelve interdependent links.

This is also mentioned in the *Commentary on Bodhicitta*, which teaching many of you have already received. In terms of the karma created, the specific karmas to be reborn in cyclic existence are classified into three: meritorious karma, non-meritorious karma and non-fluctuating karma. Meritorious karma becomes the cause to be reborn in the human and desire god realms; non-meritorious karma is the cause to be born in the lower realms and non-fluctuating karma is the specific cause to be born in the form and formless god realms.

How do the twelve interdependent links serve as specific causes? The first link, **ignorance**, is the motivator. Then, once motivated out of ignorance, one creates **karma** - the second link. While the actual karma or action ceases the very next moment after it is created, the imprint of that karma or action is then stored upon the consciousness, thus forming the third link, **consciousness**.

When ordinary beings create karma they create either meritorious karma or non-meritorious karma which become a cause for being born either in the lower realms or the higher realms. Having created meritorious and non-meritorious karma, both are stored upon the consciousness as an imprint. Our rebirth is determined by whichever type of karmic imprints are the greatest in number.

When an individual comes to the end of this life and the death process starts, the virtuous or non-virtuous imprints earlier implanted on their consciousness are activated. **Craving** and **grasping** act as the main conditions to activate these imprints, followed by **existence**. For someone with more virtuous imprints, or who is more familiar with virtue, the craving and grasping activate the virtuous imprints in the mind prior to the final state of death, and this becomes the cause to be reborn in a higher realm. The main focus at the time of death seems to be a strong attachment to this life's body and fear of what is to come next life, which nurtures **craving** and **grasping**, activating the virtuous or non-virtuous imprints in the mind. More specifically, the craving relates to this life's existence and body, and the grasping relates more to the future life's existence, and these two nurture and activate the imprints. Again, if virtue is stronger in a person then the virtuous imprints are activated. This then leads to the next link, **existence**, which propels you to the next rebirth and then the link of **birth** takes place, with the rest of the links following from that.

In relation to one's own personal practice, the most important aspect of the twelve interdependent links is to have a virtuous mind at the time of death. As explained in the teachings, if one has a virtuous mind during the process of death, then that definitely secures a good rebirth in the next life. On a personal level, whenever we engage in a practice, such as meditation, prayers and so forth, we should ensure we are purposely generating a virtuous mind; as virtue is only accumulated when one is in a virtuous frame of mind. If we assume a meditative poise but our mind is distracted with non-virtuous thoughts, then that meditation pose will not be a means to accumulate virtue. At the time of death, one's future rebirth will not be determined by how many meditation poses you have held, but rather by how many virtuous states of mind you have generated. Therefore familiarising yourself with virtue is the essential condition for a good rebirth.

I have shared before with you a discussion I had with a young Geshe during teachings in India. When he asked me, I shared my understanding of what meditation means. I said it was to familiarise one's body, speech and mind with

virtue to ensure that whatever one does through one's body, speech and mind that it becomes imbued with virtue. That is what I consider to be actual meditation. The young geshe was very pleased and said 'Geshe-la, you have now given me unsurpassable instruction', which indicates that he considered it as really inspiring. Indeed, it all comes down to being familiar with a virtuous state of mind, which will then determine our good rebirth. Being familiar with a neutral state of mind doesn't do much to secure a good rebirth.

If one is able to apply a level of mental stabilisation during one's meditation that can maintain focus on the object without distraction, then this by its nature is virtue. If we have not achieved that, and are in either a neutral or distracted state during meditation, the practise does not become the means to accumulate virtue. Mental stabilisation falls within the class of determining mental factors, which means it is not a main consciousness. Some teachings explain that when the main consciousness is in a virtuous state there is a part of the mind which maintains that virtuous focus, and that is what is known as mental stabilisation. When it is explained as a mental factor then it is a state of mind which from its own side is able to maintain an unwavering focus on the object. These determining mental factors are understood to be subsumed into the virtues, which is why mental stabilisation is considered to be a virtuous frame of mind. We now understand how the twelve interdependent links are subsumed into the four noble truths.

The commentary further explains:

To elaborate on this further, the entire collection of topics for those seeking liberation are definitely included into the two classes of phenomena which are afflicted phenomena and enlightening phenomena. That is because, the first is included within the first two truths of the cause which binds that is true Origin and the result which is being bound that is true suffering. The second is included within the next two truths, true cessation which is to be attained and true path which is the means by which to attain.

We can see that the first class of afflicted phenomena includes the twelve interdependent links. The cause which binds is the true origin, and karma and ignorance are within true origin. So of the twelve interdependent links two are karma and three are delusions, and these five together are the truth of origination. The binding factor is the cause and what it binds to is suffering. This is the truth of suffering. The remaining twelve interdependent links (apart from karma and delusions) fit into this truth. On a personal level, the truth of suffering is the five contaminated aggregates and the truth of origination binds us to these aggregates which are in the nature of suffering. Based on that we experience the various sufferings in cyclic existence.

The second class of phenomena, enlightening phenomena, is included within the next two truths: true cessation (to be attained) and true path (the means by which to attain it). There is no other phenomena which would not be subsumed into this as a way to attain liberation.

The commentary continues:

With respect to the order of the presentation, true suffering is taught first so that those seeking liberation would initially think on the general and specific shortcomings of cyclic existence.

This infers that truth of suffering is to be understood or known.

True suffering is taught first so that those seeking liberation initially think about the general and specific shortcomings of cyclic existence, by reflecting on the eight, six and three sufferings, and then generate an uncontrived aspiration to achieve liberation. The eight, six and three sufferings are presented in the lam-rim teachings on the different types of sufferings as humans and so forth.

The point to understand is *that those seeking liberation would need to initially think on the general and specific shortcomings of cyclic existence by reflecting on the sufferings*. So seeking liberation means seeking liberation from the sufferings of cyclic existence. If we wish to be free from the suffering of cyclic existence, we need to contemplate them; more specifically we need to contemplate the shortcomings of cyclic sufferings. Suffering here is not just the obvious levels of suffering that we experience such as physical and mental pain, but more on a deeper level. One needs to understand that.

The eight sufferings as presented in the lam-rim are:

- The suffering of birth
- The suffering of old age
- The suffering of illness
- The suffering of death
- The suffering of encountering what is unpleasant
- The suffering of separation of what is pleasant
- The suffering of not getting what you want
- The suffering of five appropriated aggregates

These are said to be the sufferings generally experienced by all beings in cyclic existence. When we contemplate on each of them individually, we can get a sense of how unbearable they are. Take the example of the suffering of birth. Although we cannot recall our own suffering of birth, by witnessing child birth, and how uncomfortable it is both for the child, who comes out crying, and for the mother who is in pain and tired, we can imagine how much suffering there was at that time. We may also not recall the suffering of our past deaths, as we are not experiencing that now, but we can see how much suffering there is for those on the verge of dying. We can relate to other levels of suffering like the suffering that comes with age and the suffering of illness, and the other types of sufferings listed here. Again, the sufferings explained here are not merely the first level of suffering, the suffering of suffering and suffering of change, but also include the all-pervasive compounded suffering, which is a much deeper level of suffering.

On a practical level, really contemplating these types of suffering can create a great source of endurance and inner strength. One is unfamiliar with the very nature of cyclic existence and contaminated aggregates, and that one is bound to experience sufferings at one time or another, then experiencing them when things go wrong it can become unbearable. If, however, one contemplates sufferings and relates them to one's own experience, then when one experiences some suffering like the suffering of encountering what is unpleasant, or the suffering of being separated from what we perceive as pleasant, and familiarises oneself with the natural consequences of being in cyclic existence, then one's mind will not be too disturbed when it experiences such suffering. There's also the suffering of not getting what you want, and those who don't see this as part of being in cyclic existence will be very disappointed when they don't get what they want.

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Familiarity does not mean just being able to list them out; this alone is not sufficient. One needs to actually incorporate the understanding into one's life and contemplate on the nature of one's own existence. This can really help one's mind.

Shantideva's *Bodhisattva's Way of Life* presented the five virtues or qualities of thinking about suffering. A text lists these specific five qualities.

The first quality is contemplating suffering can become an impetus to **strive for liberation**. For those who have great pride, experiencing suffering can **reduce the pride**. It is very true that when someone who is normally quite pompous or proud gets ill, they don't retain a heightened sense of pride at that time. The third quality refers to when one experiences great agony from suffering, at that time one can recall that this uncomfortable and unwanted feeling one is experiencing is none other than **the result of creating non-virtue** in the past. This can become an impetus to develop a strong determination to refrain from committing non-virtuous negativities. This quality means that by training one's mind to think in this way, one engages in the main practice of taking unfavourable conditions upon the path. There is no other way to do this than to relate to one's immediate sufferings as being a result of non-virtues or negativities created in the past. Then one commits to refrain from negativity now and in the future. This is a very profound level of practice.

The fourth quality is that at the time one experiences great suffering one will **wish to be free from suffering**, and experience a happy state. As one wishes for happiness, and contemplates again the causes for happiness, one understands that accumulating virtue is the cause for happiness. One then develops a keen determination and joy to create virtue. The happiness of wanting to create virtue is one of the qualities of suffering presented here. There are many individuals who have honestly said that they find great impetus for their practice of Dharma when they are experiencing illness. Some comment that they hear the Dharma and think, 'Oh yeah it must be true', and take it lightly. But at the time of great difficulty, such as an illness, then it all becomes reality, a strong impetus to take the Dharma into account arises.

The fifth quality relates to one's own experience of uncomfortable suffering, and contemplating on how all other beings are also in the same plight. Then our suffering becomes a means to remind ourselves to think about the suffering of others, think about their plight and **wish all other beings to be free from suffering**. Then suffering becomes a great impetus to develop great compassion for others. We can now see how we can engage in profound practices through the experience of suffering.

Here we can quote this verse from Shantideva's text:

Furthermore, suffering has good qualities:  
Through being disheartened with it, arrogance is dispelled,  
Compassion arises for those in cyclic existence,  
Negativity is shunned and joy is found in virtue.

This verse includes the five qualities of suffering mentioned earlier: refraining from negativities, being joyful about accumulating virtue, reducing pride and generating love and compassion for other sentient beings.

As presented here, if one really contemplates suffering, one can actually incorporate the practices of all three types of being: small, medium and great scope. If we take this into

account it becomes an incredibly profound practice. It helps us change our attitude towards the experiences we are having. Whether the actual suffering is lessened or not, when we have the proper attitude towards our experience we're better able to endure it. These points show that contemplating on suffering gives our mind the right perspective whereby the thoughts become the means to end suffering, not create more suffering. That is the significant point.

As the teachings present, when one reaches the level of being happy when one is suffering and unhappy when one is experiencing happiness, that is actually a great level of practice. Often we think that overcoming the eight worldly dharmas is a lower-level practice, but in fact if we have not incorporated the means to overcome the eight worldly dharmas, then our real practice hasn't yet begun.

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Edited Version*

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