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# Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual we can engage in our regular meditation [*tonglen meditation*].

We can set our motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines: 'For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose, I will engage in listening to the teachings and putting them into practice well'. If we can generate this motivation from the depth of our hearts, it will make our practice really worthwhile.

## The suffering of cyclic existence

In our last session, the truth of suffering was presented in the context of contemplating the eight types of suffering, the six faults, and the three sufferings.

As mentioned in the Medium Scope teachings, when we contemplate these various levels of suffering, it creates the impetus for us to long for liberation. Based on having developed disenchantment with cyclic existence, we generate renunciation through the very strong determination to be free from it. With this understanding, we then focus on other sentient beings, contemplating how they too are experiencing the various types of suffering. This then becomes the impetus for us to develop compassion. I will present this in more detail later.

Thus, we need to develop a strong conviction that the very fact that one is born in cyclic existence means that one is born into the nature of suffering. Being born into the nature of suffering doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be a feeling of suffering, but rather that samsaric existence invariably leads to dissatisfaction. This discussion will most likely have come up in your recent seminar. Whatever is a product of karma and delusions is necessarily in the nature of suffering; thus all results of karma and delusions are in the nature of suffering. That is one way of understanding it.

Another way of explaining it is that, for any being reborn in cyclic existence, the very fact they are born in cyclic existence means they have to undergo various types of suffering, such as the eight types of suffering presented earlier. In particular, all beings in cyclic existence have to experience the four types of suffering of birth, ageing, sickness, and death. There is no being born in cyclic existence who is spared from these four types of suffering, which inevitably have to be experienced.

As mentioned earlier, contemplating the nature of cyclic existence is what impels us to develop the strong determination to be free from cyclic existence. The commentary mentions that one contemplates the various types of suffering again and again. The examples given are of the eight types of suffering, the six faults of suffering, and particularly the three types of suffering. By

really contemplating these, one naturally develops a strong sense of wanting to be free from them.

The commentary further presents another approach to recognising the pitfalls of cyclic existence, which is based on contemplating the twelve interdependent links in accordance with Chandrakirti's tradition. It is said that contemplating the twelve interdependent links is a much more profound way to develop the wish to be free from cyclic existence because it gives a very detailed description of how beings are born in cyclic existence. Thus, when we contemplate the twelve links in their reverse order, we will be able to see the way to free ourselves from cyclic existence. The incomparably kind teacher Trijang Rinpoche emphasised that thinking about the twelve interdependent links is a more profound way to develop renunciation and the wish to be free from samsara.

When we apply our understanding of the process of entering into samsara to other sentient beings – who are also caught in cyclic existence by way of the twelve interdependent links – the compassion we develop for them becomes much more profound. It's relatively easy for us to develop compassion when we see the obvious levels of suffering that other sentient beings undergo. But if we do not understand the process of how beings enter cyclic existence, it will be harder to develop compassion for those who are seemingly enjoying the pleasures of samsara, and not undergoing any obvious level of suffering. Therefore, contemplating the twelve interdependent links is also a profound way to develop compassion for other sentient beings.

Most people can relate to the obvious levels of suffering and develop a sense of compassion for others who are experiencing it. In fact, the common basis for developing compassion in all religions is recognising the obvious levels of suffering that others experience and wishing them to free from that.

However, here we develop compassion by recognising the main cause of sentient beings being caught in cyclic existence is ignorance. The ignorance of grasping at the self is the root cause for beings to enter cyclic existence and experience the shortcomings of various levels of suffering. This explanation is unique to the Buddhist teachings. This is how we can see that the development of compassion here is on a much more profound level.

Indeed, when we think about it, while we are now experiencing the results of previous karma that is not yet exhausted, we are constantly creating more karma. When we create karma out of ignorance, that becomes the cause to be reborn in cyclic existence, and thus the cycle is further perpetuated. When we think in this way, it can appear that there is no end to our cyclic existence.

Yet, while we are still under the influence of ignorance and compelled to create karma, if we can ensure that we at least create positive karmas, which are a cause for a higher rebirth, then that is worthwhile. While we are not yet able to completely free ourselves from cyclic existence, the next best thing is to create the karma for obtaining a higher rebirth, such as a human rebirth in the next life. If we could secure a good human rebirth, it would then become the basis for us to further engage in

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the practices and free ourselves from cyclic existence. In this way, we can see that there is some hope.

As humans, we have the great potential to be able to create the causes for a good future rebirth. If we don't use that potential, it would really be a great pity, and this human life would be no different from an animal's rebirth. An animal doesn't have the understanding or capacity to create virtuous karmas for a good rebirth in the next lifetime. They have no choice, because they have no understanding. In such circumstances, it is hard to see how they could create the causes to be free from cyclic existence. Whereas as humans, we have the potential to create the causes for a higher rebirth.

Contemplating these points becomes a great comfort for us. By contemplating the pitfalls or disadvantages of cyclic existence, we can develop a sense of disenchantment for its pleasures. This in turn benefits us greatly, because it reduces our strong attachment to the pleasures of cyclic existence. Contemplating this definitely helps the mind to become calmer and more relaxed. We will have less anxiety, along with a sense of purpose and the knowledge that we can free ourselves from cyclic existence. If, on the other hand, one has strong attachment to, and longing for, the pleasures of cyclic existence, it will be hard for the impetus or wish to be free from cyclic existence to arise.

As presented in the teachings, the definition of cyclic existence is: 'the factor or part which connects one to rebirth again and again through karma and delusions.' The Tibetan term *cha*, which is translated as 'factor' or 'part', might have a slightly ambiguous meaning. I personally understand it as 'continuum'. So the continuum that connects one's rebirth again and again through delusions and karma is cyclic existence. When I presented it in this way, Lama Zopa Rinpoche commented, "Oh, that's a very good meaning. That's a more profound understanding of what 'cyclic existence' is". In any case, we can understand it as the factor that connects one again and again to rebirth through delusions and karma.

When the teachings present an ambiguous passage, I often apply a certain understanding and interpretation myself. Of course, I could be wrong at times, but it is good to find logical ways to understand a point.

I used to also wonder why there were slightly different ways of presenting the meanings of the teachings by great scholars and masters of the past. Now, having contemplated them for many years, I can see that there are profound reasons for those seemingly different presentations. Their presentations come from their own thorough investigation and experience. For example, there are seemingly different presentations of the ultimate view of emptiness. But the different ways of explaining it come from the thorough investigations and experiences of individual masters and scholars. They might have slightly different ways of expressing their experiences. However, we need to understand that, when they come from great masters and scholars, all these teachings are presentations based on a profound and thorough understanding. That's how I understand these differences, and it is good for you to also keep this in

mind, so that you do not develop doubts about different presentations.

In summary, by contemplating suffering, the nature of cyclic existence, and particular types of suffering in detail, one then comes to the point of wondering whether there is a cause for these sufferings or not. Do these sufferings occur randomly without cause? Or do they have a cause? That's the next contemplation we undertake.

### The cause of suffering

It's essential for us to investigate whether there is a cause for suffering or not, rather than just following the outline of the teachings and thinking, "The teaching presents the causes as delusions and karma". If we just resort to that explanation, we won't develop a personal understanding of whether or not there is a cause of suffering. We need to use our own initiative and really investigate whether there is a cause of suffering or not. While some levels of understanding may not be immediately obvious to us, if we really think about the cause of suffering and contemplate it, it will start to become clearer and clearer to us.

Through logic, it would become clear to us that suffering must have a cause. If it didn't have a cause, then when suffering was experienced, it would have to be experienced perpetually, at all times, because it doesn't depend on a cause. It would either have to occur at all times or, when it ceased, it would have to cease altogether. Why would it occur again if there were no causes?

We can also contemplate how suffering itself is by nature impermanent. Whatever suffering one experiences, it does not last for ever, it actually changes. The moments of experiencing suffering can later change into a feeling of relief from that suffering. However, due to causes and conditions, one can experience that suffering again.

When we contemplate the impermanent nature of suffering, we can also incorporate an understanding of how, depending on causes and conditions, we experience the result of suffering. When the causes and conditions cease, the experience of suffering ceases as well. This is how we acquire a deep understanding and insight into the causes of suffering.

In relation to the **four attributes of the truth of suffering**, when we contemplate suffering, we contemplate that it is: impermanent; in the nature of suffering; empty; and selfless. In this way, we get a more profound understanding of the nature of suffering within the context of cyclic existence.

More particularly, when we contemplate the causes of suffering, we can understand that we create karma as a result of an initial cause, which is the delusions, particularly ignorance. Through the combination of delusions and karma, one individual being creates the causes to be reborn in cyclic existence, and then experiences the various levels and types of suffering. The great master, Lama Tsong Khapa, says in one of his works: "Without thinking about the process of how one enters samsara, there is no way that one will be able to reverse the process and thus be free from samsara". This is very profound. It encompasses the main points that we

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need to contemplate – the process of how an individual being enters samsara. We have to relate to these causes for samsara as not being physical causes, but rather causes within the mental continuum – specifically, the delusions, of which ignorance is the very root cause of samsara; and then the karma created out of those delusions.

As the commentary explains here:

Following the recognition of the delusions and contaminated action as being the cause of cyclic existence, one will generate a thought of getting rid of the true origin. Therefore, after that (true suffering) is presented, true origin is presented.

So thus:

One meditates on true origin to understand the means by which beings enter into cyclic existence.

This is exactly the point I was explaining earlier. That is why one meditates on the truth of suffering first, as a way to develop the impetus to understand the causes of suffering and contemplate them.

On this point of *meditating on true origin to understand the means by which beings enter into cyclic existence*, at a practical level, we can all relate to this notion of this very strong sense of ‘I’ that we have within us. The stronger this sense of ‘I’, the more likely it is that we will have strong feelings of ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ in relation to different objects. We think: “I like this so I want this” and “I don’t like that so I want to get rid of it”. That strong sense of ‘I’ itself is not specifically identified in the teachings as the ignorance of grasping at a self; it is, however, a major factor for generating attachment and aversion to particular objects. The stronger that sense of ‘I’, the stronger the sense of attachment we develop towards certain things we like and want, and the stronger our aversion towards certain things that we don’t like and wish to avoid. This is how we can relate it to ourselves on a practical level.

By relating it to our own experience, we can get a sense that, for as long as we are under the power of the three primary delusions of attachment, anger and ignorance, there is no real opportunity for us to be free. We need to really think about whether that is a good situation for us to be in or not. Would we rather be free from the dominance and influence of the three poisons, or would we rather be under their dominance? We can all relate to the fact that, if we were free from these three poisons or primary delusions, it would indeed be a great relief from our agony, and that a great sense of peace and calmness would prevail within us.

Having identified the causes of samsara as karma and delusion, it is appropriate to get some further understanding of what this means. Karma here particularly relates to contaminated karma. There are some karmas classified as uncontaminated, and the karmas that are a cause for cyclic existence are said to be contaminated karma. The general **definition of karma** is ‘the mental factor of intention’. The **definition of delusion** (or affliction) is, ‘a mental factor which, from the moment it is generated, causes unrest and disturbance in one’s mind’.

As presented previously, we come to understand the process of entering cyclic existence through contemplating the twelve interdependent links. The first, ignorance, is specifically the ignorance of grasping at the self. Due to grasping at the self, one creates a karma, which is the second link, karmic formation. That karma then leaves an imprint upon the consciousness, which is the third link, which further connects to the remaining links. This is the process of entering cyclic existence.

A point to note here is that karmic formation, the second link, is a particular type of karma known as throwing, or propelling, karma and is so-called because it has the potential to propel or throw you into a future existence – that is, it has the potential to bring about the effect of a ripened result within cyclic existence. The term ‘potential’ is used here because the karma need not be definite; once a karma is created, whether positive or negative, it can be counteracted. For example, when one engages in purification practice, certain negative karmas can be exhausted or purified. Also, the imprint of positive karmas can be cancelled due to generating anger afterwards. Therefore, the definition of karma includes potential: karma has the full potential to bring about a ripened effect. The tenth of the twelve interdependent links, existence, is said to be the completing karma of the causes that were created before. So completion takes place at this stage.

Another point to understand here is that the grasping at the self as presented in the twelve interdependent links is said to be the **grasping at the self of a person**. When the teachings on the twelve interdependent links say that the first link is the cause of cyclic existence, we need to understand that ‘the first’ here relates to the first link of the twelve interdependent links. It does not relate to the very root cause of all cyclic existence, because that is said to be **grasping at the self of phenomena**. These explanations need to be understood when the twelve interdependent links are presented.

So, when the commentary says, *meditating on the true origins to understand the means by which beings enter into cyclic existence*, it really means to contemplate how, out of ignorance, we create the causes, the karma, and how all the rest of the experiences of cyclic existence follow from that. By contemplating the causes of cyclic existence, such as ignorance, in depth, we next contemplate whether ignorance can be abandoned or not. When we contemplate the possibility of abandoning ignorance, we get an inkling of how it is possible to abandon the sufferings of cyclic existence.

As mentioned earlier, true origin is identified as afflictions or delusions and karma. The three root delusions (anger, attachment and ignorance) are the causes of the suffering we experience. Of those three delusions, it is particularly ignorance that serves as the main cause. When we see that the very root cause of our all our suffering can be abandoned, then we can develop the profound understanding that cyclic existence can be abandoned.

The commentary explains:

Ignorance which is the primary true origin refers to a mistaken view with respect to the way things exist. Seeing the possibility of eliminating it will entail the

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knowledge of the possibility of attaining true cessation.

As presented here, we need to really contemplate how ignorance is a mistaken view. To understand the possibility of abandoning ignorance, we need to first identify ignorance, and understand whether it is a correct view or an incorrect view. As mentioned, the term ignorance here specifically refers to the ignorance of grasping at the self. How does the self appear to an ordinary conceptual mind? How does the self appear to us? Does it appear to be autonomous? Does it appear to be independent? If that is how it appears, then is that true or false? Is the self independently, autonomously, and substantially existent or not? Contemplating how the self does not exist in the way it appears shows us how the ignorance of grasping at the self is a mistaken view: it is based on falsity. If it is a mistaken view and based on falsity, then it cannot hold its true identity. Thus it is possible to overcome it, because it does not hold its true identity: it does not exist in the way it appears.

By contemplating in this way, again and again, we come to the realisation that ignorance is something we can abandon or overcome. This realisation does not come about naturally, by itself, but rather through a lot of contemplating and meditating.

Of course, at our level, we have to use many different reasonings to prove that the self does not exist in the way it appears. The various logical reasonings that prove selflessness have to be employed here, such as the reasoning of 'dependent arising', which is said to be one of the most profound reasonings. Based on the misconception or wrong view of perceiving a self that is not dependent on any causes, conditions or parts, we perceive a self that appears to have its own independent existence. It appears to be independently existent, without depending on causes and any parts. So while the 'I' or self appears in this way, we need to investigate whether it actually exists in that way or not. We contemplate how a self that does not depend on causes or parts, and exists in a unitary way, independently, by itself, cannot possibly be true.

### True cessation

When one contemplates like this – using the reasoning of dependent arising, that the self is dependent on causes and conditions and parts, and is thus an imputed phenomenon – one gains an understanding of selflessness through reasoning. Although one may not have had the direct realisation of selflessness or emptiness yet, even the understanding gained through reasoning is said to be very profound. Actually, some teachings explain that a profound understanding of selflessness and emptiness can be gained through reasoning alone.

Thus, we need to employ such methods to gain the profound understanding of selflessness and emptiness. When one gains the understanding of selflessness – realising that the self does not exist independently, without depending on causes and parts – we will have shattered the wrong view of grasping at a truly existent or inherently existent self. Thus we will have begun to shatter the very cause of cyclic existence. This is in line

with the commentary where it says that ... *seeing the possibility of eliminating ignorance will entail the knowledge of the possibility of attaining true cessation*. This is the point I am emphasising here.

The commentary then mentions:

Therefore, at the third time, true cessation is taught.

... *at the third time* ... refers to the sequence of the four noble truths, when true cessation is presented. Then quoting from the *Bei-bum* scripture, the commentary further mentions:

As it follows that the attainment of true cessation is dependent upon the realisation of true path, so at the fourth time the true path is taught.

So, in relation to the path, *cessation is dependent upon the realisation of true path*. The true path, as presented previously, relates to the three higher trainings (morality, concentration and emptiness), the main practices to be adopted here. Emptiness is the direct antidote that overcomes the ignorance that grasps at a self, because it leads to the realisation that there is no truly or inherently existent self. When one further meditates on that, and develops calm abiding focusing on emptiness, that is further enhanced through the development of special insight. When one achieves calm abiding, one obtains physical and mental pliancy. Then, based on physical and mental pliancy, one experiences physical and mental bliss. It is from within that state of physical and mental bliss that one is able to investigate the meditational object, which is emptiness. Then one obtains the union of calm abiding and special insight.

After thorough investigation, when one gains the realisation of emptiness directly, one obtains the path of seeing; at the first moment one obtains the uninterrupted meditative equipoise on emptiness. Then, when one obtains the liberated path of seeing, one obtains cessation. So first one realises the actual path, then cessation is obtained when one attains the liberated path. This was presented in more detail previously; here it needs to be understood and incorporated with an understanding of the true path.

After having obtained the path of seeing, when one further meditates on emptiness, one gains the path of meditation and develops the antidote for overcoming the subtler levels of the imprints of the delusions. Then, once one overcomes the actual root of the delusions within oneself, one obtains liberation. One obtains liberation when the roots of the delusions are completely abandoned. Of course, more profound details are explained in the teachings, but we can broadly understand how one obtains liberation in this way.

At that point on the path of meditation, when one completely abandons the root or seed of the delusions, one obtains liberation. However, although one has abandoned the seed of the delusions, the imprints are still within one's mental continuum. Hence there is still the appearance of a mistaken view, a dualistic appearance; this is the sign that one has not yet overcome the imprints of the delusions.

The analogy used is that dualistic appearance at this level is like a dream. Although the dream appears to be true, it is actually mistaken. That is why the analogy of a dream

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is often used in the teachings – because things in a dream are an illusion. The reason why dreams appear real to the mind is because it is affected by the mind of sleep. Similarly, for sentient beings who have not yet abandoned the imprints of the delusions, there is still the mistaken view of the appearance of inherent or true existence due to those imprints affecting the mind.

It is good to understand how the example fits the meaning. Normally, we would just say, “Oh, it’s like a dream or an illusion”, but it’s good to understand how the mind is affected in this specific way. Many have commented that it is useful to understand how this wrong consciousness affects our perception. I have also explained in recent teachings the story of how having that understanding really helped one geshe’s mind. So it’s good to understand how we possess a wrong consciousness.

It’s because we don’t recognise wrong consciousness that we fall prey to always engaging in wrong deeds. In those situations, we follow appearances, we believe in them, and thus engage in wrong deeds. But if we had that proper understanding, it would prevent us from following the wrong consciousness that propels us towards non-virtuous deeds; we would hesitate and avoid that. So it’s meaningful for us to have that understanding.

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Edited Version*

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