
Study Group - “Liberation *in the Palm of Your Hand*”

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Try to cultivate the proper motivation, which is wishing to achieve full enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings. Try to cultivate this motivation in your heart, not just in words. Also develop the motivation to put these teachings into practice in order to achieve the ultimate spiritual wish of full enlightenment for the sake of all beings.

422.321.12 The Actual Seven-Fold Cause and Effect Instruction

In past teachings we finished the benefits of bodhicitta, and also the meditation on immeasurable equanimity. Tonight we start the teachings on the actual seven-fold cause and effect instruction to generate bodhicitta.

422.321.121 The first cause: Recognising all Sentient Beings as one's Mother

The first of the seven-fold cause and effect instructions is to recognise all beings as having been one's mother. It is said that this first step is difficult to cultivate, yet we have to realise that without this first step it is impossible to generate the following steps. Therefore we need to make very serious effort to cultivate this first step.

The relationship with one's mother is the closest relationship one can have with another sentient being. Therefore it is said that to cultivate bodhicitta mind one has to recognise all sentient beings as one's mother, otherwise one is deprived of the opportunity to cultivate bodhicitta. So it is very important to make effort to see all sentient beings as one's mother at an experiential level.

Although this is a difficult step, unlike profound topics such as impermanence and emptiness, there is not much scriptural and logical evidence that can be employed to prove this fact. There are some scriptural sources but these alone will not convince our mind. The most important factor that will convince your mind is to employ, to the best of your knowledge, as much logical proof as possible. If you take time to explore this topic with many reasons, you can gradually see how it makes sense that all sentient beings have, in fact, been one's mother.

Beginningless Mind

The logical starting point, and the most important thing we need to know, is that our life is beginningless. Once we have proved to ourselves that our life is beginningless, then we can infer that each and every sentient being has been our mother in the past.

By saying that life is beginningless we are also saying

that consciousness has no beginning. The continuum of our consciousness is like a seed: you cannot trace the initial cause of any particular seed. That seed came from a cause, which came from a former cause, and so it goes without beginning. If we consider the life which we take in cyclic existence, then due to the force of karma and delusion the number of lives we took in the past is infinite. If we trace back we can find no beginning where we can say that this is the start of one's life in cyclic existence.

If you burn a seed in a fire, then that is the end of the seed. If you trace forward rather than backwards, you realise that, just like that burnt seed, your life in cyclic existence has an end, because that life is based on the object of the conception of self-grasping, which does not exist. When we realise this, we can realise that there is an end to this life within cyclic existence. The ignorance which is this conception of self-grasping is the seed, or the root of our continuation in cyclic existence. When the seed is completely burnt, there is no chance for it to sprout and grow branches. Likewise once the seed of ignorance is destroyed, or at least if we can see the possibility of its destruction, or the removal of that root cause, then we can understand that there will be no creation of karma, and without karma there is no birth. So although life has no beginning in cyclic existence, we can see the possibility of it having an end.

Logical Proofs Of Beginningless Mind

Regarding the logical proof which shows that our consciousness, or mind, has no beginning Chandrakirti stated, “The mind of a just born child has a preceding moment of mind, because it is a mind.”

If we are asked, “From where does our current mind come?” we might say, “It comes from the mind which we had yesterday.” This is one simple reason we can use, because if the mind that we have today is not a continuation of the mind we had yesterday, then there would be no connection. But there is a connection, in the sense that we planned yesterday to do something today, and we have completed that task. The reason why we can do it today, is because it was planned in our mind yesterday. Just as today we have plans to do things tomorrow, or on the next day, then when the time comes we can do those things. Therefore it is very clear that the mind we have today comes from yesterday's mind, and yesterday's mind came from the day before that. We can see this for as long as we have lived in this current life.

From where does the mind we have in this life come?

We can say it comes from our body, because the body supports the mind. If it comes from this body, then from where does this body come? And so we can trace right back to the first moment of conception in the mother's womb which is when life in this body began. The question is does that first moment of body have a karmic cause, a previous life, or does it come totally from our parents?"

The initial cause of one's body is the union of egg and sperm from one's parents. Even scientifically, however it is clear that this union of egg and sperm does not always develop into a new body. Therefore we say that at conception consciousness must also be entering, since the union of egg and sperm alone does not always form life.

We can say that the egg and the sperm come from our parents, but can we say that our consciousness also comes from our parents? If it does come from our parents many unsolved questions arise. If we look at children from the same parents, each one of them might have very different habitual behaviours and different personalities. If their minds as well as their bodies came from their parents, then why are there so many differences in the children? You can see for example, how within the one family one child can be calm, soft and placid by nature, whereas the other child can be rough, aggressive and very angry by nature.

It is said that there is some parental influence in the personality of the children; boys will have more personality traits of the mother, and a girl will have more traits from her father, however this needs to be examined. But in terms of the child's natural habitual behaviour, it is extremely difficult to say that this has anything to do with the parents. If habitual behaviour was inherited, then it would follow that the children would resemble their parents in this respect.

So the mind of the child has not come from the parent, and is not the same continuation of the parents' minds. Then what is the origin of the mind? If we say that it comes from some mind other than that of the parent, then this is a sign of existence of a previous life.

Logically then, if we have to contend that this current life must have a former life, then it follows that that former life must have had a life before that, and so on. So we cannot trace back to the beginning, as the number of lives we have taken in the past becomes infinite. It follows that if each sentient being has served as our parent, then logically there are not enough sentient beings to have served as our parent in the past. In this way we see that in the countless numbers of past lives, then each time we are born from a mother's womb or from an egg, we have relied upon some other being as our mother. Using this method we can deduce that there is not one sentient being who has not been our mother in the past.

It is said that this first step of recognising all sentient beings as one's mother is an essential cause to generate impartial love and compassion for all sentient beings, as it extends the number of objects for whom we generate love and compassion.

Another very effective reason proving the existence of previous lives is our experience of a different identity as "I" when someone calls our name. We have some notion of a self identity which is attached to the name of this life, but we also have the experience of another "I" which can arise without any connection to the name of this present life. Therefore there is an "I" which is related to this life, and there is an "I" which is not related to this life.

When we talk of the existence of life before and after, the whole question is one of the continuum of our mind, and of our self. If we can prove that our mind is beginningless or comes from a previous life, then naturally we can also understand that there is a future life.

Given the fact that our mind's continuum has come from a past life and has no beginning, and will likewise go on into a future life, what we need to know is that in our continuum there is an habitual pattern which determines our mental attitude, familiarity with, and ability to achieve things. It is important to see that happiness and suffering are all the outcomes of the good and bad nature in our habitual pattern. Therefore our focus in spiritual practice is on developing this good nature and habitual pattern in our mind.

Our most important spiritual practice is subduing our own mind, but we cannot achieve a result instantly. It takes a continuous effort, and to make this continuous effort we must maintain our motivation to practise dharma or the spiritual teachings. Having such a continuously strong motivation to practise dharma also depends upon our understanding of the connection of this life with previous and future lives. On this basis we slowly develop an understanding of the spiritual path. Then how we make continuous progress is a matter of being skilful, such as realising that it is very important to not rush, or force, the pace and that spiritual practice is rather a very gradual process, where we make an effort bit by bit, but always in a continuous way. For more details you can refer to the commentary.

The point of always training our mind to objects such as non-attachment, non-hatred, non-jealousy, non-competitiveness, is not only to enhance peace and happiness in this life, but it also has some benefit for future lives. We know from our experience in this life that we feel very peaceful and calm when there is no disturbance of anger, jealousy, or attachment in our mind, then we feel totally relaxed. If we train our mind to be distant from any objects of attachment, anger and so on, then if we are born as a human in the future we shall find more peace in the sense that there will be less influence from desire and so forth. As we always emphasise in the teachings, what we are looking for in our spiritual practice is help or support from within ourself. Once we have found that support, then even when we encounter deceit, we are not disturbed and do not feel discarded, deceived or helpless.

Headings with outline numbering are derived from the Text. Headings without outline numbering are derived from Geshe Doga's commentary.
