

*This booklet is part of the series on
The Basic Teachings of Buddhism*

***The Twelve Links of
Interdependent Origination***

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Note

We have italicized each technical word the first time that it is used to alert the reader that it may be found in the Glossary of Terms.

The Tibetan words are given as they are pronounced and their actual spelling.

We use the convention of using B.C.E. (Before Current Era) for B.C. and we use C.E. (Current Era) for A.D.

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Chapter 1

Cause and Effect

The teachings on *Mahamudra*¹ are mainly concerned with discovering the essence of mind, which is emptiness (Skt. *shunyata*)² or “the way things really are” (Tib. *nge lug*) on the ultimate level.³ The teachings on interdependent origination (Tib. *tendrel*) are complementary to the Mahamudra teachings because they deal with “the way things appear” (Tib. *khri lug*). Although on the ultimate level things really are emptiness or the undifferentiated pure nature, on the conventional or relative level things manifest because of each other; they depend upon each other, they originate one from another. The teachings on the twelve links concern interdependence of the way things originate and their dependence on each other.

Interdependent origination deals with the world as we experience it. Even though we understand through the Mahamudra teachings that everything ultimately has a pure nature, our everyday experience of the inner self and the outer world of phenomena is experienced as a relative universe, as a process of interdependent origination. The twelve links examine and explain the connections of all phenomena.

Where does the world of relative manifestations we experience—whether the outer world of the four elements (earth, water, fire, and air) or the inner world of our body, speech, and mind—come from? Various religions and philosophies have proposed answers to explain the manifestation of the relative world. Some philosophies that existed in India at the time of the Buddha, for instance, postulated no cause for things to happen. If this were the case, then absolutely anything could happen at any time in a haphazard way, without needing any cause; sometimes things would take place, sometimes they would not. Absolutely anything could be possible in any moment. But through observation we know that this is not true. If we observe phenomena and the way they appear, we see very clearly that they only happen when causes

are present and combined in such a way that allows them to appear. There is not an infinite possibility of anything happening. So it is not true that things happen without a cause.

Other philosophical schools think that some divine power, a God or gods, is the cause for the creation of the things that we experience. They think, for instance, that a god might not only create the outer world but also be responsible for our own inner happiness, our suffering, and how we relate to the world. Of course, when one believes that there is a god or a creator, then it is necessary to pray to the god and make offerings to show respect to that god. The people who believe this way feel that their happiness comes from respecting and paying homage to the god and that if they do not carry out these actions, suffering and punishment will ensue. That is another way to explain cause and effect in our relative world.

In fact, the views that we hold in our minds are not the true causes for the manifestation of the things we experience. To counteract the incorrect views that were present during the Buddha's time, the Buddha taught interdependence as the way things manifest. Furthermore, he broke this process into twelve stages. He explained that the things we experience do not arise without a cause, nor do they come from a god or gods.

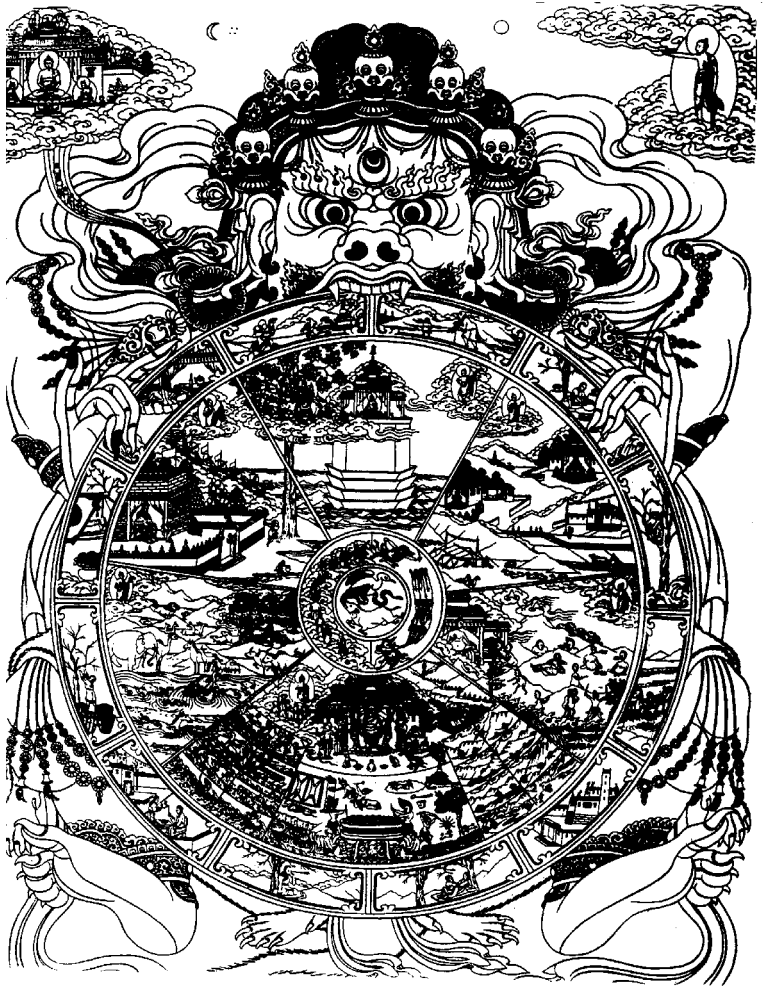
In fact, the Buddhist belief is that each thing manifests because of its own specific cause. For instance, if we feel happy, then there are specific reasons that we are happy. If we are suffering, then there is a specific reason or reasons for that suffering. Each condition has its prime cause, its main cause.

Not only is there a primary cause for every effect to occur, but also there are also many secondary conditions and circumstances which, if present, will modify the quality of the way something manifests. In brief, everything has its causes and conditions, and these causes and conditions interact with each other to make up our experience.

Everything we experience as the outer world, as well as our inner mind, is due to the interdependent play of causes and conditions. In his kindness, the Buddha gave the extraordinary and special teachings on interdependence to explain how things are produced. Interdependence explains causation in terms of the material world. For example, a flower must have a prime cause, which is a seed. The seed makes a shoot, and the shoot grows into a flower. For the flower to grow, the flower must have the primary

cause or seed, but it must also have the secondary causal conditions of soil, warmth, sunlight, water, and so forth. Another example is our mind, which is made up of the five *aggregates* (Skt. *skandhas*), which also emerge because of causes and conditions and their interplay. The mind goes through a complex set of twelve stages, which are the twelve links of interdependent origination. Through this process, ignorance sometimes arises, and this is the cause of suffering in our life.

The Buddha's teachings explain outer and inner interdependence. We have seen the outer form in the example of the flower. The inner form has more to do with our own being. Of these two, it is the understanding of inner interdependence that is most important for us. By understanding how interdependence works in our mind, we see in sequence how one thing produces another through the twelve links of causation. It is made clear to us that once there is "this" particular thing, then "that" will happen, or, in other words, "this" cause is the ground giving rise to "that" effect. In this way, we understand how inner interdependence takes place progressively, how the interaction of complex elements makes up our inner experience. When we study this, we do so in the actual process of creation and action that generates *samsara*. We also study the order in which we can take this process apart. Dismantling the process of *samsara* shows the way to liberation and enlightenment. This is the reason why the teachings on inner interdependence are very important.



The Wheel of Life

Yamantaka, the Lord of Death devours the wheel of samsara. The outer circle shows the 12 links of interdependence, the next inner circle shows the six realms of samsara and the innermost circle shows the root of these realms which are the major disturbing emotions of attachment, aggression, and confusion.

Chapter 2

The Twelve Links

1. IGNORANCE

In the presentation of the twelve links of interdependence, the first link, which is the basis for all the others, is ignorance. Being ignorant creates all the ups and downs, the happiness and the suffering, that are part and parcel of samsaric experience. Samsara is like that: sometimes we are happy and sometimes we suffer. All of the complex illusions and manifestations which are this samsaric world are rooted in ignorance. Here, ignorance means “not knowing” the true nature of existence. When one does not understand or recognize the true nature of reality, then through this “ignoring,” all the manifestations of samsara come about. Ignorance is therefore the prime cause of our happiness and our suffering. That is why it is presented as the first of the twelve links.

The first, root link of ignorance means that, by ignoring the true nature of phenomena, we project things which do not exist; we are deluded, we are confused. Although there is no self, we are under the illusion that a self exists. Although everything is impermanent, we incorrectly project permanence onto everything. We also believe that some things such as material possessions will bring happiness, when in fact they do not. Our ignorance gives rise to confusion. And because of confusion, our samsaric world is generated; all the ways we have of relating to things are generated from the root causes of ignorance.

In a way, this is good news because it means that samsara and its suffering are easy to get rid of. If samsara and suffering were real and solid and not just due to the confusion of our own mind, then they would be very hard, almost impossible to get rid of. As it is, because the root cause of suffering and samsara is the confusion and ignorance of our mind, if we remove that delusion and ignorance, then the very root of samsara and suffering can be eliminated. By working on our mind’s confusion we can become

liberated. Clearly, this is very fortunate. We have the possibility of liberation and enlightenment by attacking the very root of samsara and its complex suffering.

There is a famous example in the Buddhist scriptures, illustrating how ignorance is the root of our suffering and showing that if we eliminate this mistaken view, the misery of samsara will go away. It is the example of mistaking a rope for a snake. If one goes into a dark room and sees a coiled rope, one might believe out of ignorance that the rope is a snake. Thinking that the rope is a snake, one would be full of fear and other painful and obscuring emotions. If there really were a snake, then one would be in serious trouble and would have to work hard to get out of the situation. But in this case, there is only confusion: there is no snake, only a rope. By examining what is really there, one realizes that it is not a snake at all, and one's feelings of panic and anxiety are eliminated. Similarly, if samsara, which is quite frightening with all its pain and suffering, were as real as it seems, then to be free of it would be quite a job. But because samsara's very root is our own ignorance and confusion, then once we get rid of these, all of the problems of samsara will disappear. It is not that samsara is real and we have to get rid of it, but that our perception of samsara is rooted in a basic mistake; it is the mistake that needs to be eliminated. Once that is done, we will be liberated from all of samsara.

In order to counteract the confusion and ignorance which are the root of suffering, the Buddha taught at three different levels, which are called the *three vehicles*⁴ His teachings of the first vehicle, the *Hinayana*, are easiest to understand. In the *Hinayana*, the Buddha explained that our suffering in samsara is due to our mistaken belief that we have a solid, real self. He showed that, in reality, there is no lasting self, and that it is through our fabrication of the notion of self that all our suffering and difficulties come about. Through discovering that there is no lasting self, one realizes that there is no one who suffers, no one who has difficulties—this is indeed liberation. The belief of a lasting self is established by carefully analyzing the components of one's existence—specifically the five aggregates, the twelve *dhatu*s, and the *eighteen elements*. One tries to find a single individual self, the thing we refer to as “I,” and instead one finds only a collection of aggregates or elements. One then looks at mind through the passage of time and finds that the “I” that was in the past is not the “I” that is in the

present, nor is it the “I” that will be in the future. Through such careful analysis, one understands clearly that there is no lasting self. Through meditating profoundly on the meaning of that, the confusion and the delusion caused by the projection of a lasting self are overcome. This is how the prime source of suffering and difficulties is removed according to the teachings of the first vehicle, called the Hinayana.

To those with great intelligence and with a broader vision and wisdom, the Buddha taught a combination of skillful means and wisdom in the second vehicle, the *Mahayana*. In order to remove ignorance, the Buddha demonstrated that not only is the individual self “empty” or devoid of a lasting self, but that all outer phenomena, such as mountains and trees, as well as inner thoughts and feelings, are also empty. By a skillful and profound analysis of gross phenomena, especially as presented in the Middle Way (Skt. *Madhyamaka*) one comes to understand that there is no phenomenon that has true existence, because all gross things are merely collections of smaller components and do not have an existence in their own right. Phenomena are just concoctions of smaller things. By working down to the most subtle objects, to the notion of an atom or tiniest building-block of matter, one recognizes that there are no lasting self entities in the phenomenal world.

Likewise, one applies a similar logic to one’s own mind. One analyzes mind in terms of time, going to the tiniest fraction of mind-moments. From this analysis, one realizes that mind and thoughts and feelings also do not have the lasting entity that they seem to have. Through all these skillful approaches, one understands emptiness in a broader sense: the fact that all phenomena are devoid of inherent existence.⁵ Through these logical analyses, one develops the view of emptiness; then one contemplates and meditates on that truth. This overcomes all illusions. The value of this approach is that it not only brings liberation for oneself, but also brings liberation for many, many other beings.

Although the Hinayana is a wonderful approach and benefits many beings, it is said in the scriptures that the time it might take to go through the process of the Hinayana and Mahayana could be as long as three eons, which is in the order of millions of years.

The third vehicle is the *Vajrayana*, which gives us the opportunity to reach Buddhahood very quickly. The Vajrayana

recognizes that, while it is important to analyze external phenomena, this process takes a long time; the Vajrayana approach is to examine the mind, which is very close by and far easier to analyze.

On the gross level, we see our mind as a single thing, as something that exists and that experiences thoughts and feelings and perceptions. This is a very powerful experience, and we feel sure that the mind exists as a solid entity. But once we examine mind closely to discover its character, its very nature or essence, we find that mind is devoid of any entity at all. We cannot find any color or any shape for it, nor can we find any place where mind rests. In fact, this thing we call “mind” is nothing whatsoever and is found nowhere. Mind is empty by its very essence. After the emptiness of mind is established, the Vajrayana approach is to look at the emptiness of outer phenomena—whose emptiness will then be easier to establish, because outer phenomena are only appearances in the mind, which has already been established as being empty.

The Buddha’s teachings generally are presented in terms of the *sutras* and *tantras*. We find the information on the twelve links of interdependence mainly in the sutras; however, the teachings on interdependence are equally valid for the tantras.

As already presented, there are twelve links of interdependence, which begin with the first link, ignorance. This is the ignorance of not understanding the true nature of reality, which is emptiness. It is this ignorance that causes us to wander in samsara. It is through the ignorance of not knowing the truth that the other steps follow and our mind becomes samsaric. Ignorance, again, means not knowing the true nature of reality. It is seeing how reality seems to be and not what it really is.

Among the Vajrayana teachings are the Mahamudra teachings. The point of the Mahamudra teachings is to gain a true vision of the nature of reality. In Mahamudra practice, we learn to develop first *Shamatha* and then *Vipashyana*. Through *Vipashyana*, we eventually come to recognize the true nature of reality. By doing so, we are attacking the very root of the twelve links, which is ignorance. Instead of not knowing, we have clear knowing of the true nature of reality. We can thus see that there is no conflict at all between the sutra path and the tantra path, and that the teachings on the twelve links are very helpful for our practice of the Vajrayana.

Because of the first link, one ends up in samsara, where the

whole samsaric process goes on. Ignorance is the prime cause and root which accompanies the samsaric mind. Some texts speak of “raw ignorance” and “accompanying ignorance,” which means that ignorance goes along with our thoughts and experiences. Thus there is both the basic ignorance of not knowing the true nature of things and accompanying ignorance.

Basic ignorance, or “ignoring the true nature,” is expressed in the sutras as “not recognizing the dharmata,” with *dharmata* being the very essence of phenomena. Basic ignorance is expressed in Mahamudra slightly differently, as “not recognizing the essence of mind.” Either way, it is the root ignorance, while accompanying ignorance goes along with our thoughts and feelings. When there is a very gross and coarse level of thinking, for example the desire for things that seem powerfully attractive, instead of recognizing the truth that such things are empty of inherent nature, one thinks that the things one desires are really very important and worth getting. One is both ignorant of the true nature (basic ignorance) and deluded by the apparent nature (accompanying ignorance). The same is true of anger. What seems unpleasant is rejected with aversion; not recognizing the empty nature of appearances, there is accompanying ignorance as well. Sometimes there is neither the power of attraction nor rejection, but just a mental dullness. Again, not recognizing the true nature is accompanied by delusion. These are the three main mind poisons: desire, aversion and mental dullness, all accompanied by ignorance.

Because ignorance accompanies thoughts and feelings, one acts and does things, creating the next link in the chain of interdependent origination, which is karmic creation.

2. KARMIC CREATION

The three root poisons of mind—desire, aggression, and stupidity— are rooted in ignorance and cause us to act. The strength of these passions or *obscuring emotions* (Skt. *klesha*) are sometimes very strong and overwhelm our thoughts and sometimes they are very weak, having only a slight influence on the mind. The power of these emotions determines our actions, which result in karma. For instance, sometimes we feel a very powerful sense of love and compassion towards others and develop good karma. With these feelings, we perform actions that are loving and compassionate, the result being positive or virtuous action.

Sometimes the obscuring emotions become very strong, and we then do unvirtuous actions such as lying, stealing, and harming others. Whether we do virtuous or unvirtuous actions determines whether we will experience pleasure or pain in the future. Unvirtuous actions lead to more samsaric suffering.

Karma literally means “action.” There are three kinds of karma—positive, negative, and neutral karma. Positive karma is the result of actions which lead to pleasant results, negative karma the result of actions which lead to unpleasant results. Meditation, the practice of making the mind concentrate one-pointedly, is an action that creates neutral karma. However, meditation can produce positive results so that if one meditates thoroughly and long enough, one can actually be reborn not in the *human realm* but in the *form realm* of the gods or even the *formless realm*. So there are three kinds of karma—virtuous, unvirtuous, and neutral.

Because the mind is ignorant, it has the obscuring emotions of passion or desire, anger or aggression, and stupidity; because of these, we perform unvirtuous actions. These actions have later consequences and create what is called “bringing together circumstances” or “karmic creation.” The resulting effect of our actions is the second link of interdependent origination. For example, if one has harmed another being by killing, in the future one’s own life-force will be damaged; one might be killed, one might become very sick. As a result of our actions, we experience something.

The second aspect of karma is called “cause for developing a tendency,” in which an action has a conditioning effect making the action easier to do the next time. For example, if we perform an unvirtuous action such as killing someone, not only do we receive the negative karma from this action, but we also build up the habit for harming life, making it easier to kill again. Whatever action we do—whether positive or negative—we develop a habit and become used to it, making it easier to do in the future. Therefore actions possess a cause that will produce two types of results: future experience and conditioning or habit. This is the second karmic link which is created through our actions.

3. CONSCIOUSNESS

The third link is consciousness, meaning that (a) because of the first link of ignorance, (b) we perform an action, which is the

second link, and (c) this action plants a seed in our mind or, we could say, imprints a condition in our consciousness. At some time later, through conditioning, through the seed that has been planted, a certain experience will occur in the future and a certain habitual tendency will have an effect in the future, because of what we have done before. There is both a potential for experience and a potential for acting in a certain way. These latent imprints are sown in our stream of consciousness. Our conditioned consciousness is thus the third link in the chain of interdependent origination, with “conditioned” referring to imprinted links.

We know that some beings are born into fortunate circumstances and have a good mind, while others are born into unfortunate circumstances and have a very bad mind. Some people are nice, others are not; some are good, others are not; some experience much suffering, others seem to have it very easy. All of this is because of the way consciousness has been conditioned by one’s actions in the past. The way consciousness has been conditioned will determine the quality of one’s life experience as time goes by. This is what happens overall in consciousness.

More specifically, there are two kinds of conditioned consciousness. One is called “the causal consciousness,” the other is called “the resultant consciousness.” The causal consciousness has to do with what happens at the time we are acting. When we are acting, we are imprinting a result in our stream of consciousness. That impregnation, or one could say that conditioning or sowing of the seed, stays with us until the time the result manifests. It stays dormant in our stream of consciousness until conditions are ripe for the result to manifest. It establishes an imprint.

Some time later that imprint will manifest and produce a result. At that time we come to the resultant consciousness. Depending upon whatever action one has done, then one gets the result—pleasant or unpleasant, good or bad.

One of the main contexts in which the twelve links of interdependence are presented deals with rebirth and how the links affect us from one lifetime to the next lifetime. What is happening to us in this lifetime is the result of what we did in a previous lifetime. Those aspects of consciousness that establish karma, literally called “gathering karma,” are the *eighth consciousness* and, some time later, the result that emerges. This takes place on many levels. It means that as we act, from day to day, we are continuously imprinting and conditioning our stream of

consciousness. How we act this year influences how we will be next year. How we act in this life influences how we will be in the next life. In terms of creating rebirth, the two together make what is called “the rebirth-establishing consciousness.”

The actions of our body, speech, and mind make imprints. But the imprints themselves are all in the mind, in the stream of consciousness. Whether we are acting physically, verbally or mentally, we are conditioning the mind. The mind never stops continuing, like a stream. But the body and speech are interrupted and do not go on forever. The physical karma that we engage in makes a certain set of imprints in our ongoing consciousness and these imprints eventually become the body we have in our next life. Each verbal action we perform makes imprints and each action conditions our stream of consciousness. This eventually determines the quality of our speech in a future life. So we can see that this ongoing stream of consciousness, which is continually being conditioned, is now becoming a cause for the fourth link.

4. NAME AND FORM

The title “name and form” is another word for the five mental aggregates (Skt. *skandha*). “Name” refers to the last four aggregates: feelings, cognition, mental events and consciousness. “Form” refers to the first aggregate. What does this mean? This means that after we have died and have been reincarnated in a new life, we are conceived and at first do not yet have a complete body with all the feelings and mental activities which very much depend upon the way our body is made up. Form is literally the embryo, the potential for the aggregates. All the genetic potential for the form that is to come is the conditioned potential for the various feelings, conditions, cognitions and consciousnesses that will emerge, once the body is formed. They are present but only nominally, and for this reason they are called “name.” One cannot have the eye-consciousness until there are eyes to see, and so forth.

In the time of the Buddha, the Buddha asked that temples display a drawing of the six realms of existence. In Tibet this has been formalized in the Wheel of Life paintings. These paintings all have a rooster, snake and pig in the center, representing the three root emotions of passion, aggression, and ignorance. Next is a circle with six divisions, representing the *six realms of samsara*.

Finally, along the outside is a circle depicting the twelve links that lead to samsara.

The first link, ignorance, is depicted by the image of a blind person. A blind person cannot see and consequently does not know which way to go. Through ignorance, one is not aware of the true nature of reality and because of this, one wanders in samsara, not knowing which way to go.

The second link of karmic creations is symbolized by a potter making a pot. At first there is a raw lump of clay that goes on the wheel. The potter shapes it with his hands, and gradually it emerges into the form it will have. Similarly, through our karmic creations—sometimes good, sometimes bad—we are gradually establishing the pattern of our future. Through our actions, we are shaping how our body, speech, and mind will be in the future.

The third link, consciousness, is very complicated in its conditioning and the way it works. We saw that the eighth consciousness can be quite complicated. Consciousness can be good or bad and contains the whole power of the result which will eventually emerge. Because it is so varied, so complicated, it is depicted by a monkey. Monkeys are continually busy: they swing around in trees and play, getting into lots of things. This is why consciousness is depicted by a monkey.

The fourth link, name and form, has to do with the future rebirth one will take. It is carried over from one life into the next and therefore is depicted by a boat that carries one across the water from one land to another.

In our study of the twelve links we got as far as the fourth link, which refers to the five aggregates when they are just beginning to form in the womb of the mother. That is why this link is called “name and form,” because many of the aggregates are still merely nominal. Their potential is there, but they are not yet active. The links are presented in terms of how what happens in one lifetime determines what the next life will be. In that context, the preceding links establish the five aggregates of name and form in the next life.

At first in the womb, there is merely form; the other aggregates are not very active. Step by step and bit by bit, the basis for the aggregates to exist develops and leads to the fifth link.

5. THE PERCEPTUAL ENTRANCES

The fifth link is the six *perceptual entrances* which are: the visual faculty, the hearing faculty, the smelling faculty, the tasting faculty, the physical sensation faculty, and the mental faculty. When the eye organ develops, it will eventually become the basis for visual consciousness; as the ear develops, it gives us the basis for auditory consciousness, and so on. The *ayatanas* enable consciousness to arise and to develop within a certain field. For instance, once the visual faculty is working, it enables the visual consciousness to make contact with the things it sees, to explore them, and to develop into them. The Tibetan term for these perceptual entrances literally means to “arise and develop.”

The eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body perception (of touch) develop, as does the brain, in the womb. Because these organs will eventually allow our perception of the world to enter, they are called the “doors of perceptions” or “perceptual entrances.” Perception itself, however, does not occur at this fifth step and must wait for the sixth link, contact. The fifth link is depicted in the Wheel of Life as a building with many windows.

6. CONTACT

The word “contact” has a very precise meaning here. It means the contact of the faculty—the five sense faculties and the mind faculty—with its object through the link of consciousness. Three things are happening simultaneously: there is the object, the faculty, and the linking consciousness. For instance, there is an object to be seen, the visual faculty, and the visual consciousness. When those three are present simultaneously, then the visual consciousness is working.

Once the perceptual entrances develop, the eyes of the fetus in the mother’s womb can see visual things, so there is visual contact; the ears can hear things, so there is auditory contact; the nose can smell things, so there is olfactory contact; the tongue can taste flavors, so there is the taste contact; and the body feels sensations (heat, cold, and so on), so there is physical contact. The mind reacts to those things with various feelings and thoughts, so there is mental contact based upon the physical sensations. There are two points about contact: one is that the three factors of faculty, object

and consciousness come together. The second is that, once the outside sensory object, the sensory organ, and the consciousness associated with that organ come together, we have an experience of the outside world, which gives rise to the seventh link, feeling.

7. FEELING

In the chain of the twelve links of interdependent origination, one link gives rise to the next link. One could also say that each link is the cause for the next link to arise. Once there are the perceptual entrances, there can be sensual contact. And once there is contact, then feelings arise. These feelings can be either pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent. For instance, when the eye sees something that is beautiful, that creates a pleasant feeling. If the visual faculty sees something ugly, then there is an unpleasant feeling. Eyes can also see things which are not particularly ugly or beautiful, and then there is a neutral feeling or the feeling of indifference. The raw quality of feeling good, bad, and indifferent is the seventh link, feeling. Feelings such as those of compassion can lead to good karma; feelings such as hate can lead to negative karma.

The twelve links can be grouped in various ways. Looking at these links globally, the first two links of ignorance and karmic creation are the cause for the next five links of consciousness, name and form, the perceptual entrances, contact, and feeling. This means that through the main root of ignorance, one made the karmic creations in former lives, which then give rise to links three, four, five, six and seven in this life. In other words, our present consciousness and the links that follow are conditioned by previous ignorance and karmic conditions. The way that consciousness is imprinted determines the fourth link of name and form; name and form, in turn, give rise to the perceptual entrances. Due to the perceptual entrances, there is contact. With the external perception, the sense organ, and the consciousnesses coming together, we get the seventh link of feeling. Each link leads to the next, but in terms of a larger view, the first two links relate to past lives; and then give rise to the next five links, which have to do with this life. In their turn, these five links are the basis for how one acts in this life, which will create future lives. There is a constant play of causality, on smaller and greater levels.

Again, the seventh link is feeling. When we have a pleasant

feeling due to contact with the objective world, there arises a sense of need. When one has pleasant feelings, one wants to maintain or continue them. This leads to the eighth link, which is grasping.

8. GRASPING OR INVOLVEMENT

A better translation for the eighth link is “involvement” rather than “grasping,” since it concerns an involvement with the objective world that one experiences. This grasping can be part of a certain situation, such as being in love and grasping at one’s loved one, or a feeling that one has to have people’s admiration and respect, or desperately holding onto a material possession, such as a house or car or form of entertainment. When there is a pleasant feeling, one wishes to keep that feeling of pleasantness. One’s mind becomes involved in clinging to this subjective experience. Besides clinging and grasping at nice experiences, we also reject unpleasant feelings and we want to keep away from unpleasant experiences. Involvement can be clinging or rejecting; in both there is some kind of involvement with the objective world one experiences, because of the way it makes us feel. Actually, there are three kinds of involvement: clinging, rejecting, and indifference.

Due to a pleasant feeling, one’s involvement with that feeling grows to a point where one decides that one definitely needs to acquire the things which give rise to the pleasant feeling. On the other hand, one may decide that one needs to get away from the things which give rise to unpleasant feelings. This is the ninth link.

9. ADOPTION

The link of involvement, either wanting something or avoiding it, leads to the ninth link of adoption, in which one makes definite plans to get the object of one’s desire or to avoid something one has deemed unpleasant. At this stage, the process is still mental. In the tenth link, this decision is put into action.

10. BECOMING

The tenth link is called “becoming,” because at this stage all the things one actually thinks about one acts on. At this stage we are doing actual physical or verbal or mental actions. Since it is

necessary for one to perform an actual action for karma to ripen at a later time, this stage is called “becoming.” The eighth link of grasping is involved with wanting or avoiding something and this leads to the ninth link of adoption in which one makes definite plans to get the object of our desire or to eliminate or avoid something we have deemed unpleasant. In the tenth link, this decision is put into action. Good actions bring about good results, bad actions bring about bad results. Because the fruition of our actions is determined by the action itself, it is called “becoming” and involves physical, mental and verbal karma. These actions do not become nothing after they are finished. The way we act with our body, speech, and mind sows seeds which bring their fruit in the future.

The tenth stage of becoming is one of action; it is one of creating karma. Because of that we come to the eleventh link in this sequence of events.

11. REBIRTH

Because the actions taken in the tenth link cause effects in one’s next lifetime, the eleventh link is called rebirth. The karma that has been created will cause rebirth in samsara. Because of our karma we will begin a certain type of life, which will start in the womb with the link called name and form. One will be born, the body will develop and one’s life will manifest with all its experiences according to the karma accumulated. Some experiences will be good and pleasant, others will be difficult and painful. All experiences occur because one has been born into a specific state. So birth into a particular life is the basis upon which the various experiences in life occur. Because of birth, there will be all the various forms of suffering one has during life, which are dealt with in the twelfth link.

12. AGING AND DEATH

Although aging and death are two main forms of suffering for all of us, this name for the twelfth link—aging and death—stands for all the various kinds of suffering, difficulties and pain which take place in life; all the things which are unpleasant, burdensome, and so forth. All are there because one has been born, and once one has been born, they are inevitable; they are a part of the process of life.

Once one is born, one begins to age; once one is born, one must die. These are the inevitable consequences of birth including the last link of aging and death is all the suffering of existence which we call samsara.

The Process of Interdependent Origination

Through the twelve links of interdependent origination, we saw that from the root of ignorance and through the process of the twelve stages or links, samsara evolves. Because of ignorance, one makes karmic creations. Because of that, one has a conditioned stream of consciousness. Because of that particular conditioning, one was born in a certain way. Once one is born, one has sense faculties which make contact with the world. Consequently, one has feelings. Because one has feelings and the interaction of the skandhas, one becomes involved with certain things, and so on. Through the twelve links, we see how samsara develops from the first step of ignorance onwards. Each step forms the basis for the next step. Ignorance not only forms the foundation of the twelve links, but once the cycle begins, it is almost inevitable that the next link will take place, and so on, step by step.

We can see that in order to get rid of the twelfth link of aging and death and all the problems of life, we need to get rid in the eleventh link of worldly rebirth. In order to get rid of rebirth, we need to get rid of the tenth link of becoming, of all the karmic creations which determine rebirth. In order to get rid of becoming, we need to eliminate adopting, and so on. By taking away any former step, the latter step cannot happen. And so we go all the way back to the first step, which is the most important one of all—ignorance. In fact, if one can remove ignorance, then none of the following links can occur.

One of the main points to realize is that this body and this life we have now are here because of the things we did in former lives; this life is not something that just happened by itself. It is part of an ongoing process. Our life is established the way it is now because of all the things we did in the past. In that same way, what we are doing now is conditioning and forming the next life. The process is ongoing.

If we look at this in terms of the twelve links, we see that links three to seven are the results of what we do in this lifetime and links one and two belong to the past. This means that because of

ignorance in general and past karma, in this life we have the conditioned consciousness which leads to the five aggregates of perception. These gave us the capacity to experience the objective world through the perceptual entrances and to have certain feelings. These links (three to seven) are the result in this lifetime which is due to a cause we created in the past lifetime. Once we have that particular result, what we do is determined by links eight, nine and ten. This means that because of the feelings we have about certain things, there is involvement, adoption, and becoming. In other words, we become involved with our experience, then we become even more deeply involved, and eventually we act because of our involvement in clinging and rejecting. Therefore, links eight, nine, and ten are related to the present lifetime in terms of what we are doing now and will determine our future life. This future lifetime is related to links eleven and twelve, rebirth and aging, suffering, and death. In this way we can see the groupings within the twelve links as they relate to the past, the present and the future.

The process of dependent origination is going on all the time; it is an unbroken continuum of interaction of many elements. Because it is ongoing, we are the way we are due to the past. Because of the way we are now, we are shaping the future. Because it is an ongoing process, it is compared to a wheel, the famous analogy for *samsara*: a wheel that spins round and round and round.

This entire process is called “interdependent origination,” which means that things originate from each other and depend upon each other. The process is called *ten chin drel wa* in Tibetan. *Ten* means “one thing is a basis for another” and *drelwa* means “things are connected and related.” In other words, there is a process of causality. Whenever something happens, it does so because of certain circumstances and conditions. If there is a result, there was a cause, and wherever there is a cause, there will be a result. Causes do not become nothing—if there are causes, results must follow; if there is a result, it must be because of a particular cause.

In the explanation of the twelve links, we saw that the middle set of links concern what is happening in this life because of conditions coming from past lives. The middle links are the foundation from which we are creating the nature of the lives to come.

The Twelve Links and Their Analogies

1. Ignorance (Skt. *avidya*)
A blind old woman
2. Karmic Connection (Skt. *samskara*)
A potter molding a pot
3. Consciousness (Skt. *vijnana*)
A monkey looking out of a window
4. Name and Form (Skt. *namarupa*)
A man rowing a boat
5. The Perceptual Experiences (Skt. *ayatana*)
A prosperous-looking house
6. Contact (Skt. *sparsha*)
A man and woman embracing each other
7. Feeling (Skt. *vedana*)
An arrow piercing the eye
8. Grasping (Skt. *trishna*)
A drunken man
9. Adoption (Skt. *upadana*)
A monkey plucking fruits
10. Becoming (Skt. *bhava*)
A pregnant woman
11. Rebirth (Skt. *jati*)
The birth of a child
12. Aging and death (Skt. *jaramarana*)
A corpse being carried to cremation

FROM: *Rigzin, Tibetan-English Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology*

Chapter 3

The Two Main Kinds of Causes

When we look more closely, we find two main kinds of causes. One is called “the fundamental cause” or “the necessary cause.” This refers to the prime cause that must be present for something to happen. For instance, if we have a certain kind of flower, it can only come from a certain kind of seed and from nothing else. So it is a necessary cause without which the result cannot take place. This is what we have been studying up to now: which link is the main cause for the next thing to happen.

The Accompanying Conditions

In addition to fundamental causes, there are also “accompanying conditions.” These are all the other factors that can modify the quality and the nature of the result. In the example of the flower, we know that a particular seed is the necessary cause for a certain flower to manifest. But the quality of the soil, the humidity, the light and heat will also affect the appearance and quality of the flower. They are not the fundamental causes, but they affect the growth, the character, and the size of the flower to a great extent.

The first link was ignorance. Ignorance is not just there by itself. What comes into play are our own senses and the quality of the mind that is present simultaneously with ignorance. Depending on what is happening within the mind, ignorance might be greater or lesser. So there will be ignorance that also depends upon the accompanying mental consciousness and circumstances. The second link is karmic creation, a karmic act which takes place. There also will be many other incidental secondary factors that will qualify that action and have some influence on the result. They are the accompanying conditions.

The accompanying conditions are the main things which will influence the fundamental cause. A group of six accompanying conditions are often mentioned: the five elements, or earth, water,

fire, wind, space; and consciousness.

While these elements may seem simple, they also represent different functions. For example, consider our body. The earth element is not only the substance of the body, but also the body's firmness, its materiality. The water element in this context does not apply just to water but to all the fluids in the body. The fire element applies to the warmth of the body and also to the burning or transformation of food into energy. The wind or air element makes the various physical movements in the body possible, such as moving an arm, but it also is involved in the subtle energies flowing along the meridians. The element of space refers to all the cavities of the body and also the mind's luminosity, which is its awareness and intelligence.

So the earth element keeps the body together as a working whole. The water element applies to all of the interactions, the bonding processes which take place within the body. The fire element is particularly concerned with digestion, the power of transformation of solid food into energy within the body, which enables us to accomplish various tasks. The wind element is associated with respiration, and the space element provides the possibility of dimension. Consciousness is, of course, our awareness, our reflection.

The View

In answering the question why one experiences various kinds of happiness and suffering, some believe that there is a powerful being, a god, who creates all this, who determines who will be happy and who will suffer. The Buddhist view is not like that. Rather the Buddhist view is that if the causes of suffering have been created, then there will be suffering. It is not that some external being has decided to make us miserable for some reason. The Buddhist view is that the causes have come together completely and manifested their result. Likewise, when we experience happiness, it is because the various factors which give rise to happiness have come together, not because some external being decided that we should be happy.

The value of the Buddhist view is that it means that our destiny is in our hands. If we want to be happy in the future, then we need to gather the causes to produce the happiness we want. If we do not want to suffer, then we need to eliminate anything which can be a

cause of suffering. In a greater perspective, this also means that our enlightenment is in our own hands. If we want to achieve total enlightenment, then we must do everything that will lead to enlightenment. If we do these things, then we will indeed reach total enlightenment.

The Five Aspects of Causality

There are five particular aspects we should be aware of regarding the process of results emerging from causes. These aspects must be understood well, otherwise we may misunderstand the process of causality. To clarify the process of causality, we must examine five different aspects.

1. **No permanence.** The first aspect is that in the process of cause and evolution there is no permanence, so the cause does not last. This is exemplified by a seed giving rise to a shoot. The seed is the fundamental cause and the result is the shoot. When the shoot arises, the seed disappears. It is not as though the seed is permanent and creates a shoot as well. When the result is manifest, the cause has ceased to be. Thus there is no permanence of causes.

2. **No discontinuity.** The second aspect is that although there is no permanence in causes, there is no discontinuity in the process. The ceasing of the seed and the becoming of the shoot take place in an unbroken process of evolution, i.e., the seed gradually ceases and the shoot gradually appears. It is not a discontinuity, so that the seed just stops and then the shoot appears. There is always a continuity between cause and its effect. This continuity is called “the smoothness of transition” and is compared to a scale; as one arm of a hanging scale goes down, the other arm goes up. The smoothness of the evolution of a cause producing a result is like that: as the result is coming about, the cause is coming to an end.

3. **No transference.** The third aspect is that there is no transference. There is no transference from the former to the latter, from the cause to the result. The observation is that the very character of the cause and result are quite different. In the example of the seed and shoot we see that the seed is tiny, hard, has a certain color and shape while the shoot has a different shape, color, taste, texture, and so on. There is a difference between the two; they do not have the same character at all. A seed which is the causal condition of a plant sprouting is not similar in nature to the shoot

which is the effect of this causal condition. A cause of a certain magnitude does not necessarily create a result of equal magnitude. We cannot think that there is transference of identity from the cause to the effect, because their identity is very different.

4. **A large result from a small cause.** The fourth aspect is that a large result can emerge from a small cause. Although some seeds are very tiny, the result can be an exceedingly large tree.

5. **Correspondence.** The fifth aspect is that there is an infallible process of correspondence within the continuum from the cause to the result. Infallible process means unailing, you can guarantee it; correspondence means similarity. For example, a wheat seed will produce a wheat plant. There is a correspondence between cause and result. Infallibility means that a wheat seed will always produce a wheat shoot; it can never grow into a rice shoot. A grain of rice can only grow into rice and can never accidentally grow into a wheat plant. A specific cause produces a specific result.

Similarly, virtuous actions will always produce a similar result: happiness. Unvirtuous actions will always give rise to a similar result: misery. There is an infallible process which takes place and there is a specific correspondence between the cause and the nature of the result.

The Eight Examples

In order to help us understand this more subtle process of interdependence, we will examine a series of eight examples. Interdependence means that because of one thing another thing takes place. Like the five aspects, the eight examples are given so that we do not have an incorrect understanding of how a cause produces a result.

1. **A teacher and the student.** When a teacher teaches a student, there is not a transference of knowledge. It is not that the knowledge goes out of the teacher and into the student. If the teacher does not teach, the student will not understand. It is because the teacher teaches that the student will understand. But some “thing” is not transferred. There is interdependence: the cause is the teacher’s explanation and as a result of that, wisdom will arise in the mind of the student. From a former cause, a future result in another being takes place.

2. **A candle and its flame.** When one candle is lit by another candle, it is not that the candle flame of the first candle is transferred into the second candle. When we light one candle with another candle, there is no direct transference of the flame from one candle to the other. Rather it is an interdependent process. Without the first candle's flame, the second cannot be kindled.

3. **A Mirror and its Reflection.** When we see our reflection in a mirror, it is not that something comes out of us and is transferred into the mirror. Nevertheless, there is infallible and precise interdependence between us and the reflection. Whatever is in front of the mirror determines the image that will be seen in it. There is an infallible correspondence between the object and its reflection in the mirror, but there is not a transference of something from one to the other.

4. **A stamp and its dye.** When one imprints a stamp with dye, the print on the paper is there because of the dye and depends upon it. There is no transference, because the dye used makes the impression in another material in a certain and specific way (with the dye actually being imprinted in a mirror image).

5. **A flint and its sparks.** Here we see that cause and affect can have a dissimilar nature. When we strike a flint, it produces a spark and fire. It is not that the spark and fire are in the flint. But when the flint is used in a specific way of interdependence, a spark definitely arises and through the spark the actual fire is created. The spark depends upon the flint, but the nature of the flint and the fire are not similar.

6. **A seed and its harvest.** We know from the previous examples that without a seed there can be no plant. The seed gives rise to the shoot, the result. It is not the case that the seed is transferred into the shoot, but without the seed (the cause), there definitely cannot be the result. It is the same point as no transference, but because of one thing another thing occurs.

7. **A fruit and its taste.** If we merely look at a sour fruit, we can get a sour taste in our mouth. This does not mean that the sour taste is actually transferred to us. Because we are familiar with a particular sour fruit, we will remember the taste. If we do not see the fruit, we would not reproduce its taste in our mouth. There is no transference of the taste from the fruit to the mouth in this example, but there is a definite interdependence of the sight of the fruit and our salivating.

8. **A sound and its echo.** When there is a sound in a cave, there is an echo. It is not that the sound has been transformed into the echo, but rather there is the interdependence between the sound, the sides of the cave, and the position where we are standing.

By contemplating these eight examples we can understand how a certain cause gives rise to a specific result. The result does not come from the cause itself; there is no transference, no permanence. All five aspects of causality apply. It is a very subtle process.

Chapter 4

The Relevance of Interdependence for the Buddhist Teachings

The teachings on interdependent origination are studied by Buddhists in all three vehicles. We may say that there are three vehicles (Skt. *yana*): the shravaka, the pratyekabuddhas, and the bodhisattva vehicle. The shravakas and pratyekabuddhas seek individual liberation from samsara; the bodhisattvas seek to liberate all beings.

The teachings of interdependent origination are particularly studied by the “solitary realizers” (Skt. *pratyekabuddhas*). The pratyekabuddhas are practitioners who develop tremendous insight and wisdom and from these develop a powerful and natural revulsion for samsara. Although they seek out and receive teachings from great masters, the pratyekabuddhas prefer to develop and gain wisdom themselves. They do this in particular by studying the process of interdependent origination. The pratyekabuddhas may concentrate on this teaching very thoroughly in this lifetime; when they die and are reborn into another lifetime, they may come across something that triggers a memory of having studied interdependent origination. For instance, if they go to a funeral ground, to which they might well be attracted, they will see the rotting corpses. This triggers their memory of interdependence, and they think, “Ah, death is because of aging; aging is because of birth; birth is because of the process of becoming,” and so on. The funeral ground refreshes their memory, and they work their way back through the twelve links to the first link of ignorance. They then know that ignorance needs to be removed, so that they can be liberated. Their understanding of ignorance concerns the misapprehension of a subject, the self. Among all the Buddhists, they especially develop a profound understanding of the twelve links of interdependent origination.

The understanding of the process of interdependent origination, however, is very important for all Buddhists. An understanding of

interdependent origination helps us understand how things function on the *conventional truth* or level and also how things function on the *ultimate level*. By understanding interdependence, we begin to understand the power of actions done in our previous lives. When we analyze the links, some show what happened in the past, others show what influences the present, and still others deal with the present and how it sets the stage for the future.

In particular, what we appreciate through an understanding of interdependence is that causes produce results, especially that good or bad actions we performed in past lives are the reasons for the happiness and suffering that we experience presently. We also begin to realize that what we are doing now is setting the stage for our future experience. This drives home the message that we need to do only those things which create happiness and get rid of those things which cause suffering and difficulties. Because of the nature of interdependence—how one thing produces another—we realize that we need to give up our obscuring emotions of anger, desire, and so on, because they lie near the root of all suffering, which takes place as a result of interdependence. Such interdependence arises on a level of conventional or relative truth.

Understanding that all things that manifest to our mind are interdependent means that we can begin to understand the ultimate truth. This happens because by studying the way things appear through the play of interdependence, we begin to realize that nothing is as solid, as real, as concrete, as it seems to be. In fact, things manifest as what they really are, which is empty.

The Tibetan word for “conventional reality” is *kunzop*, meaning literally “totally artificial or fake.” Everything is a fabrication and its very nature depends upon the components of which it is fabricated. No phenomenon can exist on its own. All things depend upon other things for the nature they take on at a particular time. By understanding interdependence we can also come to understand that all things are empty, in that they are devoid of any lasting reality. We can see that emptiness (Skt. *shunyata*) does not mean a dead emptiness, such as one finds in empty space; it means that things only exist in interdependence on a conventional level. They have no ultimate existence; they are devoid of such existence.

The Buddha gave the profound teachings on the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita* in Sanskrit), but most of his followers did not understand these teachings at the time. About 500 years later,

these teachings were thoroughly understood by the great master Nagarjuna. He understood the Prajnaparamita remarkably clearly, not just from the level of intellectual understanding but from actual experience. Nagarjuna was able to present these teachings thoroughly and completely through logical arguments. In particular, he presented the Buddha's teaching on emptiness through what are called "the five areas of wisdom," in one of which interdependence is especially stressed. Nagarjuna shows that all phenomena we experience—each and every phenomenon—only exist through dependence upon other things and no phenomenon has an essential existence of its own. Through demonstrating that things merely exist relatively, he showed that they are devoid of an ultimate nature. This is one of the five main ways in which Nagarjuna presented emptiness, in reliance on an understanding of interdependent origination. Thus the understanding of interdependent origination helps one understand not only conventional reality, but also ultimate reality.

Interdependence in the Sutras

What comes out of the study of interdependence is the understanding that all things appear because all the things we experience are only relative and dependent on each other. What we discover in the teachings on interdependence is that phenomena depend upon each other; one thing depends upon other things for its relative existence. We come across this fact in the Mahamudra teachings when we begin looking for the essential nature of the mind. We do not find any solid nature of mind. Rather we find emptiness devoid of any inherent nature; this emptiness is mind's essential nature. Even though we discover that emptiness, at the same time we are aware that there is an unbroken stream of mental manifestation. The emptiness we find in our mind is not a mere nothingness, because our mind is continually changing. The manifestation of mind—that is, our unbroken stream of awareness, thoughts, and feelings—has no recognizable essence. On the conventional level, there is a continuous unbroken interplay of interdependence where one thing creates another. Things depend upon each other. This is how reality is presented in the sutras. From an ultimate point of view, however, there is no "one" essence to be found, and relatively everything has its existence through the play of interdependence.

To show how one thing depends upon another for its nature, we can look at two sticks of incense, one of which is 2 inches long and one of which is 4 inches long. The 2-inch stick is the short one, while the 4-inch stick is the long one. However, when we take away the 2-inch stick and put the 4-inch stick next to a 6-inch stick, we see that now the 4-inch stick is the short one and the 6-inch stick is the long one. We can see that “short” and “long” are not inherent qualities of the stick, but are simply qualities that rely on the object’s interdependence on other objects. We would all agree that the 2-inch one is short and the 4-inch one is long, but that the 4-inch stick is short compared with the 6-inch stick. We see that things depend upon each other for definition of their qualities.

There are many relative values like this. Take, for example, good and bad: Some things are good compared to others, and vice versa. The same is true for beautiful and ugly, here and there, self and other. In all cases, the value assigned to something is only a relative value that depends upon other things for its meaning. So something is “only” beautiful because in one set of relative values it is “more” beautiful than some other things, but when compared to something else it may be ugly. The point is that nothing is beautiful, nothing is long, nothing is bad in itself; they are beautiful, long, or bad in a relative sense.

On a conventional level, things have a particular value. But, from an ultimate point of view, we cannot say that this “thing” is once and forever ugly or long or that it is once and forever over there and not over here. By examining such logical arguments, we can examine things in a gross way to get some understanding of the relative interplay and the ultimate emptiness of phenomena. Therefore, in the sutra method of teaching, emptiness is presented by way of this logical reasoning.

Interdependence in Mahamudra

In Mahamudra practice, we approach the same topic slightly differently—through meditation. There we come to appreciate that on a relative level, our mind’s thoughts, sensual experiences, and appearances come and go through a play of interdependence. We learn to look directly into the nature of what is taking place in the mind. We find that nothing has a nature we can ever grasp, no ultimate, lasting essence, as we have discovered through the teachings on interdependent origination. All things have their

relative existence; ultimately nothing has true existence at all.

To understand the two aspects of truth—what is relatively true and what is ultimately true—is profoundly important.

Chapter 5

The Twelve Links Applied to One's Action

Up to now, we have studied the twelve links of interdependence in the context of long-term effect, in relation to past lives which influence this life and how this life is shaping the future. We can also present the twelve links in terms of effects over a short period of time, by applying the twelve links to one particular action. We can do this by taking one example given in the scriptures, which is the example of killing.

1. **IGNORANCE.** We see that someone kills because of ignorance, not realizing what a bad thing it is nor the karmic results that will come to himself from doing it. Generally, ignorance is the very nature of the action and its consequences and sets the beginning for other links to happen.

2. **KARMIC CREATION.** If someone kills a person because of ignorance, then the actual act of killing is the second link, karmic creation. That act does not take place all by itself. Various factors accompany it.

3. **CONSCIOUSNESS.** The third link is the stream of consciousness of the killer at the time, i.e., the motivation for killing, the strength of feeling, the vision of the whole act, and how his consciousness is imprinted by the act.

4. **NAME AND FORM.** The consciousness and the act of killing are accompanied by the fourth link, so the five aggregates of form, feeling, cognition, mental events, and consciousness take part in the action.

5. **THE SIX PERCEPTUAL ENTRANCES.** The six perceptual entrances also play their part, because during the act of killing there is seeing, hearing and the general play of the sense consciousnesses.

6. **CONTACT.** In this particular example, the contact takes place when the person is struck with the weapon and the deed is done.

7. **FEELING.** The seventh link is the feeling in the mind of the killer

at that time; whether he feels great suffering or pleasure in doing the act.

8. GRASPING OR INVOLVEMENT. This link is the particular feeling of satisfaction or aversion in carrying out the action.

9. ADOPTION. This link is the continuing process of this act of killing. The killer does not stop half-way through but carries the act out to the end.

10. BECOMING. The tenth link covers the whole action, i.e., once the action is being done, then the killer has created the karma which will produce a result.

11. BIRTH. Birth applies to that particular life and the consequences to the killer in the future.

12. AGING AND DEATH. Aging and death apply to both the end of that life and also to the end of the particular action.

The Three Groups of the Twelve Links

The twelve links of interdependence we have been studying can be placed in three groups, showing that they have three types of character.

1. DEFILEMENT. The three links of ignorance (link 1), involvement (link 8), and adoption (link 9) are part of defiled mind and therefore are connected to the obscuring emotions (Skt. *kleshas*). The three main obscuring emotions are attachment and aversion (links 8 and 9) and ignorance (link 1).

2. ACTION. The word karma literally means action, which is connected to link 2 (karmic creation) and link 10 (becoming).

3. SUFFERING. The remaining links are suffering, which is connected to links 3 (consciousness), 4 (name and function), 5 (perceptual entrances), 11 (birth) and 12 (aging and death).

The Conventional and Ultimate Aspect

In the sutra tradition the twelve links are more closely related to the conventional truth than with the ultimate truth, because the conventional level deals with how most persons actually experience the world. One understands that a flower comes from a seed and this is the truth about the relative process of manifestation. This is the truth on a relative level. The ultimate truth in this system is presented as a remedy to ignorance and the suffering created by the

twelve links. With the Mahamudra teachings, we are concerned mostly with the ultimate truth which we develop by examining our mind directly.

Understanding how things happen on the conventional level of perception is very important; it encourages us to develop good conduct of body and speech. It is the understanding of how things happen on the conventional level that gives rise to great love and compassion for others; love in wishing others to be happy and compassion in wishing others be free of relative suffering. From that point of view, the ultimate level is understanding how things take place on the conventional level, and it is most important.

The Notes

1. The meditation of Mahamudra is the principal meditation of the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. This is the meditation of looking directly at mind.
2. We prefer to use the word emptiness rather than voidness which implies a dead nothingness because this refers to the emptiness of inherent existence of mind which has the quality of *salwa*—intelligence or a knowing.
3. Buddhists believe that this world is not solid and real it appears. What we experience is the conventional level of reality (Tib. *kunzop*), not the ultimate reality (Tib. *dondam*). A modern example which helps explain this difference is if we look at a wooden table we see a solid object that is brown. This is the conventional truth and everyone will agree with us that the table looks solid. However, a physicist would tell us that the table is actually made up of atoms moving at high speeds and that the table is actually 99.99% empty space with the color brown being nothing other than a certain wavelength of radiation which looks “brown” to human eyes. This then is closer to the ultimate level of reality.
4. The three vehicles—the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana—are described in much greater detail in Thrangu Rinpoche’s *The Three Vehicles of Buddhist Practice*. Namo Buddha Publications.
5. What is meant here is that thoughts and feelings when analyzed in meditation do not seem to come from anywhere, they don’t seem to stay anywhere, and they don’t seem to go anywhere. Furthermore, our mind is not a solid entity with any characteristics, but rather like a stream of thoughts and feelings. So ultimately mind is not solid and real like a rock, which takes up space and has a beginning, existence, and end, so the mind is “empty of inherent existence.” However, our mind is not empty like “empty space” because our mind has awareness and intelligence which is called “clarity” (Tib. *salwa*). So the mind is not completely empty so we say that it is empty of inherent existence.

A Brief Biography of Thrangu Rinpoche

Thrangu Rinpoche was born in Kham in 1933. At the age of five he was formally recognized by the Sixteenth Karmapa and the previous Situ Rinpoche as the incarnation of the great Thrangu tulku. Entering Thrangu monastery, from the ages of seven to sixteen he studied reading, writing, grammar, poetry, and astrology, memorized ritual texts, and completed two preliminary retreats. At sixteen under the direction of Khenpo Lodro Rabsel he began the study of the three vehicles of Buddhism while staying in retreat.

At twenty-three he received full ordination from the Karmapa. When he was twenty-seven Rinpoche left Tibet for India at the time of the Chinese military takeover. He was called to Rumtek, Sikkim, where the Karmapa had his seat in exile. At thirty-five he took the geshe examination before 1500 monks at Buxador monastic refugee camp in Bengal, and was awarded the degree of Geshe Lharampa. On his return to Rumtek he was named Abbot of Rumtek monastery and the Nalanda Institute for Higher Buddhist studies at Rumtek. He has been the personal teacher of the four principal Karma Kagyu tulkus: Shamar Rinpoche, Situ Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, and Gyaltsab Rinpoche.

Thrangu Rinpoche has traveled extensively throughout Europe, the Far East and the USA and is the abbot of Gampo Abbey, Nova Scotia, Canada. In 1984 he spent several months in Tibet where he ordained over 100 monks and nuns and visited several monasteries. In Nepal Rinpoche has also founded a monastery, Thrangu Tashi Choling in Bodhanath, a retreat center and college at Namu Buddha, east of the Katmandu Valley, and has established a school in Bodhanath for the general education of lay children and young monks. He also has built in Katmandu Tara Abbey offering a full dharma education for nuns. He has also completed a beautiful monastery in Sarnath, India a few minutes walking distance from where the Buddha gave his first teaching on the Four Noble Truths. Presently, Rinpoche has begun planning a retreat center for his Western students in Colorado, USA.

More recently, because of his vast knowledge of the Dharma, he was appointed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to be the personal tutor for the 17th Karmapa.

Glossary

afflictions another name for the kleshas or obscuring emotions. See **obscuring emotions**.

aggregates, five Literally “heaps,” these are the five basic transformations that perceptions undergo when an object is perceived. First is form, which includes all sounds, smells, etc., everything that is not thought. The second and third are sensations or feeling (pleasant and unpleasant, etc.) and identification or cognition. Fourth is mental events, which actually include the second and third aggregates. The fifth is ordinary consciousness, such as the sensory and mental consciousnesses.


atman Sanskrit for a permanent “self” which exists after death.

ayatanas See eighteen elements.

bodhisattva An individual who is committed to the Mahayana path of practicing compassion and achieving the six paramitas in order to achieve Buddhahood and free all beings from samsara. More specifically, someone with a motivation to achieve liberation from samsara and who is on one of the ten bodhisattva levels that culminate in Buddhahood.

conventional truth There are two truths: relative or conventional and ultimate or absolute truth. Relative truth is the perception of an ordinary (unenlightened) person who sees the world with all his or her projections, based on the false belief in ego.

dharmata Dharmata is often translated as “suchness” or “the true nature of things” or “things as they are.” It is phenomena as they really are or as seen by a completely enlightened being without any distortion or obscuration, so one can say it is “reality.”

 **tu** There are five elements forming everything in the world according to Buddhism: earth, water, fire, wind, and space (or ether). The internal elements are the same but have a property associated with them, so they are: earth (solidity), fluidity (water), fire (heat), wind (movement), and space (the vacuities within the body).

eight consciousnesses These are the five sensory consciousnesses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and body sensation. The sixth consciousness is mental consciousness which does our ordinary thinking. The seventh consciousness is afflicted (klesha) consciousness which is the ever-present feeling of “I.” Finally, the eighth consciousness is the ground (or alaya) consciousness which holds the other consciousnesses together and also stores karmic latencies.

eighteen elements of perception These are the six sensory objects such as a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, and body sensation

and the six sense faculties such as the visual sensory faculty, the auditory sensory faculty making up to the twelve constituents for perception.

form realm These are seventeen heavenly realms in which beings have bodies of light. See the **realms, three**.

formless realm (Tib. *zuk me kham*) The abode of an unenlightened being who has practiced the four absorptions. See the **realms, three**.

Hinayana Literally, the “lesser vehicle.” The term refers to the first teachings of the Buddha which emphasized the careful examination of mind and its confusion.

interdependent origination The principle that nothing exists independently, rather everything comes into existence only in dependence on various previous causes and conditions. There are twelve successive phases of this process that begin with ignorance and end with old age and death.

Kagyü One of the four major schools of Buddhism in Tibet. It was founded by Marpa and is headed by His Holiness Karmapa. The other three are the Nyingma, the Sakya, and the Gelug schools.

karma Literally “action.” Karma is a universal law that when one does a wholesome action, one’s circumstances will improve and when one does an unwholesome action, negative results will eventually follow.

Karmapa The title of the seventeen successive incarnations of Dusum Khyenpa who have headed the Karma Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism.

klesha See **obscuring emotions**.

kunzop Tibetan word for conventional truth. See **conventional truth**.

Madhyamaka This is a philosophical school founded by Nagarjuna in the second century. The main principle of this school is that everything can be proven to be empty of self-nature using rational reasoning.

Mahamudra Literally, “great seal” meaning that all phenomena are sealed by the primordially perfect true nature. This form of meditation is traced back to Saraha (10th century C.E.) and was passed down in the Kagyü school through Marpa. It is, to greatly simplify, the meditation of examining mind directly.

Mahayana Literally, the “great vehicle.” These are the teachings of the second turning of the wheel of dharma, which emphasize shunyata, compassion, and universal buddha nature.


Nagarjuna An Indian scholar in the second century C.E. who founded the Madhyamaka philosophical school which emphasizes emptiness.

nidana chain Sanskrit for the twelve links of interdependent origination.

obscuring emotion The emotional obscurations (in contrast to intellectual obscurations) which are also translated as “afflictions” or “poisons.”

The three main ones are passion (or attachment), aggression (or anger), and ignorance (or delusion). The five kleshas are these three above plus pride and envy or jealousy.

Prajnaparamita The Buddhist literature outlining the Mahayana path and emptiness written mostly around the second century C.E.

 **Yekabuddha** Literally, solitary realizer. A realized Hinayana practitioner who has achieved the egolessness of self and other, but who has not committed him or herself to the bodhisattva path of helping all others.

realms, three Existence in samsara is in one of three realms: the desire realm in which beings are reborn into bodies in the six realms of samsara based on their karma; the form realm in which beings, due to the power of their meditations, are born with immaterial bodies; the formless realm in which beings with meditative absorption have entered a state of meditation after death, where the processes of thoughts and perception have ceased, and there are thus no bodies, and no actual realms, environments, or locations.

rinpoche Literally, this means “very precious” and is used as a term of respect for a Tibetan guru.

samsara Conditioned existence of ordinary life in which suffering occurs because one still possesses attachment, aggression, and ignorance. It is contrasted to nirvana.

Shamatha or tranquillity meditation. This is basic sitting meditation in which one usually sits in a cross-legged posture and observes the workings of the mind.

shravaka Literally “those who hear” meaning disciples. A type of realized Hinayana practitioner (arhat) who has achieved the realization of the nonexistence of personal self.

shunyata Usually translated as voidness or emptiness. The Buddha taught in the second turning of the wheel of dharma that external phenomena and internal phenomena, or the concept of self or “I,” have no real existence and therefore are “empty.”

six perceptual entrances These are the eye and visual consciousness, the ear and hearing consciousness, the nose and smelling consciousness, the tongue and the tasting consciousness, the body and body consciousness, and the mind (sixth consciousness).

six realms of samsara These are the possible types of rebirths for beings in samsara and are: the god realm in which gods have great pride, the jealous god realm in which the jealous gods have envy and try to maintain what they have, the human realm which is characterized by great desire and is the realm in which one has the possibility of achieving enlightenment, the animal realm characterized by stupidity, the hungry ghost realm characterized by great craving, and the hell

realm characterized by aggression.

skandha Literally “heaps.” These are the five basic transformations that perceptions undergo when an object is perceived: form, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness. First is form, which includes all sounds, smells, etc., everything we usually think of as outside the mind. The second and third are sensations (pleasant and unpleasant, etc.) or feeling, and identification or cognition. Fourth is mental events, which actually include the second and third aggregates. The fifth is ordinary consciousness, such as the sensory and mental consciousnesses.

sutras These are the Hinayana and Mahayana texts which are the words of the Buddha. These often are contrasted with the tantras, which are the Buddha’s Vajrayana teachings, and the shastras, which are commentaries on the words of the Buddha.

sutrayana The sutra approach to achieving enlightenment, which includes the Hinayana and the Mahayana.

tantra Tibetan Buddhism is divided into the sutra tradition and the tantra tradition. The sutra tradition primarily involves the academic study of the Mahayana sutras, and the tantric path primarily involves practicing the Vajrayana practices. The tantras are primarily the texts of the Vajrayana practices.

tantra path The path of the Vajrayana.

Theravada School A school, sometimes called the Hinayana, which is the foundation of Buddhism and which emphasizes the careful examination of mind and its confusion.

ultimate level The ultimate truth, which can only be perceived by an enlightened individual, is that all phenomena both internal (thoughts and feelings) and external (the outside physical world) do not have any inherent existence.

Vajrayana There are three major traditions of Buddhism: the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. The Vajrayana is based on the tantras and emphasizes the clarity aspect of phenomena and is practiced mainly in Tibet.

Vipashyana meditation Sanskrit for “insight meditation.” This meditation develops insight into the nature of mind. The other primary meditation is Shamatha meditation.

yanas Literally “vehicle,” but refers here to a level of teaching. There are three main yanas. see **Hinayana**, **Mahayana**, and **Vajrayana**.

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- The Three Vehicles of Buddhist Practice.* This book gives an overview of the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana as it was practiced in Tibet. Boulder: Namo Buddha Publications, 1998.
- The Four Foundations of Buddhist Practice.* There are four thoughts one should contemplate before practicing precious human birth, impermanence, karma, and the downfalls of samsara. Boulder: Namo Buddha Publications, 2001.
- The Middle-way Meditation Instructions of Mipham Rinpoche.* This great Tibetan scholar who actually stayed for a while with the previous Thrangu Rinpoche at his monastery describes how one develops compassion and then expands this to bodhichitta and eventually develops prajna or wisdom. Boulder: Namo Buddha Publications, 2000.
- The Practice of Tranquillity and Insight.* This book is a practical guide to the two types of meditation that form the core of Buddhist spiritual practice. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1993.