

Lesson 4

The Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination

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Notes: To practice Dharma is not merely to carry the name of being a Buddhist. Nor is it to make certain superficial alterations in our lifestyle. Dharma practice means the total integration of our minds and the Dharma.

For this to become possible we must first prepare ourselves by cultivating spiritual stability—a sense of pure renunciation—within our stream of being. The Tibetan term for this, *nges-jung*, implies that we should first realize that we are caught in the rebirth process of cyclic existence, or *samsara*, a state of being characterized by a great many sufferings. Therefore at the beginning of our practice we must realize the true nature of *samsara* itself and the way in which we exist in *samsara*. We must become aware of the unsatisfactory nature of *samsara*, the condition in which we find ourselves. This is very important. Once we have recognized the true nature of *samsara* and become disillusioned with it, from the depths of our hearts we should generate a spontaneous aspiration to attain liberation from it. Such a pure and spontaneous aspiration of seeking liberation is the meaning of renunciation.

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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. 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 dhatus, 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. Madhayamaka) 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. 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 on-going 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

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The Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination

By [Geshe Rabten](#) at New Delhi, India April 1980 (Last Updated Mar 9, 2010)



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Understanding leads to renunciation

Dharma practice entails more than just calling yourself a Buddhist or making superficial changes in the way you live your life. It means totally integrating the teachings with your mind.

To integrate the teachings with your mind, you must first prepare yourself by cultivating spiritual stability—pure renunciation—within your stream of being. The Tibetan term for renunciation, *nges-jung*, implies that you must first realize that you are caught in the process of rebirth in samsara, a state of being characterized by a great many sufferings. Therefore, at the beginning of your practice you have to realize the true nature of samsara itself and how you exist in it; you

must become acutely aware of the unsatisfactory nature of samsara, the condition in which you find yourself. This is very important.

Once you have recognized the true nature of samsara and become sufficiently disillusioned with it, from the depths of your heart you will generate the spontaneous aspiration to liberate yourself from it. This pure, spontaneous, constant aspiration to be free of samsara is renunciation.

Generally, there are two ways to develop the fully renounced mind. The first is to meditate on the two aspects of samsara: its nature of suffering and the causes of this suffering. The second is to meditate on the twelve links of interdependent origination. Here I will discuss briefly the latter.

There are two main ways of presenting the twelve links: the scriptural way, which explains them in terms of how samsara evolves in general, and the experiential way, which explains them in terms of how they are experienced by an individual over a continuum of lifetimes. These two systems differ slightly in the way the order of the twelve links is presented. I'm going to explain them the second way: how they are experienced.

Ignorance

The first of the twelve links is ignorance, the root of all samsaric suffering. The Sanskrit term, *avidya* [Tib: *ma-rig-pa*], means "not seeing" and implies an obscuration of mind. To explain precisely what this ignorance is and how it functions requires a great deal of time and energy, so let's just focus on the general principles instead.

When we go to teachings, for example, we have the intention, "Today I'm going to go and listen to teachings." Whenever we think like this, we all have a certain conception of our "self," or "I." Buddhism calls this sense of self the ego. Our ego is with us at all times and becomes more obvious on certain occasions, like when we encounter highly favorable circumstances or great difficulties. At such times our sense of self becomes more intense and visible than usual. Each of us is subject to our own conception of "I." We can see it quite easily in our daily experiences without need of lengthy, theoretical reasoning.

Whenever our ego-concept arises very strongly, it grasps us as if it exists within us as something very solid, very vivid and totally uncontrollable. This is how the false self grasps us. However, it is important to contemplate whether or not this "I" really exists as it appears. If we search for it within ourselves, from the top of our head down to the soles of our feet, we'll come to the conclusion that neither our physical body nor any of its individual parts can serve as the "I" that under certain circumstances arises so strongly. Nothing in our body can be the "I". Our limbs, organs and so forth are only parts of the body, which, in a sense, "owns" them.

If we analyze our minds in the same way, we'll find that the mind is nothing but a stream of different thoughts and mental factors and conclude that nothing in the mind is the "I" that we conceive either.

Moreover, since there's no separate entity outside our body or mind to represent the "I," we can conclude that the self that we normally feel doesn't exist. If we meditate like this, we'll see that it's true that the "I" can't be found. However, this doesn't mean we don't exist at all. Non-existence cannot be the answer, because we're analyzing how we exist.

Actually, the situation is very subtle. We neither exist as simply as the ignorant mind supposes, nor do we not exist, and gaining an understanding of the true nature of the self requires thorough training and sustained meditation practice.

The mental factor that holds the wrong, fabricated view of the self is what Buddhism means by ignorance, the first of the twelve links of interdependent origination. All the other delusions—such as attachment to ourselves, our friends and possessions and aversion to people and things alien to us—rest on the foundation of this false concept of the self. Acting under the influence of such attachment and aversion, we accumulate much unwholesome karma of body, speech and mind.

Volitional formations

The distorted actions of body, speech and mind that arise from ignorance, attachment and aversion stain the mind with what are called volitional formations. This is the second of the twelve links. The moment after we create a distorted karma, the action itself has passed and is gone, but it leaves on our stream of consciousness an imprint that remains there until it either manifests in future as a favorable or unfavorable experience, depending on the nature of the original action, or is otherwise disposed of.

Consciousness

The continuity of the mind stream serves as the basis of the imprints of karma. This is the third link, the link of consciousness. It carries the imprints and later helps them ripen and manifest in the same way that seeds are sown in the earth, which then serves as a cause for the growth of a crop. However, not only must seeds be sown in the ground; they also require favorable conditions to grow. Contributory causes such as water, fertilizer and so forth must be present in order for the seeds to ripen and reach maturity.

Craving

The attachment that evolves from ignorance helps condition the karmic seeds sown in our stream of consciousness. This particular attachment, which is called craving, is the fourth link.

Grasping

There also exists in our mind stream another type of attachment, called grasping, which has the special function of bringing karmic seeds to fulfillment. This is the fifth link of the twelve-linked chain. It manifests at the end of our life and conditions the throwing karma that gives rise to our next rebirth.

Although both above types of attachment have the nature of desire, each has its own function. One helps to ripen karmic seeds; the other brings them to completion and connects us with our next life.

Becoming

The sixth link is becoming. At the end of our life, a throwing karma arises and immediately directs us towards our future existence. This special mental action that appears at the final stage of our life is called “becoming.”

These six links are generally associated with this life, although it is not necessarily the case that they will manifest in this life. In particular, some situations may develop in other lifetimes, but in most cases they belong to this life.

As we near death, our body and mind begin to weaken. Bodily strength and the grosser levels of mind dissolve until finally we enter a level of consciousness that the scriptures call the clear light state. This is the final stage of our life, the actual consciousness of death—the most subtle level of mind. We remain in this state for a certain time, then there occurs a slight movement of consciousness and we enter the intermediate state—our mind shoots out of our body and enters the bardo, the realm between death and rebirth.

The intermediate state has its own body and mind, but the body is not made of the same gross elements as ours. Therefore, bardo beings do not have the gross form that we do. The bardo body is composed of a subtle energy called “wind,” which exists in a dimension different to ours. We should not think that this is a wonderful or beautiful state, however, for it is characterized by great suffering and difficulty. We undergo a total loss of free will and are driven here and there by the force of karma until we finally find an appropriate place of rebirth. The beings in this state subsist on smell rather than on ordinary food and **it is this search for food that eventually leads them to seek rebirth**. After a certain period in the bardo state they take rebirth in accordance with their karma.

There are many different realms into which we can take rebirth and each of these has its own causes and conditions. For example, to be born human, our future parents must unite in sexual union, their white and red cells (sperm and ovum) must combine and enter into the womb of the mother, and so forth. Then, when the bardo being, driven by the force of its individual karma, reaches its karmically determined parents, certain circumstances arise bringing to an end the life of the bardo being, upon which its mind enters the conjoined cells of the parents.

Rebirth

The moment the wind leaves the bardo body and enters the united cells of the parents, the link of rebirth is established. This is the seventh link. Mere union of the parents, however, is not a sufficient cause for engaging this link. As well, the womb of the mother must be free of obstacles that could interfere with the birth of the child; the material causes of the physical body of the child, that is the parents’ sperm and ovum, should also be free from defects; and the three beings

involved must have a karmic connection with one another in order to establish this kind of father-mother-child relationship. When all these circumstances are complete, rebirth takes place.

Name and form

From the time the link of rebirth is established until the sensory organs of the child are developed is the eighth link, which is called name and form. The material substances that constitute the sperm and ovum of the parents are “form”; the consciousness that dwells within that material basis is called “name.”

The six sense organs

After the sense organs of the child have developed into a mature, functional state, the ninth link, that of the six senses, arises. This is like the construction of a building in which the finishing work, such as windows and doors, has been completed.

Contact

The tenth link is contact. After the sense organs have evolved they function through the sense consciousnesses to establish contact with outer sense objects, such as visible forms, sounds and so forth.

Feeling

Contact gives rise to the eleventh link, feeling. Pleasant feelings arise from contact with pleasant objects, unpleasant feelings from unpleasant objects and so forth.

Aging and death

All this produces the aging process, the twelfth link of the chain of interdependent origination, which eventually finishes with our death.

We are all trapped in this process of repeatedly circling on the wheel of birth, aging, death, intermediate state and rebirth. It is not something special that applies to only a few beings or something that happens only to others. It is a process that embraces every one of us. We are caught in cyclic existence and experiencing the twelve links every moment of our existence.

It is very important to contemplate this. If we become fully aware of this constant process of evolution, we'll come to a correct realization of the problems of samsara.

Meditating on this, we'll gradually generate the sincere **aspiration to achieve liberation. That aspiration is pure renunciation.** However, merely having that aspiration is not enough; we must put great effort into practicing the methods that bring about liberation. On the one hand, we need the help and guidance of the objects of refuge, but from our own side, we must learn and put into practice the actual methods that have been taught. Through the combination of these two, we will attain liberation from the sufferings of samsara.

