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Introduction to the twelve links

[Note: First part of teaching not recorded, but a more in-depth discussion of the first three links are available in the next transcript.]

4. Name and form

The name and form is represented by the boat, oarsperson and passengers. The boat is the body. The passengers and the oarsperson are the different mental aggregates. We’re going across the sea of samsara in the currents of birth, aging, sickness and death. When we’re born into a new body, it is represented by this new boat. This is the vehicle that will take us from this life to the next life. It’s also the vehicle through which we experience all the happiness and unsatisfactory experiences of this life.

5. Six sources

The fifth link is called the six sources. These are the six faculties or sources that produce cognition. Five of them are sense faculties: the eye sense faculty produces sight; the ear sense faculty produces hearing, the nose sense faculty produces smelling; the tongue sense faculty produces tasting, the tactile or body sense faculty produces touching. These five are subtle faculties located within the grosser organ. For instance, the taste faculty is not the gross tongue, but the part of the tongue that enables us to connect with the taste. It is something subtle inside the taste buds, not the gross tongue. They are called “sources” because they are the source of consciousness. Each one is the dominant condition which causes the five sense consciousnesses—visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile—to arise.

The sixth source or faculty – the mental faculty – produces mental consciousness. Included in the mental faculty are all six consciousnesses: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental. For example, in dependence upon a visual consciousness perceiving blue, we can later think about blue. That visual consciousness is the dominant condition producing the mental conceptual consciousness that thinks about or visualizes blue.

In the context of one set of twelve links, the six sources refer to specific moments of development, i.e. when those six sources are attained. Tactile and mental sources are the first to appear just after conception in the womb. The being that has taken rebirth in the fertilized egg can feel touch. His or her mental consciousness is also active, though certainly not as sophisticated as it is later. As the fetus grows and the grosser organs develop, the other four subtle sense faculties come into being.

The six sources are symbolized by an empty house. Not a lot goes on in an empty house. But when residents move in, there are lots of activity. Similarly, as the six sources “move” into the body, we contact objects and perception begins.

6. Contact

The sixth link is a couple embracing. This is contact. In order to have perception, we need the coming together of the object, the sense faculty and the consciousness. To see the color purple, I have to have the color purple, the eye faculty, and the visual consciousness, which is the thing that perceives it. Contact is when these three come together, producing cognition or perception. When you don't have contact, you won't have perception. For example, right now we're not having contact with our car. Our eye consciousness is not seeing the car. Because the object, the faculty and the consciousness haven't joined, there's no perception of that. Contact is when those things come together, and that's symbolized by the couple embracing. This then creates perception.

Do you see this kind of evolutionary process we're going through? From ignorance (1st link) that's creating karma, karma is placed on the consciousness, that consciousness takes rebirth in the womb, followed by the development of name and form and the six sense organs, which aren't yet functioning fully. When they start to function, we have contact, and the contact produces feeling.

7. Feeling

Feeling is the seventh link, and that's represented by the arrow in the eye. This is where we get really hung up. We get hung up on feeling and craving (the next link).

As soon as we have contact, it generates feeling. We get pleasant feelings, we have unpleasant feelings, we have neutral feelings. You can see how the contact is dependent arising; it is dependent on the object, the faculty and the consciousness. The feeling – pleasant, unpleasant or neutral – is also dependent: it is dependent on the contact. It's interesting, because when we have certain pleasant or unpleasant feelings, we feel like they're so solid, so real, so there. It is useful at that time to remember they only exist because there's contact with the object. If there's no contact, there will be no feeling. So it's not like these feelings are so solid and rigid. They exist because the cause for them exists. If there's no cause, there's no result.

So we have the feeling. There's nothing wrong in the feelings themselves. There is nothing wrong with feeling pleasure. That's what we all want, isn't it? There is nothing wrong with feeling displeasure, even though we don't want it. It is the same with neutral feelings. There is nothing wrong with these feelings. When we get hung up, it is because of how we react to our feelings. And remember 'feeling' here doesn't mean emotional feeling. It means pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feeling. This is a slightly different usage of the word “feeling” than how we use it in liberal America.

Difference between “feeling” and “emotion”

[In response to audience:] We get tangled up because there's no word for “emotion” in Tibetan or Sanskrit, and our English word “feeling” is very vague. Our English word “feeling” can mean something like “I feel hot”, or “I feel pleasant”, or “I feel angry”. It has many usages. Here the word “feeling” is referring just to the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings. “Emotion” is more your reaction towards those feelings. When there is a pleasant feeling, I get all excited. I get delighted. I want more of it and I dream about it. That's emotion. When there is an unpleasant feeling, the emotion that can arise from it is I feel discouraged, or I feel disappointed, or I experience aversion or hatred.

When you're doing the mindfulness or breathing meditation, it is interesting to try and notice the difference between the feeling and your reaction to the feeling. You might be sitting there watching the breath, and then your knee starts to hurt, so temporarily, you might put your attention on the pain in the knee. See if there's a difference between the sensation of the pain in your knee and your feeling of, “I've got to move my leg, I can't stand this!” Because what happens sometimes is, we get them all mixed up. There's the pain in the knee, but do you see how sometimes we build up this whole story about this pain? It's like, “I've got to move. I can't stand this. Why are they making me sit here?!” There's the physical sensation, and there is the whole emotion regarding it. They are two different things.

It is the same thing when you have a nice pleasant sensation. When you eat your food slowly and you experience some pleasant sensation, watch how the mind says right away, “I want more. I want more.” And we start planning how to get more when we haven't even finished swallowing the first bite. But

there's a difference between the pleasant sensation on our tongue, and the mind that then jumps in and says, "Oh, this is so great. This is the best I've ever had and I want more. I have to have more." So you can watch that and see where we get really hung up, which is when we don't leave the feelings alone but instantly jump in and give them juice.

When we respond to these pleasant and unpleasant feelings, we're getting into the next link – craving. We crave to be with the pleasant feelings, and we crave to be free of the unpleasant ones.

8. Craving

Craving is a particular kind of attachment. Like attachment, craving involves wanting to be with pleasant things. But craving also includes the craving to be free of unpleasant feelings and the craving for neutral feelings to not subside and become unpleasant ones.

Craving is shown by somebody drinking. They're drinking alcohol. Isn't an alcoholic's mentality the best description of craving? We aren't all alcoholics, but the mind functions in a very similar way regarding other objects. We're praise-aholics, or money-aholics, or image-aholics. We want more. We want better. Craving is this addictive behavior and it's really the nature of dissatisfaction. When you drink a lot, or when you overeat, or when you over-listen to your music, or when you over-drive around the city because you're bored, or when you're a shop-aholic, it's the nature of dissatisfaction, isn't it? It seems like if we fulfill our craving, we'll be happy, but we're never so. That craving itself is such a painful emotion, because it's so dissatisfied, so restless. And you can feel it in your physical energy. You can feel this restless energy in your body sometimes.

9. Grasping

Grasping is the next link. Grasping is when you're going for the next thing. Craving arises at the time of death, when we crave this (present) body. We don't want to separate from this body, so we crave it. And when we realize we have to leave this body, then what do we do? We grasp for another one. That's why it is represented by the picture of a person picking fruit off the tree, reaching for another rebirth – as if we don't have enough problems already! We reach for another body to jump into, so that we can again get born, get sick, get old, and die.

People have this idea of, "We take rebirth to learn a lesson." But I don't see a lot of people learning lessons. This is the whole reason why Dharma practice is so important. The moment we reach out for another body, this is the alcoholic taking another drink, this is the dysfunctional person going back into the relationship. This is just doing it again because it's familiar, because it's safe, because it seems like it's going to make us happy. Changing it is really scary. This is our universal sentient being phenomenon. It's not just us personally. We're all in the same boat here. Which is why when we come to see this, we really appreciate the Buddha's teachings. Look at our own behavior – we crave for this body, we jump into another one, we get born and sick and old and then die, and the process repeats. We look at our own behavior, and then there's the Buddha who comes along and teaches us the path to enlightenment and how to stop this recurring cycle. It's like this light in a dark tunnel, or the sun rising in the horizon. It's like, "Wow, I never knew that there was any possible way out of it." We really feel at that time the kindness of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

10. Becoming

The tenth link is called becoming, or sometimes it's called existence. I like to call it "becoming". It's symbolized by a pregnant woman. What that means is at that time when we crave for this (present) body at death and we grasp for the next body, the karma to jump into the next life is fully ripened. The karma is fully ripe, like a pregnant woman about to give birth. It's when you would leave this body and you would take the intermediate stage body that's similar to your next. And then the one of birth, the eleventh link, is when you get a gross body again.

11. Birth

The eleventh link is birth. It's symbolized by a woman actually giving birth, but what it actually means here is conception. So the symbol here doesn't match the meaning exactly.

12. Aging and death

The twelfth link, aging and death, refers to the period from the time of conception onwards. It is symbolized by a hunched-up old person and a corpse that is getting carried away. Aging and death do not happen to a person just once, say, at eighty-five. From the moment after conception, we're aging and

heading towards death.

So these are the twelve links. This is just a brief introduction to the twelve links. We're going to go through them again more in-depth and really see how they work together.

Purpose of studying the twelve links

The whole purpose of studying the twelve links is to give us a real feeling of, "I want to be happy and I deserve to be happy, but I'm not going about it the right way. There's another way to do this. I really want to free myself from all of my dysfunctional attitudes and behavior." In other words, in psychological terms, "I want to stop being in denial, and make a determination to free myself from all my addictions and all my dysfunctional things." Here, 'addiction' and 'dysfunction' refer to our attachment to cyclic existence. It is a much broader thing than in psychology. Much broader. But the basic principle is the same.

Recognizing ignorance, afflictions* and karma as the root of our problems

Lama Zopa Rinpoche mentioned something during one teaching, and it was so powerful that I typed it up. He said, "Our whole problem is that we took this body and mind which are in the nature of pervading compounded suffering." Remember when we study the three kinds of suffering or unsatisfactory experiences, the pervading compounded suffering was having a body and mind that are under the influence of ignorance, afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'] and karma?

"What caused us to be born with such aggregates?" This is the question. Why are we in a body that gets old and sick and die? Why do we have a mind that is so confused and dissatisfied? This is the basic question in our life. Why is this happening? If you say it's happening because there's an external creator, then as Lama Zopa said, you need to get rid of the external creator and get a new one because that one is the cause of all your problems. But it's not due to an external creator. There's nobody else that put us here. How did we get here? It's our own ignorance and afflictions*, and the karma we create under their influence.

So this is making us look at, "Why are we here?" And when I have problems, "Why am I having this problem?" We usually say, "I have this problem because this person is doing this and that." But that isn't the principal reason. I'm having this headache right now because I'm in cyclic existence, because I'm under the influence of afflictions* and karma. By my afflictions* and karma, I got born into this life with this body and these minds with all these karma ripening.

Taking responsibility for our own situation

This means taking responsibility for our own situation, which is not the same as blaming ourselves. We don't blame ourselves. It's not that we're bad people because we're in samsara. It's not that we're sinners and we deserve to suffer, or any of that kind of stuff, but it's just when I'm not mindful, when I don't take care of myself, when I don't explore what's reality and what isn't, I continually get myself into messes. In some ways this is very empowering because if we get ourselves into the messes, we're also the ones who can get ourselves out of them. All we have to do is stop creating the causes. It's not a question of perpetuating some external being so that they bestow grace or they move the puppet strings differently. It's a thing of generating our own wisdom and compassion, bringing those to the forefront, and then freeing ourselves. Buddhas and bodhisattvas help, of course. They influence us. They guide us, but we're the ones responsible. This is very similar to modern psychological theory, isn't it? Be responsible for your own jams instead of pointing it off on someone else.

At the same time as we're doing this, we have to have a lot of compassion for ourselves. Compassion is the wish for others to be free of suffering. We also have to have that same wish for ourselves. It's not, "Oh, I'm in samsara because look what a creep I am, and I deserve this." It's, "No. I'm a sentient being. I have the clear light nature of the mind. I can be happy. I can become a Buddha. But I need to treat myself better." So practicing Dharma is a way of treating yourself better.

After Rinpoche posed the question, "What caused us to be born with such aggregates?" he went on to ask, "Did we have a choice in previous lives?" We didn't have a choice. Some people have this idea, "You're in the intermediate stage and you choose your next rebirth to learn lessons." No. We didn't have a choice. If we had a choice, we wouldn't choose to suffer, would we? We wouldn't. So it was clear, we

didn't have a choice.

Why didn't we have a choice? Because we're completely on automatic. We're completely overrun by our afflictions*. So Rinpoche said, "Did we have a choice in previous lives? Did we have control so that we could be born without suffering? No. The fact that we took this body, which is in the nature of suffering, shows that we didn't have a choice. We've been under the control of afflictions* and karma since beginningless time." We have let the afflictions* and karma take over. We've flowed with the current but we've flowed with the wrong current. We didn't flow with the current of our wisdom-compassion mind. We flowed with the current of our afflictions* and contaminated karma mind, and just went along with it, so we didn't have a choice.

"Having the burden of cyclic existence that is these aggregates, the self has to experience suffering." Once we have a body and a mind under the influence of the afflictions* and karma, we're going to have unsatisfactory experiences.

"The rope which ties the thorns of the five aggregates to our back is afflictions* and karma." That means the source of all the problems is the afflictions* and karma. We get rid of the source, and the whole tangle falls apart. Has no energy. Doesn't exist on its own. You see, everything is dependent arising. It's not like cyclic existence exists as an external thing out there, solid, that has to be like that. It's only that way because it arose depending on causes. We have the power to stop those causes, and do something different.

Two sets of cause and effect

To go back to the drawing, remember I said there were two sets of cause and effect?

The Lord of Death and the Wheel of Life here form one set of cause and effect, with the chicken, the snake and the rooster being the causes, and the other things around it being the effects.

Then you have up here, in the top right corner, the Buddha pointing towards the moon. The moon is nirvana. Nirvana is the cessation of all the unsatisfactory experiences and their causes in such a way that they can no longer occur again. It's the removal, the final absence, the cessation of those things, their non-arising. The Buddha is pointing us to that. So the Buddha's gesture is like the path to enlightenment. It's not that the Buddha is the cause of nirvana. The Buddha is a cooperative condition of our nirvana. He indicates the path to us, he points out to us what to practice and what to abandon in order to be liberated. When we follow the path, we get the result, which is nirvana. That's another set of cause and effect.

What is cyclic existence or samsara?

Samsara is not the external environment

I want to define cyclic existence. We tend to say, "Oh yes. This is samsara. We're all in samsara." And we tend to think the external environment is samsara – "America is samsara" – don't we? We say, "Samsara is too much!", meaning my job's too much, everything around me is too much, I've got to get out of samsara – where's the airplane? But samsara actually is not the environment we live in.

Samsara is our body and mind under the influence of afflictions* and karma. Our body and mind that make us continually circle within the six realms. Samsara can refer to the present body and mind, or it can refer to our process of circling in the six realms, taking one body and mind after another body and mind – body and mind of a god, body and mind of a hell being, body and mind of a human, body and mind of a hungry ghost. That's samsara. That's cyclic existence.

When we say we want to generate the determination to be free of samsara, it's not that we have to move out of Seattle. It's we have to free ourselves from the body and mind that are under the influence of afflictions* and karma. That's a very important point to understand. The environment does influence us, but it's not the environment that's the root problem. Of course we have to choose our environment well so that we can practice well, but we have to remember that the basic problem is being under the control of the afflictions* and karma which cause us to take a body and mind and have unsatisfactory

experiences, over and over again.

We like to think, “If only things were a little bit different, then I could practice.” “I can’t practice well because I have a job.” Or “I can’t practice well because the cat bites me when I’m meditating.” Or “I can’t practice well because I can’t get time off to go to a retreat.” Or “I can’t practice well because the neighbor’s radio is blaring.” We always think if only I were somewhere else doing something else, then I can practice better. “My present situation is just so filled with obstacles that it’s difficult to practice.” What we forget is that samsara is one big obstacle. If we had no obstacles, we wouldn’t be in samsara. That’s the whole point.

If we’re in samsara, of course we’re going to have obstacles. Of course. Wherever we go, whatever we do, we’re going to have some obstacles. It’s true that in some places or with some goings-on, we’re going to have more obstacles than others. That’s why you try and create a good environment around yourself, try and live in a peaceful place, have a job with a right livelihood. Don’t get involved in too many clubs and hobbies and social activities. Meditate in a quiet place instead of on a highway. Put yourself in a good environment, but don’t think that a good environment is the thing that is going to do it. Wherever you go, you’re going to have obstacles.

This came real clear to me once. A few months after I was ordained, I went from India back to Nepal. About a dozen of us went up to Lawudo which is a place in the Himalayas, where Lama Zopa’s previous life meditated for twenty years. In his previous life Lama Zopa was called Lawudo Lama and he meditated in this cave for twenty years. So the energy in this cave is really strong. I remember we went in there and we were doing a retreat in Lama Zopa’s cave, with Lama Zopa in there doing the retreat with us, but my mind couldn’t concentrate on anything. It just came so clear to me that it’s not the environment, because there I was in that incredible environment, but my mind was totally bananas.

Thought training teachings help us transform obstacles into the path

It’s not the environment. Fixing the external world isn’t going to be the only thing that’s going to make things better, because samsara is one big obstacle. That is why there is this whole set of teachings called the thought training teachings. The thought training teachings revolve around how to turn bad circumstances into the path. As long as we are in samsara, we’re going to have bad circumstances. So the thing is, is there a way that we can take these things, and transmute them into the path? Or every time we come up against a hindrance, are we just going to get blocked by it and get frustrated?

The “Wheel of Sharp Weapons”, the “Eight Verses of Thought Transformation”, “Seven-Point Training of the Mind”, “Advice to a Spiritual Friend”, Lama Zopa’s book “Transforming Problems” – these are all teachings revolving around transforming bad circumstances. Until we’re Buddha, we’re going to have bad circumstances. When somebody is enlightened, they have totally eliminated all the afflictions* and the karma, all the undesirable experiences, and they have developed all their good qualities. If that person is living here, they will see this as a pure land. They go in the middle of the city, they see a pure land. They go to Somalia, they see a pure land.

The high-level bodhisattvas, out of compassion, voluntarily choose rebirth in a certain place to benefit others. Somebody like His Holiness looks like an ordinary human being. But if we could crawl inside His Holiness’ mind, which we can’t yet, I’m sure we will see that his experience is vastly different from ours. Once we become Buddhas, we’ll understand what his experience is. Even two people in the same room can have very different experiences. Have you ever had something happen where you left a place feeling very good and the companion you were with said, “Oh, wasn’t that awful?” Same situation, same place, but different experiences.

Our state of mind determines what we experience

The state of mind is a real big determiner of our experiences. If your mind is overwhelmed by afflictions [Note: ‘afflictions’ is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of ‘delusions’] and karma, you could be here and this appears like a hell realm to you. When people flipped out or went completely psychotic, they are perceiving hell realm due to their karma though they are in the same environment as us. So it’s not the place. You can be here. This can be a pure land. Interesting to think about that, isn’t it?

For example, we have a glass of water here. If you’re born as a hungry ghost, when you look at this glass of water, you see pus and blood. That’s how it looks. That’s the karmic vision. A human being sees water. A celestial being, a god, because of their incredible karma, when they see it, they see very blissful

nectar. So it's karmic appearance. We think it's water, and that it's one solid thing. Actually, what it is depends on who's perceiving it.

Next time I'll go through the twelve links again, going more in-depth. There is a lot to discuss here. Any questions?

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] How do we get out of cyclic existence?

The way to get out of this whole cycle is to cut the ignorance. If we generate the wisdom realizing emptiness, then there's no first link. If you don't have the first link, you won't have the second one, you won't have the third one, and so on.

The path to do so is called the three higher trainings: ethics, concentration and wisdom. That is why there is so much emphasis on these three higher trainings.

Wisdom is the actual thing that cuts the ignorance, the wisdom realizing emptiness.

But to have that wisdom, you need to have the ability to keep your mind firm and steady on what you're meditating on. So you need concentration. If you just have wisdom but you can't concentrate on it, nothing sticks.

In order to generate the concentration and the wisdom, you need to keep good ethical conduct. If you don't keep good ethical conduct, your mind has more anger and attachment, and you have more distractions when you're meditating. Also you will have more negative karma, so you have more external problems too.

If we keep good ethics, we remove the very gross defilements. If we generate concentration, we remove a more subtle level of defilements. And if we generate wisdom, we cut the root of all the defilements altogether. So wisdom is the actual liberating factor. That's why we keep emphasizing compassion and wisdom, the two chief things on the path. Without the wisdom, you might be very compassionate, but you don't know where you're going.

[Audience:] How does one cultivate the wisdom?

It comes through hearing teachings, thinking about them and meditating on them. So again you have this three-step process. Wisdom is not a lightning bolt. You have to hear the teachings so that you know how to cultivate the wisdom – what it is you're trying to be wise about, what the object of the meditation is when you're meditating. Then you need to think about those teachings to make sure you understand them properly. And then you need to meditate on them and integrate them into your mind. It is a three-step practice. It takes time.

Strengthening our refuge in the Triple Gem

When you think about this, you can really see the kindness of the Buddha, because the Buddha is the one who gave the teachings, who showed the whole way for us to free ourselves. If the Buddha didn't show the teachings, we couldn't hear them and contemplate and meditate on them. When you think about this, that makes your refuge much deeper, because you can see how the Buddha is a guide to free us from the disadvantages of cyclic existence.

We often take the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha very much for granted. There is a Buddha and there're teachings and there're realized beings. We think "Of course!". But no, there're places in this universe where the beings don't have the karma for the Buddha to appear, so they can't learn the teachings. We are quite fortunate that we are in a place where the Buddha has appeared, the Buddha has given the teachings, the lineage of these teachings exists, and we have the opportunity to practice. It's due very much to the kindness of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Interrelatedness of topics in the Lamrim

Do you see how, when I'm explaining things, that all the meditations are interrelated, even though we've been going on the Lamrim step by step? We talked about cyclic existence here, but I was also relating it to perfect human rebirth, to refuge, and to generating compassion. The more you understand this, the more compassion you can have for others. Even though we're doing the Lamrim step by step, all these different meditations really inter-relate; the more you understand the later ones, the more they relate back to the earlier ones, and the more the earlier ones relate to the later ones.

Let's sit for a few minutes to contemplate this.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>

*'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'.