

The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising – Part 3 of 5 (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 27 Jan 93

Contents (click on heading to view text)

- Purpose of studying the twelve links
- First three of the twelve links:
 1. Ignorance
 - *Two types of ignorance*
 2. Karma or formative action
 - *Different types of karma*
 - Fortunate (wholesome, positive, constructive) karma and unfortunate (unwholesome, non-virtuous, destructive) karma
 - Immovable karma and movable karma
 3. Consciousness

Purpose of studying the twelve links

We have been talking about the twelve links of dependent arising that describe how we take rebirth, live, die, get reborn, again and again in cyclic existence. The purpose of this teaching is to put us in touch with our own experience, to help us look at our lives in a very different way than we've ever done before, to see that what we're experiencing now is part of a cycle of many, many life-times.

Explicitly, it's taught to help us generate a sense of disgust and boredom for being in a dysfunctional situation. It's taught so that we overcome our denial and recognize that we're capable of a higher level of happiness; that the happiness that's found within cyclic existence is fraught with all sorts of difficulties and problems. What's the use of hankering after it when it just becomes a disaster eventually?

So this teaching is really helping us to generate a very strong wish to free ourselves from cyclic existence, or the determination to be free. Sometimes it's translated as 'renunciation', which I don't like, because it gives you the feeling of, "I'm renouncing the world and moving to the cave!" This isn't what it means. What you're doing is you're determining to free yourself. You realize you have the capability to experience a higher, more lasting level of happiness than the present happiness. You're determining to be free from all the confusion of this life and future lives, and to attain liberation.

And then by extension, when we look at other beings, we see them as also caught in similar cycles of existence, and that's when compassion arises for them, wanting them to be free and to attain liberation. It's a much deeper meaning of compassion. It's not just about all the people who don't have food and clothes. It's also looking at this basic situation of getting born, getting sick, getting old and dying. It doesn't matter how rich you are, you're still in that situation and it's not fun for anybody.

When we have problems in our life and everything seems so overwhelming, it is very helpful to stop for a minute and think about the twelve links. When we start thinking about the state of being under the influence of anger, attachment and ignorance and being pushed again and again to take rebirth after rebirth, we realize what's bothering us at work isn't so important. In fact, we should actually expect conflicts like that because we are in cyclic existence.

What is truly important is to free ourselves from cyclic existence. This puts daily problems in a different perspective. They don't overwhelm us now. We see that in comparison to the whole situation, those problems aren't so big. It gives us impetus to practice good ethical conduct, concentration and wisdom to free ourselves from the whole situation.

When I was living in France, there was a person living at the center whom I had so much problems with. Obviously I was right and she was wrong but she just didn't get it and was driving me totally crazy! [laughter] One time Lama Zopa Rinpoche visited the center and taught the twelve links. He started teaching about how sentient beings get born, get old, get sick and die. I looked at that person whom I was so upset with, and all of a sudden I recognized, "Wow, she is a sentient being who's getting born, getting sick, getting old and dying. She is under the influence of afflictions and karma, this completely

out-of-control process.” I couldn't be angry with her anymore! Look at the situation she's in. Look at the situation I'm in. What's there to be angry with her about? Reflecting like this is very useful, very applicable for daily life problems.

1. Ignorance

The first of the twelve links is ignorance. This is the source of the whole cycle of death and rebirth. This is the chief cause of cyclic existence.

Definition: Ignorance is the wrong view of the perishing aggregates which newly motivates its (i.e. that set of 12 links) second branch, formative action.

I know it sounds like gobbledygook. Do you remember we were studying the mental factors and there was the mental factor of the wrong view of the perishing aggregates? This mental factor looks at the aggregates of the body and mind or the relatively existent self, and says, “Ah! There's a real solid inherent person there! There's a real *me*. Something is really there, to be defended, to be protected, self-existent, independent and inherent.”

That is the wrong view of the perishing aggregates. It's called 'perishing aggregates' because it's referring to the collection of body and mind, the five aggregates. It's the 'wrong view of the perishing aggregates' because it doesn't see them accurately, and it makes an inherently existent self on top of the collection. Whenever you get very angry or very jealous, or when you want something desperately, stop and check how the 'I' feels to you, how the self exists. That strong feeling of *I*-ness or *me*-ness is the wrong view of the perishing aggregates.

Due to our ignorance, we believe in an inherently existent person. That makes us act out of anger or attachment or jealousy or pride, or some other affliction. It can also make us act out of faith and compassion. Since we are seeing everything as solidly existent, it creates the second link which is formative action or karma.

Two types of ignorance

What we have just talked about is the ignorance of the twelve links. Now we're moving from the ignorance of the twelve links to ignorance in general. There are two types of ignorance in general:

- a) Ignorance of the ultimate truth or ultimate reality. This refers to the wrong view of the perishing aggregates.
- b) Ignorance regarding karma or actions and their effects. This refers either to not believing that our actions bring results or disregarding it [that our actions bring results]. We just disregard it and don't live our life according to it.

Due to the ignorance that grasps at an inherently existent self, we create good, bad, or neutral karma. For example, if I make an offering on the altar, I may be thinking, “There's a real me. There's a solid Buddha. There's a solid apple. Everything is solid.” But I still have an attitude of generosity. I want to make offerings and I want it to benefit others. It's a virtuous attitude although I'm making everything concrete. Therefore I'll still be creating positive karma.

When we have the ignorance that doesn't understand karma and its effects, then with that, we tend to create negative karma, because we're not living our life with a regard for cause and effect. That could either be an overt misconception like, “It's fine to lie and cheat as long as I don't get caught. Nothing wrong with it. Nothing unethical about it. It's only unethical if I get caught.” Thinking that I can do anything I want and it's not going to have any kind of ramifications in future lives or at any other time.

Or, we disregard cause and effect, not paying much attention to it, “Well, I know it's negative karma, but it doesn't matter. It's just a small thing.” We do that all the time, don't we?

This is why developing the wisdom that realizes emptiness is so important, because only this wisdom can cut the ignorance from the root. If we cut the ignorance from the root, then all the other complications don't arise.

To relate this back to the very subtle mind that we were talking about previously. The clear light mind is pure in nature, and the ignorance is like the clouds in the sky. The clouds and the sky aren't the same things. We can remove the ignorance and still have the clear light nature of the mind. The clear light nature of the mind is what becomes a Buddha. When we're in touch with this, it gives us a solid basis for self-confidence. We recognize that in spite of the ignorance and everything else that is going on, there is this clear light nature of the mind that's present. It can be revealed and made manifest and purified.

Lama Yeshe said, "Imperfect superstition brings forth all the wrong fantasy view, and is the obstacle to discovering perfect wisdom. Ignorance makes transmigrating beings afflicted because it obscures seeing the right view."

'Imperfect superstition' is the term Lama used for ignorance. He also called our anger, attachment, belligerence, spite and other afflictions 'superstition'. We Westerners went trotting up to Kopan in Nepal and we think we're not superstitious, and then Lama said, "You bet!" That's because superstition is when you believe something exists that doesn't exist. Since we believe that there's a solid, concrete person even though such a person does not exist, we are hallucinating or being superstitious. When we believe that there's a solidly existent person who is completely evil, who's our real enemy, that's superstition.

This superstition – the wrong fantasy view of ignorance, attachment and other afflictions – is an obstacle to discovering perfect wisdom. That ignorance makes transmigrating beings (beings who go through the series of twelve links, getting born, getting old, getting sick and dying) afflicted, because it obscures their seeing the right view, the reality, how things are. So Lama was talking about the disadvantage of ignorance.

Now you can see why ignorance is symbolized by a blind person in the drawing of the Wheel of Life. When we're ignorant, when we're blind, we don't understand things. We don't understand who we are. We don't understand how we exist. We don't understand how phenomena exist. We completely misinterpret things and hallucinate all the time.

2. Karma or formative action

The ignorance of one specific moment generates a specific formative action or a specific karma. Let's say I get angry at somebody and start talking behind their back. The ignorance is there at that moment, and on the basis of that, I get angry and have the intention to say nasty things about someone. That intention pushes me to speak words that cause disharmony, and that act of speech becomes the karmic formation.

So now we have the first two links of one particular set of twelve links. The reason I say "one particular set of twelve links" is because we begin many sets of twelve links in our life. Each set begins with an instance of ignorance that produces a karma or formative action. The karmic imprint of that action is put on the consciousness (link 3 of that set of 12 links) and produce a certain rebirth. At the same time as we're creating the first two and a half links of many new sets of 12 links (ignorance, formative action, and causal consciousness), we are living out the resultant links of another set, which was begun with ignorance, formative action and causal consciousness in a previous life.

Definition: Formative action (karma) is the afflicted thought (intention) which is newly formed by its first branch, ignorance.

Formative action includes the ten destructive actions and the positive actions that we do under the influence of ignorance.

You do the action, and once the action ceases, it leaves an impression on the mindstream. Impression, impression of karma, karmic seed, tendency or potency – these are different translations of the Tibetan word "bakchak". The action has ceased, but its "energy" hasn't disappeared completely. There's still some "residual energy" of the action and this connects the action to our future experience. In philosophical terms, it is said that the disintegratedness of the action is produced when the action itself ends, and this disintegratedness or the "having ceased-ness" of the action connects the action with its result.

We often negate the potency of what we do. We think, "What I did this morning is over. It's not going to have any other result besides the immediate result we had this morning." But we can see that this isn't very good thinking. Even if you don't believe in karma, if you think a little wider, the result of what we did this morning could influence many, many things even in this lifetime. It can also leave many impressions on the mindstream that can influence what we experience in future lifetimes. Instead of seeing everything we do as isolated little bleeps in our life, we begin to look at what we're doing from a much larger perspective. This is how everything inter-relates. We're creating our future right now.

Different types of karma

There're different kinds of karma.

Fortunate (wholesome, positive, constructive) karma and unfortunate (unwholesome, non-virtuous, destructive) karma

Fortunate karma is a karma that always brings a happy result – a happy rebirth, rebirth in the upper realms (as a human being, god or demi-god).

Unfortunate karma brings rebirth in lower realms. Remember that things are designated 'virtuous' or 'non-virtuous' according to the result they bring. In other words, Buddha didn't say, "This is virtuous and this is non-virtuous because I said so." Rather the causal action is labeled constructive or destructive in dependence upon the result it produces. When the result is an unfortunate rebirth, the cause of it is called "non-virtuous", or "unwholesome". When you have a happy rebirth, we call the cause of it "virtuous," "positive" or "constructive". The Buddha didn't invent any of this. He just described them.

Immovable karma and movable karma

Immovable karma is the karma we create which causes rebirth in certain god realms in which the beings have very strong meditative concentration. These include the form realm concentrations and the formless realm concentrations. We've all been born there innumerable times in previous lives, if you can believe it. We've all had samadhi before, many times.

When a human being has strong samadhi without wisdom, his or her mind is still under the influence of afflictions and karma. When he dies, he's reborn in a god realm corresponding exactly to that level of samadhi that he attained. In other words, that karma produces rebirth in that specific form or formless realm, not in any other. This is why it is called 'immovable'.

Movable or fluctuating karma is karma other than immovable karma. For example, somebody created the karma to be reborn as a dog. When they're in the bardo or the intermediate stage, let's say all the conditions didn't come together for this person to be reborn as a dog. He was reborn as a horse instead. This is movable karma. Instead of a rebirth as a dog, it can 'move' and become a rebirth as a horse.

It's also movable in the sense that we can experience it in this life. When we get sick (e.g. headache) or experience some problem as a result of doing purification practice, they say that this is often very heavy negative karma that would have resulted in a very horrible rebirth, manifesting instead in this lifetime as that sickness or problem. So you purify it and it's 'moved'. Instead of it being this negative karma to be reborn in an incredible, horrible situation for five billion eons, you get a stomachache or you get the flu, or something like that.

When unpleasant things happen in your life – you get fired from your job, or you get sick, or whatever – if you remember to think, "Ah, this could be because of my Dharma practice purifying my negative karma. This could be a very horrible negative karma ripening that would have brought intense suffering for a very long time. It's ripening now in this relatively minor thing, compared to what it could be." This prevents us from feeling completely sorry for ourselves. It gives us meaning to whatever difficulty we're experiencing at that particular time. This way of thinking is very useful if you apply it in the situations.

I sent Terry, one member of our group who recently died from AIDS, a text Lama Zopa was teaching about. It says that when you're sick, try and see your sickness as a result of negative actions you've done in the past. The negative actions would have resulted in incredible sufferings, but we're fortunate that it ripens in this lifetime as this sickness. As awful as AIDS or cancer is, it's much better than five billion eons in the lower realm. If you can see your disease in that perspective, then it gives a sense and a meaning to your experience of a disease. Instead of just freaking out, "How can this happen to me?" you understand. The mind has some kind of peace.

Just to diverge a little. I have been going to a pastoral counseling workshop where I'm the only Buddhist. One of the leaders is Jewish and the rest are all Christians. What has come up a lot was when people are sick, they get angry at God. It's interesting for me to listen to them, because it points out so clearly to me why I'm a Buddhist. It seems like many people feel, "I've been a good person and I go to church. And now I have cancer! Why did God do this to me? Why does this happen to me?" These people get very angry at God, and they lose faith. It creates incredible turmoil and suffering in their mind. On top of the physical disease, they have the spiritual malaise of being angry at God and then feeling guilty about it. It's very painful for them.

Buddhism totally avoids all of that. From the Buddhist point of view, when awful things happen, we'd say, "It's a result of my own past actions. It doesn't mean I'm a bad, horrible person. It doesn't mean I deserve to suffer. But it is a result of my actions, so I take responsibility for that. If I've been a Dharma practitioner and I've been trying to purify and trying to create good karma, this could very well be a fortunate circumstance. Instead of this karma ripening in horrible, incredibly lengthy suffering, it's ripening now as this disease. I'm purifying the karma and getting rid of it." Your mind can then be peaceful with that and you only have the physical pain to deal with, free of all the mental and spiritual pain that can make the illness so awful.

[Audience: Inaudible]

When a karma ripens, how our mind thinks determines whether we are simply experiencing the result of karma or whether we are purifying the karma.

Let's say you get the flu. If you become angry because of it and are rude to the people who are caring for you, you're not purifying any karma. You're just experiencing the result of some negative actions done in the past. But if you think, "This is the result of my own negative actions, done under the influence of self-centeredness. I gladly experience this suffering. This karma could have ripened in an unfortunate rebirth so actually I'm fortunate that it only ripened as the flu," or if you think, "May I take on the suffering of everyone who has the flu," then your discomfort from being ill becomes purification. By transforming how we react to being sick, we will be able to stop our present mental suffering and prevent anger, discouragement, and wrong views from arising. In that way, we also protect the mind from creating more negative karma in response to this suffering.

[Audience: Inaudible]

This is my interpretation, I suggest you check with somebody who knows more. The purification could come partly from your purification practice, which makes a very strong negative karma ripen in a relatively minor way, and partly from your way of viewing it. This is my understanding. Like I said, I could be wrong. But that's what makes sense to me.

[Audience: Inaudible]

If you didn't transform it, you'd probably start getting very angry and discouraged. All that habitual karma to be angry, to speak bad to other people, to grumble, and all that, would start influencing our behavior. Our afflictions would then jump in and we will go completely bananas! But if you apply thought transformation, then all these don't come up.

[Audience: Inaudible]

This is the taking and giving practice.

First you see it as a result of your own karma and accept it. What purifies it even more, and which creates a lot of positive potential, is if you then say, "May this suffice for the suffering of all others."

Then you do the meditation where you imagine taking on the suffering of others, using it to destroy the ignorance and self-cherishing and then giving others our body, possessions and positive potential. If you add that meditation, you purify a lot more negative karma and create an incredible amount of good karma. In this way, your being sick becomes the best way to create good karma, not because being sick is good but because of the way your mind is.

This is why thought training is so important. We can't control when we're going to get sick. It is going to happen some time or another. But if we can practice this, then it becomes an incredible protection for our mind whenever we get sick, transforming what would otherwise be an obstacle into our practice of the path.

[Audience: Inaudible]

I think it takes some feeling of wanting to purify yourself, for the karma to be purified. In other words, it's brought on by your own wish to purify. Every time we experience unpleasant things, it isn't necessarily purification. It's only purification if we had wanted to purify. If an unpleasant experience happens to a Christian who had wanted to purify, then it could be purification of karma. But not every illness we experience was from a karma that would have manifested as intense suffering in horrible rebirths. The illness could just be from the karma to get sick.

There was one student who interviewed several Buddhist nuns and several Christian nuns and sent me a copy of the interview. It was lovely because some of the Christian nuns were saying very similar things, that when unfortunate things happen, instead of freaking out, you put it in the context of your religious practice. I think the truly spiritual Christians or Muslims or Jews or Hindus or whoever it is, will have a way to transform negative circumstances. But I think most people have difficulty with that.

Westerners are really hung up on the mechanistic view of karma. Instead of checking the meaning of karma and the motivation, and checking their own minds, they want to know how to manipulate and get around it and pull the strings. So Westerners tend to look at it as a legal system.

When Gen Lamrimpa was teaching about karma, it was interesting that he went into all the details, and many people were wondering, "Why did he tell us all that? It just sounds like a legal system." I think we didn't get the point that Genla was making. He's saying that for us to reflect on how we act and how we think. What's the difference between a very heavy negative karma and a very light negative karma? How do we discern the difference in our own mind so that we can at least abandon the heavy one if we can't abandon the lighter one? It's all taught in the spirit of practice, for examining our own mind, not for seeing it as a legal system.

[Audience: Inaudible]

The practice of *powa* is possible because karma is 'movable'. *Powa* is the transference of consciousness. Some people practice it themselves, ejecting their consciousness to a pure land. Sometimes a very good practitioner could do the transference of consciousness for another person who has died. The deceased may have the karma ripening to be reborn in a certain realm, but due to the *powa* done by the practitioner and the other karma that the deceased had created previously, the deceased's consciousness can be transferred instead to a pure land.

In the pure land, the whole atmosphere is revolving around Dharma practice. All the conditions are very conducive for you to pursue your spiritual practice. You don't have lots of other things to do. There isn't lots of noise. You don't have car insurance to worry about. There is nothing to distract you. Even the wind blowing through the trees becomes a Dharma teaching. It is very easy to practice there. There are various pure lands. Amitabha's pure land is one of them. In the Chinese Buddhist tradition especially, they do a lot of pure land practice, praying to be reborn in Amitabha's pure land.

[In response to audience:] No, pure land is not horrifying. What you're referring to is the desire realm. When you're born as a desire realm god, you lead a super-fantastic life. But seven days before you die, you start to decay and that causes much suffering. You get reborn in the god realms because of good karma, but that's still within cyclic existence. When the karma runs out, you get born somewhere else. That's why we're always going up and down from one rebirth to the next. Whereas once you take rebirth in a pure land, you don't get reborn in any of the other realms. And because everything around you is so conducive for practice, you can become a Buddha.

[Audience: Inaudible]

The very high masters could just go to a pure land and stay there, but what we're saying is, "We need you here." By making that kind of prayers, we're creating the karma to be able to have them come here and manifest so that they can teach us. Buddhas manifest in relationship to our karma.

[Audience:] What about their karma?

When you're a Buddha, you are free from the influence of contaminated karma. Lower level bodhisattvas still have ignorance and are reborn under the influence of the 12 links. But higher level bodhisattvas—those who have realized emptiness directly—aren't reborn within the 12 links. They appear in our world due to compassion.

We ordinary beings need Buddhas and bodhisattvas in our world, so their manifesting depends on our karma. Having a precious human life like ours is so fortunate because the Buddha has manifested and taught, the lineage exists, and we still have teachings and teachers all around us. This isn't an accident. It isn't always this way. All these exist because we created the karma for them to happen.

If sentient beings don't have the karma, then the Buddha doesn't manifest. The Buddhas manifest according to the sentient beings' level of mind. You remember that story about Asanga who was meditating to get a view of Maitreya but he couldn't see him? Then he saw a dog infested with worms and because he had so much compassion, he wanted to take the worms out. He did it with his tongue so it wouldn't kill the worms. Then he puts them on a piece of his own flesh that he cut off from his thigh. By doing that, it purified so much of his negative karma that it wasn't a worm-infested dog appearing to him anymore, but Maitreya Buddha. Asanga got all excited and wanted to share Maitreya with everybody else, so he put Maitreya on his back and ran through the village. But the people in the village didn't see anything on Asanga's back. Only one old lady who had a little bit of good karma saw a dog. This shows that things happen in relationship to our karma.

[Audience:] What's the moral of the story?

The moral of the story is: create good karma and abandon negative karma, and that things are not inherently existent.

Formative action or karma makes transmigrating beings afflicted because it plants polluted imprints on their consciousness. When we act out of ignorance, we create karma that is polluted (or afflicted or contaminated). When it gets planted on our consciousness, it leaves a karmic seed that will then lead to a rebirth in some realm in cyclic existence.

3. Consciousness

Where are these karmic seeds planted on? They're planted on the third link, the consciousness.

Definition: Consciousness is the afflicted consciousness which is just joined to the rebirth by being under the control of afflictions and karma.

There are two kinds of consciousness: causal consciousness and resultant consciousness.

The causal consciousness is not the consciousness that takes rebirth. The causal consciousness is the moment of consciousness upon which the karmic seed was implanted. If I'm ignorant and I get angry at somebody and slander them, those are the first two links of ignorance and karma. The imprint (or seed or potency) of my action of slandering was put on the next moment of consciousness (while I'm still in my current life). This is the causal consciousness.

Resultant consciousness is that stream of consciousness (mindstream, consciousness, mind – they're all basically the same) that takes rebirth. This is the one that the definition is referring to.

You can see that causal consciousness doesn't fit the definition of the third link of consciousness, because it's not the one that takes rebirth. But generally speaking, under consciousness, both the causal consciousness and the resultant consciousness are implied.

Sometimes, we talk about the six types of consciousnesses: the five sense consciousnesses (visual, auditory, gustatory, etc) and the mental consciousness.

Consciousness makes transmigrating beings afflicted, because it leads them to the next rebirth. Consciousness bears the karmic seeds which ripen later and consciousness takes rebirth in another realm. All the problems in that rebirth start from the moment of conception.

[Audience:] Do we each have our own mindstream?

We each have our own mindstream. But "mindstream" is just a label designated in dependence upon all the different moments of mind that are changing.

Causal consciousness and resultant consciousness

[In response to audience:] Causal and resultant consciousness are connected in that they are on the same continuum. But they happen at two different points in time. They are also different because consciousness isn't the same at any two moments.

[Audience:] What's the difference between mindstream and consciousness?

Mindstream and consciousness are used in different ways in different situations. Sometimes I use 'consciousness' to mean mindstream. Sometimes I use it to mean consciousnesses like the visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, which would be a part of the mindstream (since all six consciousnesses make up the mindstream). Or I could use 'consciousness' sometimes to refer to the primary mind (the visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, etc) but not the mental factors that aid in the perception. So I use the word 'consciousness' in different ways at different times.

The term "mindstream" emphasizes that the mind or consciousness is a continuum.

Let's sit quietly for a few moments.

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>